



Agatha Christie and the Mystery of Shyness

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Abstract:

Agatha Christie (1890-1976), the “queen of crime” of the golden age detective fiction, was documented as a shy person in her personal life. This article would investigate whether the affect of shyness substantiates the semantics of her novels. In order to do so, the article would consider Christie as a biohistorical figure whose shyness developed as a private emotion in close connection to the sociological forces of the two World Wars, Colonialism and Empire Building. This article will establish that the vulnerability of Christie due to her shyness destabilize her position as the champion of British conservativeness and align her with the marginalized section of her contemporary society.

Keyword: Agatha Christie, Shyness, British Empire, Colonialism, Detective Novels

1. Introduction

Agatha Christie (1890-1976), the “queen of crime” of the golden age detective fiction and an immensely popular writer of the “whodunit,” was an intensely shy and private person in her real life. Among the several anecdotes about her shyness, the one where she almost failed to attend a party in her honour at The Savoy Hotel in London after being refused entry by the security guard remains a classic. However, did shyness have any impact on her ever-popular novels? In this article, I take an approach of considering Agatha Christie as a biohistorical figure whose literary output has been influenced by the affect of shyness—the implications of it evident in the characterization of the two main detectives, Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple, and the clever, bloodless murders found in her novels in abundance. Perhaps, her shyness also relieves her from aspects of Empire building with which she seems to be colluding according to many of her critiques.



2. What is Shyness?

Shyness may be defined as unwarranted and uneasy attention to the self, especially in a crowded situation that causes inappropriate behaviour in the afflicted person. However, this article considers shyness as an analytical category that also gives insight in to the public aspects of the emotion. I would consider the condition of shyness of Christie as a case study to understand the category of shyness beyond its existence as a private emotion and as a mode of assessing the public nature of this emotion involving various historically contingent situations.

Stephen R Briggs, Jonathan M Cheek, and Warren H Jones, in the “Introduction” to their edited volume titled *Shyness: Perspectives on Research and Treatment* (1986), summarize the phenomenon of shyness by focusing on the past and the present studies of shyness, and relevant questions that need to be asked to develop new models for understanding this phenomenon. They rightly point out that shyness, like the common cold in medical sciences, has been neglected because it lacks “exotic symptomatology” (Briggs, Cheek, Jones, 1986, 2) and “gross pathology” (Briggs, Cheek, Jones, 1986, 2) associated with psychological conditions such as schizophrenia. They define the various stages of research on shyness-the first phase being the “descriptive phase” where shyness as an emotion is studied based on casual and clinical observation. The second phase is the popularization of shyness in the public culture. During this stage, with the steady dissolution of traditional family ties and geographic mobility, individuals needed to form new relationships and circles of their own. Such changes in the social order resulted in an outburst of books in the mid-1970s on how to overcome shyness, both academic and commonsensical. One of the significant books from this era is *Shyness: What is it? And What to do about it?* (1977) by Philip Zimbardo who opined that shyness is a widespread personal liability caused by a highly competitive society, can be alleviated with proper guidance and treatment. The third phase is a more traditional empirical analysis of shyness published in research journals and other academic forums, concentrating partially on shyness as an exclusive emotion and part of the personality traits connecting with other dimensions of introversion, such as assertiveness and social anxiety disorders. In this phase, questions were asked about whether shyness is neurotic or introverted, distinctions were made between fearful shyness and self-conscious shyness, and whether shyness, as an emotion, is a state, which is permanent or is it a trait that a person exhibits in particular situations.

Susie Scott deviated from these purely socio-psychological analyses and explored the public workings of this emotion, in her distinguished work *Shyness and Society: The Illusion of Competence* (2007). Here, Scott focuses on the sociology of shyness, that is, shyness as a condition managed in relation to cultural and social norms and values. She articulates that in a hyperconsumerist, aggressive, competitive society, those reticent are considered deviant and are

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made to feel incompetent. They are prompted to overcome their shyness and mingle with the community around them like the “normal people.” Particularly, in the article “The Shell, the Stranger and the Competent Other: Towards a Sociology of Shyness,” (2004) Scott focuses upon the construction of “the competent” other in the mind of the shy person with the remaining non-shy majority also transferring the “moral blame” on the shy individual rather than finding any fault with the society in which the situation unfolds.

Recently, Joe Moran, in his book *Shrinking Violets: The Secret Life of Shyness* (2017), talks about how shyness as an affliction has affected various well-known personalities such as Charles Darwin, Agatha Christie, Tove Jansson, and Nick Drake. He explores in lucid prose how shyness may be considered a burden, but it is also a gift that prods these talented professionals to take an alternative trajectory to develop and expand their passion. Moran’s very readable academic work is particularly useful in not being a prescriptive workbook, hands-on or medicalized, that focuses on curing the shy out of their condition but explores the phenomenology of the emotion and the extraordinary experience of living with it.

3. The Impact of Shyness in Agatha Christie’s Novels

Keeping this background in mind, we move to some readings of Agatha Christie that would help us connect shyness to her literary output. Alison Light, in her book *Forever England-Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between Wars* (1992), includes a chapter on Christie titled “Agatha Christie and Conservative Modernity” where she argues that Christie exhibits “a conservative Englishness in a modern form” (Light, 1991, 62). Light considers the institutionalizing of Christie as a doyen of the quintessential British culture, primarily due to the grand adaptations of her novels as television series, seriously flawed. She opines that the idea of Christie being a snobbish, upper-middle-class English author and a high priestess of British nostalgia rather than an astute and strategic writer of crime fiction is a popular assumption that overlooks the literary aspects of her novels. Light identifies in Christie a modernist spirit and detects in the genre of “whodunit” that Christie perfected, a studied playfulness that defies the genteel, old-fashioned drawing-room drama. According to Light, a sprightly bright tone, the lack of violence and the bloodlessness of the murders may be attributed to the attitude of convalescence of the interwar period and the tendency to neutralize the bloody horrors of the war. However, in a different vein, Christopher Prior (2018) focuses specifically on Christie’s postwar output and particularly links it to the disintegration of the British Colonial Empire. As Prior (2018) observes, criminals in her later novels turn out to be men posted in the erstwhile colonies acquiring questionable characters through this colonial experience. Prior states that Christie does not question the morale of the

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Empire building but considers that the decline of the Empire is due to the weakening in the character of the British as the colonizers.

With this background, let us now focus on the implications that emerge from Christie being a shy author in a rapidly evolving society during and after the two World Wars, and its impact on her attitude towards colonization. The biological figure of the author is considered a non-entity while reading texts following poststructuralist theories. Roland Barthes declaration of “The Death of the Author” (1967) has almost taken an axiomatic proportion that has created a floating signifier of a text trapped in the network of intertextuality. However, we will consider the texts to be an extension of Christie’s biohistorical existence and her phenomenological mind. We will deliberate on how the biological affect of shyness provides bodily weight to the pure textuality of her words.

In likeness to Prior, many critiques consider that Christie seems to possess a conservative attitude towards life, society, class structure, and the British Empire's domination. As mentioned above, Light shows that Christie also deconstructs this conservativeness associated with her. She possesses a modernist spirit by playfully and consciously using the tropes of the whodunit in her novels and embracing the demands of the rising popular culture with irony. Following Light, in this article, I would like to destabilize her fixed position as a champion of the British middlebrow culture and her tacit support of the British Empire through exploring this very insignificant emotion of shyness that afflicted her. Christie was indeed shy and withdrawn since her early years. She decided to give up on her training as a pianist and an opera singer in Paris because she realized that she lacked the talent and temperament to become one. Indeed, her social awkwardness was highlighted in the whole business of her sudden, unaccounted disappearance due to personal trouble with Archibald Christie, her first husband. This shy person’s withdrawal from an unpleasant situation of a husband declaring an affair was paradoxically transformed into a huge social fiasco that turned her into a celebrity overnight in the nascent stage of tabloid journalism. However, some of the traits of her writing seem in contrast to the reticence of her personality- her profuse output being the foremost. Shy persons are generally considered to be meditative. However, in the case of Christie, instead of producing halting and deliberated prose, shyness resulted in a massive corpus of creative work, almost unmatched in its sheer volume.

Are the most famous detectives Miss Jane Marple and Hercule Poirot duplications of her personality, or do they exhibit personality traits in contrast? Both Miss Marple and Poirot cannot be called shy in their public encounters. Miss Marple is presumably nosy and snooping while Poirot is evidently flamboyant in interacting with his clients and the criminals. However, a closer look would suggest ample textual clues to theorize both of these detectives as introverts who pose to the outside world as extroverts. For Miss Marple, it may be an amateurish delight to

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satisfy her intelligence, but for the foreigner, Belgian Hercule Poirot, the profession is necessary. To become a successful, professional detective, he requires considerable interaction with socially established and inept strangers and a confident demeanour in all such meetings. Otherwise, Poirot has domestic tastes and prefers to play cards and cook rather than socialize in gentleman's clubs. Poirot's haughtiness as a detective may be seen as a defense mechanism to fit in the British society as an outsider. His foreign accent, comic, almost effeminate appearance, lack of a gentleman status, and deficiency in the knowledge of the intricacies of the British culture and its habits often single out Poirot in a crowd, a nightmare for any shy person. A boast about the 'grey cells' seems to be the redeeming factor that makes him an exceptional figure rather than a freak, which he is in constant danger of slipping into. Miss Marple fits in no doubt with her social milieu, but her assimilation into the crowd is again a strategy that she adapts to aid her investigation process. She is an outstandingly intelligent woman that she modestly downplays to appear like an ordinary, old lady. In both cases, it may be observed that the detectives adopt a shy person's strategy—(a.) trying to fit in, (b.) if not successful, appear distant, proud, and haughty to avoid embarrassment or social awkwardness. Poirot's foreign factor is crucial here, providing the portrayal of the shy detective as a racialized other. Although not an Oriental figure, Poirot's status as an outsider shows Christie is aware of the vulnerabilities of a foreign subject, a Belgian refugee, in the British society. Indeed, Christie and Poirot are poles apart, but an apparent strategizing of social behaviour to tackle "the competent other" in the genteel society perhaps brings them closer than it is apparent.

Along with the portrayal of her detectives, the domesticity of her novels and the bloodlessness of her crimes are aptly identified by Light as reactions to the romantic bravado of the First World War, and as an integral part of the convalescence culture of the interwar period. I may take these analyses forward to state that Christie's novels' bloodlessness results from a shy person's revulsion of the horrors of violence. This disgust is not just squeamishness but a heightened sensibility towards violence and unpleasantness that produce not only severe psychological but also bodily discomfiture for the shy often resulting in to episodes of erasure, quite similar to Christie's sudden flight from Archibald Christie and later claiming that she seems to have forgotten the in-between events. Additionally, the close community structure of particularly the novels featuring Miss Marple may be seen as a reaction to the vision of the British Empire's expansionist outdoors rather than upholding the mantle of British conservativeness. Indeed, it may be established that these communities are often a parody and a stylized version of the traditional British country settings and neighbourhoods, making them space without a specific locale whose primary reason for closeness is in providing just enough room for a clever, cozy,

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in-door crime, perfect for an introverted detective exhausted by exposure to outdoors and crowds.

4. Conclusion

The detectives in her novels, the communities and neighbourhoods, which serve as the setting of her novels, and the bloodless, clever crimes perfectly executed in her novels, are among other aesthetic concerns, symptoms of a shy author. These brief analyses of Christie's shyness establish that shyness in Christie is indeed a private emotion and a bodily affect that interacts with the sociological forces of war, colonialism and Empire to produce a body of literature that may be complex and intricate beyond its popular perception.

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