

## Revenge as Wild Justice in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*

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### Abstract

*Murder on the Orient Express* is one of Agatha Christie's most famous crime novels of all time. The novel begins with a group of passengers trapped in a train stuck in a snow storm with the body of a dead person inside. Poirot, a Belgian detective is also trapped in the train and suspects the killer to be one of the twelve passengers on the train. The novel is an intricate mystery crime revolving around a group of characters cut off from the world. Instead of treading from the well-worn path from confusion to clarity, the novel is seen as a problem of ethics but not logic. In this article through the themes such as justice, insufficiency of law, moral law versus written law, deception, revenge, lies and trial by jury, Agatha Christie was able to manifest revenge as a form of wild justice acted against logic but accepted by morals in her novel *Murder on the Orient Express*.

**Keywords:** Crime Fiction; Deception; Intricate Mystery; Justice; Revenge.

The article explores revenge as a means to restore social order because of the insufficiency of the law which had disrupted the lives of many characters. In order to regain justice twelve passengers in the novel act as the jury and punish the criminal. Christie's novel, *Murder on the Orient Express* portrays the far-fetched idea of justice through deception and revenge. She further identifies revenge as a manifestation of wild justice in the novel.

Crime fiction or a detective fiction is a literary genre with narratives that revolves around criminal acts by one or many characters in a novel. The crime becomes the root cause of the plot and the detective trying to solve the case gets involved in the development of the plot. In normal scenarios, the criminal commits the crime because he is driven by a motive. But in Agatha Christie's novel, *Murder on the Orient Express* the motive of 'Revenge' is prominent among her murderers. This paper concentrates on

every character's motive for revenge. Christie tries to show the outer crust of the story and attempts to make her readers understand the deeper emotional impact created in the characters because of an indelible incident that took place in their lives.

Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* is a famous mystery-crimefiction revolves around a murder of a wealthy American criminal, Ratchett. The story is set in the far east of Europe, in a confined train where the crime takes place. Hercule Poirot, an ex-detective who travels in the Orient Express along with the victim and the murderers, helps his friend in solving the murder. Poirot suspects all the twelve strangers on the train and he tries to find the killer before anyone else is murdered.

Agatha Mary Carissa Miller was born on September 15, 1890 in England, UK. She was the youngest among her siblings. Though Agatha Christie wrote six romance fictions under the name Mary Westmacott, she was well known for her crime fictions numbering sixty six. She was married to an archaeologist, whom she travelled with and explored new places. These travel experiences formed the background for many of her stories especially her novel, *Murder on the Orient Express* which was first published in the United Kingdom on 1st January 1934.

The complete plot takes place in a luxury train named Orient Express, where an American tycoon lies dead in his compartment, stabbed a dozen times with his door locked from inside. Isolated in snowy mountains and with the killer on the loose, detective Hercule Poirot must identify the murderer before he or she strikes again. The underlying plot of the story was based on the true story of the abduction and murder of Charles Lindbergh's son around the same period. This dreadful incident forms the back drop for the revenge of the passengers.

The underlying question the author puts forward is to what extent a person would go to avenge for the loss of his loved one. Christie weaves up a tale of mystery and crime which unravels to a heartfelt story of love and loss. With all the twelve characters having a motive where they were not ready to compromise for morals. So they plot and act making the detective struggle with assumptions. Based on the past of every character the truth slowly unfolds in the end.

Christie creates an enthralling narrative of family using flashback technique. The story in the background consists of the murder of Daisy Armstrong which took place in the 1930's in which Ratchett whose real name

is John Cassetti kidnaps Daisy Armstrong for a ransom but ends up killing the child even after receiving the ransom. On hearing this Sonia Armstrong, the mother of Daisy and her unborn daughter die of shock. Later Daisy's father commits suicide.

During the court trial on this case, the nurse who took care of Daisy was suspected, and because of the shame of being blamed for a murder she never committed, she too commits suicide. A group of friends, family and loved ones who are connected with these four people's lives are distorted and shattered. They believed that the reason for their loss began with the single murder of Daisy Armstrong by Ratchett. These friends and family members later plan to avenge him for the murder.

The retired Belgian police officer Hercule Poirot suspects all the twelve passengers who are in that same compartment. Initially, when Poirot informs the passengers the death of Ratchett, several characters expressed satisfaction in his death and that it was deserved. Poirot becomes suspicious of this behaviour. So he tries to find the truth behind each character through his interrogations. He understands that those close to the Armstrong family boarded the Orient Express as everyone of them is related to the deceased. Hence, leading to the belief that everyone had a motive to kill Ratchett.

Ratchett's secretary Hector MacQueen's father was involved in the trial following Daisy Armstrong's murder, which ends up destroying his career. So MacQueen wants to take revenge on behalf of his father. Edward Masterman, who was Armstrong's butler, becomes Ratchett's valet to get closer to him and to avenge him for his master's family. The mastermind behind gathering all the people is Linda Arden who is the grandmother of Daisy Armstrong and pretends to be Caroline Hubbard. Arden also calls her other daughter.

Similarly many characters such as: Mary Debenham, Armstrong's governess; Pilar Estravados, Armstrong's nurse; Hildegard Schmidt, Armstrong's family cook; Dr. Arbuthnot served with Daisy's father in the army and a close friend to him; Biniamino Marquez, Armstrong's family chauffeur; Helena Goldenberg pretends to be Countess Elena Andrenyi who is Daisy's aunt; Gerhard Hardman, an American detective, who was in love with the Armstrong's family nurse and finally Pierre Michel, the accused nurse's brother. All these characters are either friends or family members of the Armstrong's and their only motive is to avenge Ratchett.

The role of Poirot in the novel is important as he was the one who unravels the mystery step by step. Since the beginning he vaguely suggests that, "perhaps, all these here are linked together-by death" (Christie 24) which is the actual truth. The characters are gathered there because of the murder of Daisy Armstrong. Without giving much thought he utters those words but the author second-handily gives out clues through him.

Poirot investigates all the twelve passengers in the train where they all give a negative opinion about Ratchett. Some of them directly express satisfaction in his death. Ratchett had been involved in the murder of many children and some passengers felt as if his death did save the lives of many other children. As Poirot passes by Ratchett's body he feels that a savage wild animal passes by him and he mentions feeling an evil presence emitting from Ratchett. It indirectly defines Ratchett's true character.

Finally Poirot solves the mystery by saying, "Ratchett has escaped the justice in America. There was no question as to his guilt. I visualised a self-appointed jury of twelve people who condemned him to death and were forced by exigencies of the case to be their own executioners. And immediately, on the assumption, the whole case fell into beautiful shining order." (Christie 249). This understanding gave more clarity to Poirot which helped him identify the twelve murders.

Each passenger had a hand in plotting and executing Ratchett's death. The passengers are personally too close to the events of the murder of Daisy Armstrong and her family, so they were not able to make a rational decision rather they completely relied on their instinct and emotions to carry them through the murder. The characters and decisions made in the book *Murder on the Orient Express* revolved around a corrupt theme of justice that the passengers were clinging on to and this made their actions morally acceptable. With the gruesome murder of a child these twelve peoples' life were shattered and they were pushed to the extent of revenge.

"Revenge is a kind of wild justice; . . ." (26) is the opening line of Francis Bacon's essay "Of Revenge" written in the year 1625. In this essay he talks about 'Revenge' and its role in the human interactions. According to Bacon revenge turns a man into an unconstrained human being, who takes up the law in his own hands. The term 'wild' is often connected with beastly behaviour. What differentiates humans from beasts is the conscience but in the novel these characters lose their humane side and expose their animalistic nature by killing a human being. The term 'wild' is connected with 'justice' to define the cruel method used to attain justice.

Here, the murder of Ratchett is considered as a wild form of justice because it compromises the conscience and morals to achieve a cruel goal. In the novel the judicial system failed to issue Ratchett a punishment and as a result the victims take up the roles of the system and act. The punishment that they felt well deserved is death. So they became the court and the magistrate and gave the culprit a death sentence.

To restore the social order the characters use deception and lies to manipulate others. Finally they avenge for their loved ones. The major themes of the novel such as justice, deception, identity and insufficiency of the law play a huge role in supporting the characters while plotting their revenge. In the novel, *Murder on the Orient Express* the characters declared justice by punishing the wrongdoers. They believed that social order was restored by taking the law in their hands. These twelve people from different backgrounds plotted against an injustice that had happened to their loved ones.

The insufficiency of law plays a major role in the crime; if the law would have functioned properly these twelve people would not have become murderers. The inadequacy of the American judicial system was highlighted by Poirot in many places to bring to notice the system and how it dissatisfied people making them take actions. The metaphorical usage of the twelve people in the jury and the twelve people in the train are indirectly thrown light on through the words of Arbuthnot who says, "say what you like, trial by jury is a sound system" (Christie 79) here he was not referring to the law but the sound judgement given by the twelve people who acted as the jury which permits the vengeful murder of a killer. The lack of judicial system especially the prohibition to murder law made the people take up the role of the jury and award justice to the offenders. A self-appointed group of twelve convicted Ratchett to death and murder him. The role of Jury symbolises the justness but here the system failed to act towards lawbreakers.

The deceit in the appearances of the characters is well seen in the novel. As Phaedrus, a famous Athenian aristocrat says "Things are not always what they seem; the first appearance deceives many; the intelligence of a few perceives what has been carefully hidden" (Christie 57). Similarly the characters forge a fake identity and even the greatest detective falls for the trick.

The characters assume a disguised identity in the novel and are suspected by Poirot. Their true identities are later revealed in the second half of the

novel. The characters try to deceive using fake names or professions or their associations with the Armstrong family. The characters are not what they claim to be rather their true identity is hidden and manipulated.

Agatha Christie being the author tries to hide the true motive of her passengers till Poirot tries to identify their true intentions with great difficulty and finally in the end he figures out that there is more than one murderer in the train. This final revelation was a turning point in the story. The author revealed only one eighth of the information to her readers. The characters were driven by emotion which acted as a trigger for revenge but this motive was well hidden by some of the characters in the novel that even the greatest detective was not able to identify until the very end.

The story reveals only the outer crust of the idea while the true hidden agenda lies underneath the surface. Deception and lies play a huge role in covering up the characters true identities. For instance, when Gerhard Hardman pretends to be a Professor of Economics from Wessex his accent and his knowledge in the field was lagging a little so Poirot was able to identify him to be from a different place and different profession but he doesn't find any clue which links him to the murder. Similarly every character portrays themselves to be different than what they really are. As a result it was hard for Poirot to solve the case.

Through the course of the novel revenge has been seen as an underlying theme as well as the main theme because Christie tries to project that the characters have a motive but are in denial when accused of the crime. This confuses Poirot and misleads him many times throughout the novel believing that these people might not be the killers because of their simple life. Agatha Christie also wants the readers to keep guessing the killer until the very end of the story when Poirot finally reveals the truth.

The novel constantly questions the role of jury and the system of justice with self-appointed juries. The failure of the judicial system made twelve people murderers and the morals behind these murders are questioned. The in-depth nature of deceit and vengeance in the hearts of many led to the murder of a criminal. Thus in the final argument of the novel, Poirot and the other characters agree that the murder of Ratchett is right and fair.

*The Simple Art of Murder* by Raymond Chandler is a fine collection of his essays which talks about detective fictions and crimes fictions of the time. In that work he praises Dashiell Hammett as his adherence to reality thus saying, "gave [murder](#) back to the kind of people that commit it for

reasons, not just to provide a corpse.” (Kellogg) Similarly Agatha Christie in her novel *Murder on the Orient Express* creates ordinary characters in day-to-day lives who are broken inside but seeking comfort through revenge. These characters are guilty of their acts but they reason themselves by thinking that if they leave Ratchett alive, he might disfigure another group of people’s lives like theirs. So they plot and put an end to his life. The traumatic incidents they faced were directly or indirectly linked by the various issues such as loss, sorrow, frustration and alienation. The intentions of the killers are due to profound suffering over a long period. Still they understand that the consequences of their actions are a lifetime burden to bear. Christie by showing the grey areas of the society and the justice system gives a deeper meaning to her theme of revenge as a wild form of justice.

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