

Deception, Justice, and Social Tensions in Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express

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Abstract

Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* is more than just a detective story; it explores ideas about language, media influence, and cultural identity. While some scholars have studied Christie's social themes and her use of misleading language, fewer have explored how these elements work together to highlight the complexity of justice. This paper argues that Christie's use of language, media references, and cultural diversity challenges traditional ideas of crime and punishment. Using Roland Barthes' theory of the hermeneutic code, this paper shows how Christie's storytelling makes readers question what justice really means.

Keywords: Cultural Trifecta, Linguistic Deception, Media Sensationalism, Cultural Identity

Moral Ambiguity:

Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) is a famous detective novel known for its clever plot and iconic detective, Hercule Poirot. While many readers enjoy the story's mystery, Christie's deeper message reveals her thoughts on social order, media influence, and justice. Critics like Alison Light believe Christie's novels reflect concerns about society and justice (Light 32). Gillian Gill points out that Christie often uses long-winded speech to show when characters are trying to hide the truth (Gill 120). While these ideas are helpful, they often look at language, media, and culture separately. This paper introduces the idea of the "Cultural Trifecta", the combination of language, media, and culture, to show how Christie connects these elements to explore justice. By studying the novel this way, this paper shows how Christie's writing challenges simple ideas about guilt and innocence.

This paper uses textual analysis to explore Christie's writing techniques. Roland Barthes' theory of the hermeneutic code helps explain how Christie creates suspense by delaying important information. Cultural theory is used to show how Christie's portrayal of different nationalities highlights social tensions and questions traditional ideas of justice.

Christie's careful use of language plays a major role in building suspense and shaping the mystery. Through conversations, silence, and word choices, she reveals clues about the characters. When Poirot tells Mary Debenham, "You are remarkably composed, mademoiselle," her short reply, "Why should I not be?" (Christie 52), suggests she is hiding something. Her defensive tone makes her seem suspicious even though her words are simple.

Antonio Foscarelli's exaggerated stories reveal his attempt to avoid suspicion. As Gillian Gill points out, Christie "uses verbosity as a mask; the more a character talks, the more they reveal their desperation to deflect suspicion" (Gill 120).

Silence is also important in the novel. When Greta Ohlsson nervously refuses to answer Poirot's questions, her silence hints at her hidden connection to the Armstrong case. According to Barthes' hermeneutic code, Christie's use of silence makes readers more curious by delaying key details (Barthes 78).

Christie's characters also use different types of language to reflect their cultural backgrounds. Ratchett's loud and aggressive speech that "I've been getting letters. Damn scoundrels...threatening me!" (Christie 22), contrasts with Poirot's calm and careful way of speaking. This difference shows how language reflects social class, personality, and cultural identity.

Christie's novel also reflects how media stories in the 1930s shaped public ideas about crime. The character of Ratchett is based on the real-life Lindbergh kidnapping case, a crime that shocked the public and dominated headlines. By connecting her story to this famous case, Christie highlights how media attention can create strong opinions about guilt and innocence.

Poirot's decision to let the group responsible for Ratchett's murder go free challenges the typical crime story ending. Instead of presenting a clear hero-villain outcome, Christie shows that justice is complicated. As Alison Light notes, Christie's ending "questions traditional ideas of guilt and innocence, blurring the lines between justice and vengeance" (Light 54).

Christie's portrayal of different cultures is another key part of her novel. The

train itself is a symbol of society, bringing people from different backgrounds into one confined space. Onboard are characters from Britain, America, Russia, and Sweden, representing various cultural values. For example, the wealthy American Ratchett symbolizes greed and corruption, while Princess Dragomiroff reflects old European traditions. By mixing social classes and nationalities, Christie shows that crime is not limited to one group — anyone can be guilty. As Poirot warns, “The murderer is with us ... on the train now” (Christie 45), reminding readers that crime crosses cultural and social boundaries.

Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* blends language, media influence, and cultural themes to challenge traditional ideas about justice. By carefully shaping her characters’ speech, Christie shows how language can be used to deceive. By connecting her story to media-driven crime cases, she questions how society judges guilt and innocence. Finally, by including characters from diverse backgrounds, Christie reveals that crime is a universal human problem, not one tied to social status or nationality.

Through her use of the “Cultural Trifecta,” Christie encourages readers to question simple ideas of right and wrong, reminding us that truth is often hidden beneath appearances.

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