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Alexander, M. (2008) *The lobster and the maid: scenario-dependence and reader manipulation in Agatha Christie*. In: Annual Conference of the Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA), 23-26 July 2008, Sheffield, UK.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/32232/>

Deposited on: 13 July 2010

The Lobster and the Maid: Scenario-dependence and reader manipulation in Agatha Christie

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Abstract

Readers of detective fiction deliberately seek to be deceived by the stories they read; in this manner, the genre forms a series of texts that aim to manipulate and persuade. This paper describes Agatha Christie's manipulation of plot-significant information in her short story *The Tuesday Night Club* by discussing a reader's psychological depth of processing of significant entities and characters. In particular, I describe this technique within cognitive stylistics using the theory of scenario-dependence, in which a reader's partitions of memory dictate the focus of a scenario and the role-mapping of entities within a narrative. In this manner, the paper describes how Christie's puzzle-like plot invites a reader's engagement while she simultaneously uses psychological means to divert reader scrutiny and persuade them to follow the wrong 'path' to the story's conclusion. This paper is part of a wider project to describe the cognitive and stylistic basis of reader manipulation in detective fiction (see also Alexander 2006).

Key words: scenario-dependence, minor characters, crime fiction, detective fiction, cognitive stylistics, Agatha Christie.

...the evaporating ice-darts or any of the other paraphernalia used by some of the earlier crime writers are of no great interest to Agatha Christie. Her tricks are sometimes verbal, sometimes visual. If you listen carefully and watch her all the time, you *may* catch Mrs Christie, but it is highly unlikely that you will. The solution which she has somehow persuaded you quite early in the narrative is *not* the correct one very frequently *is...*

Osborne (1999: 48)

1. Introduction

Much detective fiction, particularly that of the early 20th century, takes the form of a puzzle set by the author for the reader to attempt to solve in tandem with its fictional detective. Peter Brooks says of such novels that they are ‘pursued both for the solution of enigmas and their prolongation in suspense, in the pleasure of the text: the best possible case of plot for plot’s sake’ (1984: 170). Crucial plot information set out in such a narrative therefore has a two-fold aim; both to be established as part of the text world (see Werth 1999 and Gavins 2007) and simultaneously not be recognized as part of the puzzle’s solution. This paper looks at one of Agatha Christie’s techniques for manipulating a reader away from such a solution through the careful presentation of plot-significant information. In particular, it examines Christie’s handling of character role assumptions, to exclude a guilty party from a reader’s scrutiny.

1.1. The Butler Did It

In detective fiction of the Agatha Christie mould, there is the oft-cited cliché that ‘the butler did it’; that a minor servant character is the eventual culprit. In fairness, as Herbert (1999: 49) points out, ‘there are surprisingly few detective novels in which the butler is actually guilty of a crime’ – more common in the genre is the situation where a servant is accused because s/he is of a lower social class than the other suspects, who themselves cannot believe that someone of their own class could commit such a crime. Christie, as one of the key figures of early 20th century detective fiction, does indeed rarely employ this servant-as-culprit device, although never using a butler – however, one of her early short stories, the first appearance in print of her spinster detective Miss Jane Marple, has a maid as the murderer.

This story, *The Tuesday Night Club* (Christie 1997: 3-16), will be the focus of this paper. In order to describe the particular cognitive stylistic grounding of this device of the minor servant character ending up a highly plot-significant character, I first describe the psycholinguistic model of *scenario-dependence*, which can be used to explain the plot device and the reasoning behind its use.

2. Scenario-Dependence

Scenario-dependence is part of the larger framework of Sanford and Garrod’s *Scenario Mapping and Focus* model (Sanford and Garrod 1981, 1998, Sanford and

Sturt 2002, and Anderson *et al* 1983). This is a psychological model of the assumptions readers make as they read texts, and narrative texts in particular. In its description of the organization of generic and discursal knowledge it is similar to classical schema theory (see, *inter alia*, Minsky 1975 and Schank and Abelson 1977) – the major difference between the two is that Sanford and Garrod’s model is an extensively empirically-tested psychological account of how the mind reads, rather than a construct based on the requirements of artificial intelligence. It has been recently employed in stylistic analysis, particularly in the area of reader manipulation, by Catherine Emmott (2003 and Emmott *et al* in press).

For our purposes here, it is important to note that these scenarios are selectively activated during reading, used by a reader to make sense of the text which follows. Such scenarios are, broadly speaking, schemata which encode situational information (that is, contextual knowledge of locations, such as restaurants, bedrooms, shops, universities, and so on). Within a scenario, there are various roles into which readers ‘map’ characters (Sanford and Garrod 1981: 91ff). These role slots exist not only for explicitly-introduced characters, but also for any expected participants which are brought into the reader’s mental representation of the text as the scenario is introduced, even if they are not mentioned. For example, the classic example of a restaurant includes role slots for waiters who are assumed to exist in the scenario, even if not referred to – a canonical restaurant which has no waiters would, in fact, be so unexpected to pragmatically warrant explicit mention. These ‘assumed’ characters are known as *scenario-dependent*, in opposition to *principal* characters (those who exist beyond a scenario’s boundaries).

Such scenario-dependent characters often include the butlers and maids of detective fiction. The canonical scenario-dependent character is a minor participant, performing relatively stereotypical actions in the scene, and Sanford and Garrod have shown empirically that principal characters and scenario-dependent characters have different psychological statuses, and in particular scenario-dependent characters are far less psychologically prominent than principal ones (1981: 145-153). This is an ideal situation for a writer of manipulative detective fiction, where the downgrading of psychological prominence is a key feature of hiding significant clues from the reader’s attention.

3. *The Tuesday Night Club*

Turning to the text under analysis, *The Tuesday Night Club* (Christie 1997: 3-16) is a short story with a relatively simple plot. It is set in the late 19th century in the house of a well-to-do husband and wife, and Christie’s own summary, given by the narrator at the start of the story, is:

‘The facts are very simple. Three people sat down to a supper consisting, amongst other things, of tinned lobster. Later in the night, all three were taken ill [...] Two of the people recovered, the third one died.’ (Christie 1997: 7)

These three characters are Mr Jones, Mrs Jones – his wife, who died – and the companion is a Miss Clark. No other characters are mentioned at this stage. After the burial, Mr Jones is accused of murdering his wife for financial gain, although there is

no obvious means of his having done so; the symptoms of his wife's death are from what appears to be food poisoning. He is accused of murder since after his wife's funeral there is the discovery of an incomplete letter written by Jones which seems to implicate him in his wife's death. The police, however, blame the lobster – it had gone off, they conclude, and the woman died of food poisoning.

This conclusion is explicitly brought to the reader's attention by the lobster being given contrast-prominence in the above quote. The high contrast between the generic introduction, using vague terms ('people', 'things'), and the particular detail of the lobster – even to the extent of it being premodified by 'tinned' – focuses attention on it. Here, if you will forgive the term, the lobster functions as a clear red herring.

3.1. The Maid as Maid

Although the two Joneses and Miss Clark are the three main characters in the story – what Sanford and Garrod would call the 'principal' characters – it is the fourth, unmentioned, character who is most relevant for our purposes. The maid, not introduced or even included in the above count of 'people' present, is a scenario-dependent character, both housemaid and murderer – poisoning food that only the dead woman ate.

With regards to the majority of the text, however, the maid is an ordinary and quite typical scenario-dependent character. Her existence is predicted by any experienced reader, as the story is set in a late 19th-century English country house which we can reasonably expect to include domestic staff. As explored below, she performs consistently scenario-dependent tasks such as cooking, does nothing which is inconsistent with her role, and is wholly in keeping with the nature of a minor servant character. Her behaviour is almost entirely typical of any unnoticed character in an exclusively scenario-dependent role, performing scenario-typical actions. The remainder of this section will demonstrate this through an analysis of each appearance of the maid in the story.

When she first appears, she is embedded within a discussion of the lobster:

Unfortunately none of the lobster remained – it had all been eaten and the tin thrown away. He [the police officer] had interrogated the young maid, Gladys Linch. She was terribly upset, very tearful and agitated, and he found it hard to get her to keep to the point, but she declared again and again that the tin had not been distended in any way and that the lobster had appeared to her in a perfectly good condition. (Christie 1997: 10)

Linch is here mentioned through confirmation, rather than introduction; the use of the definite determiner means she is 'the maid', someone whose presence we should already expect in the house. Some extra attributes of her – being young and in distress – are provided. These are consistent with her scenario-dependent role in this situation, a maid being interrogated about possible lethal negligence in preparing food, but there is no suggestion that she has a more prominent role in the story. Syntactically, the last sentence of the extract is fairly complex, with multiple coordinate clauses and a final focus on the lobster in its role as red herring. Linch's attributes of distress are only mentioned in the first of the four coordinated main clauses, and so are not made prominent in any way (Sanford and Sturt 2002).

The maid then prepares food in the kitchen in an unremarkable way:

After supper on that evening Mr Jones had gone down to the kitchen and had demanded a bowl of cornflour for his wife who had complained of not feeling well. He had waited in the kitchen until Gladys Linch prepared it, and then carried it up to his wife's room himself... (Christie 1997: 11)

And, upon Miss Clark eating the cornflour (Mrs Jones having changed her mind about drinking it), Clark states:

'Gladys is really quite a nice cook. Very few girls nowadays seem to be able to make a bowl of cornflour nicely...' (Christie 1997: 11)

This can be seen as either reinforcement of Linch's scenario-typical actions of preparing food, or evidence that Linch is not likely to be a negligent cook (an oblique reference to the lobster, throwing further suspicion on Mr Jones). Significantly, both extracts do not contradict her scenario-dependent status – she is seen to prepare food or linked with the preparation of food in each mention, and each is placed near a point which is linked to Mr Jones' possible guilt (his being alone with something his wife was supposed to drink, the lobster not looking as if it had gone bad, and the maid not being likely to be a poor cook).

3.2. The Maid as Murderer

The maid is not mentioned again until the story's conclusion, where Miss Marple guesses the story's solution (see also Emmott 2003 for a similar pattern). At this point, there is no need for the maid to remain in scenario-dependence, and Christie takes every opportunity to elevate her to principal character status:

'That poor girl, Gladys Linch, of course – the one who was so terribly agitated when the doctor spoke to her – and well she might be, poor thing. I hope that wicked Jones is hanged, I am sure, making that poor girl a murderess. I suppose they will hang her too, poor thing.' (Christie 1997:16)

'Jones had got Gladys Linch into trouble, as the saying goes. She was nearly desperate. He wanted his wife out of the way and promised to marry Gladys when his wife was dead. He doctored the hundreds and thousands [poisoned sugar strands placed on the trifle] and gave them to her with instructions how to use them. Gladys Linch died a week ago. Her child died at birth and Jones had deserted her for another woman. When she was dying she confessed the truth.' (Christie 1997:16)

The attributes given to the maid in the first quote (four uses of 'poor' in three sentences) are not generally associated with scenario-dependent characters. At no stage is her profession (the source of her scenario role) mentioned, with her instead being referred to as 'girl', 'murderess', and 'poor thing'. Similarly, the second quote refers to her solely by name or pronoun (a notable characteristic of principal characters). The succession of short, syntactically simple sentences contrast with the embedded mentions of Linch in earlier sections.

Afterwards, Marple and her nephew discuss the case:

‘... I can’t think how on earth you managed to hit upon the truth. I should never have thought of the little maid in the kitchen being connected with the case.’

‘No, dear,’ said Miss Marple, ‘but you don’t know as much of life as I do. A man of that Jones’s type – coarse and jovial. As soon as I heard there was a pretty young girl in the house I felt sure that he would not have left her alone ...’ (Christie 1997:16)

Here, Christie explicitly and suggestively plays on the double roles of the maid, juxtaposing the stereotypical ‘little maid’, in the view of her nephew (standing in for the reader), with a description of her own which is more indicative of her role as lover, ‘a pretty young girl’. Notably, there is no mention of her attractiveness at any earlier part in the story. Marple’s nephew emphasises the maid’s scenario-dependent origins (‘in the kitchen’), which is ignored in Marple’s reply. This short dialogue between the predicted interpretation of the maid and Marple’s ‘insightful’ interpretation is a useful device to pre-empt the reader’s possible reaction to Christie’s ‘trick’.

By this stage in the story, Linch has moved far from scenario-dependence. Her schematic role as a 19th-century maid cannot in any way include murder or sexual involvement with her employer. The mappings a reader makes to the house-servant role slot, and the associated scenario knowledge used to understand her character, are no longer valid and in some cases are explicitly rejected. We as readers instead require her to become a principal character, so that we can ascribe motivation to her and understand her ‘repaired’ role. It is, of course, notable that these extra pieces of information are only ascribed to her after she ceases to be scenario-dependent, to preserve her status as long as possible.

4. Conclusion

Sanford and Garrod’s model, while not explicitly intended for stylistic analysis, provides a useful and coherent way in which to look at the role of scenario-dependent characters in manipulative fiction (see also Emmott 2003, Emmott *et al* in press and Alexander 2006). Linch in *The Tuesday Night Club* is, in the early parts of the story, a typical scenario-dependent character, and in order to construct a generalised model it is possible to base a number of characteristics of ‘hidden’ scenario-dependent characters on Linch (at least, the characteristics of the presentation of Linch before Marple deduced she was the murderer).

Firstly, Linch is *confirmed rather than introduced*; the syntax of the introducing expression is definite rather than indefinite. This follows from the definition of scenario-dependent characters, which through the opening of role slots in a scenario must necessarily be assumed to exist within the discourse. The use of definite introductory reference without prior allusion is a strong indicator of scenario-dependency.

In a related point, she is only *introduced after the scenario is established*. In order for there to exist a role slot for her to be bound to, Linch cannot appear until the scenario is sufficiently confirmed to the reader. A reversal is, of course, possible (a scene

beginning *in medias res* with a waiter asking a question then leads to the establishment of a restaurant scenario), but less diagnostic of a ‘hidden’ principal character masquerading as scenario-dependent, as this may stylistically draw unwanted attention.

In order not to be upgraded to a principal character, Linch *performs only scenario-consistent tasks*. In fulfilling the role of a maid, it is important she does not carry out other tasks which would place high reader attention or psychological prominence on her. Her role slot arises from the scenario, and while she is bound to it then she must not violate the internal rules of the scenario.

Linch’s *appearances are often subordinated*, drawing attention away from her. In terms of the overall story, her appearances are made in the service of a greater point (establishing the state of the lobster, mentioning where food is prepared, etc), which consequently means she is either mentioned in conjunction with the plot’s obvious red herring (the lobster) or with the more-effective device of attempting to establish Mr Jones as the murderer. Syntactically, her appearances are often buried in complex sentences (such as a subordinate/adverbial clause, or within a series of coordinate clauses), reflecting her role as an accomplisher of tasks rather than a motivated entity in her own right.

Finally, despite being a servant she is *present relatively frequently* in the detective story. This is due to this genre’s requirement that a reader theoretically be able to solve any mystery presented to them, and that they know all that the detective does. As a result, to play fair with a reader, it seems that a scenario-dependent character must at least be present in the narrative at frequent points. The nature of such characters is that their lack of prominence means that without repetition a reader may well forget they featured in the story at all; the ideal situation is one where the character is referred to frequently enough to avoid accusations of the author not playing fair, while the character is still not placed under any real scrutiny. This is likely to be at least part of the reason why the manipulation of scenario-dependence is found mostly in detective fiction, as the scenario should be such that the guilty character can re-appear throughout the novel, without being accidentally upgraded to principal-character status by being present in multiple differing scenarios. These requirements are fulfilled by having the story principally set in a single scenario with clear dependent role slots – such as a country house.

These five characteristics are not necessarily restrictive, with the possible exception of the initial two, but they do begin to describe the nature of scenario-dependent characters being used in a manipulative fashion. In other areas of detective fiction attention is distracted *away* from clues, in much the same way as magicians use sleight-of-hand while performing a card trick, while in scenario-dependent manipulation there is little if any attention placed on such characters in the first place. The sleight-of-hand required here lies instead in carefully managing the appearances of the character in question, waiting until the appropriate moment to break the pattern of scenario-dependence and raise them to prominence. In so doing, an author can provide the reader with the enjoyable moment of surprise disclosure which is so central to the experience of reading detective fiction.

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Acknowledgements

This research was supported by an AHRC Research Preparation Master's studentship. Support for my attendance at PALA 2008 was provided by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland and by the University of Glasgow/AHRC *STACS* Project (*Stylistics, Text Analysis and Cognitive Science: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Nature of Reading*), whose work also influenced much of the research in this paper.