Rethinking Retrospection:
Temporality and Criminality in Christie’s Detective Fiction

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“I shot him symmetrically, in the exact centre of the forehead....”
-Poirot, Curtain

One of the more frequently made observations about Golden Age detective fiction is that it tends toward retrospection. Many of the analyses of the genre in the past forty years suggest that it has an inherently formulaic quality. Detective fiction of the Golden Age (1920-circa 1950) seems to regurgitate instead of innovate, to reiterate known and familiar plots over new and potentially subversive ones, and in so doing, offers what Christine Evans terms “the comforts of established world views” instead of calling these “into question and thus menacing the conceptual habits of the receiver” (Evans, 160). This repetition of the tried-and-true distinguishes detective fiction from major literary works. As Tzvetan Todorov argues in his influential work, The Typology of Detective Fiction, “to ‘improve upon’ detective fiction is to write ‘literature,’ not detective fiction. The whodunit par excellence is not the one which transgresses the rules of the genre, but the one which conforms to them” (138).

What are the rules of the genre? One author of Golden Age detective fiction, S.S. Van Dine, suggested in 1928 twenty imperatives to which “any self-respecting author of detective fiction must conform” (Todorov, 142). Though many of Dine’s prescriptions were, and continue to be, highly contested, two seem to have been more or less accepted without complaint: the idea that the culprit must not be a professional criminal or the detective, and second, that psychological analyses are antithetical to detective work (Van Dine, 1). Regardless of such specifics, the mere existence of rules governing the production of detective fiction would seem to limit the scope of the genre.

This all raises the question: Can detective fiction, its very identity bound in the repetition of what preceded it, ever innovate?

Something of an answer emerges when one considers the concurrence of Golden Age detective fiction with the social upheaval of interwar Europe. The new scientific concept of relativity, in conjunction with the works of Freud and contemporary moral philosophers, called into question the dichotomy between good and evil, shrouding the neatly quantifiable “blacks” and “whites” of human experience in the ambivalent “gray” of moral relativism. The staunchest proponents held that time itself was relative and, therefore, beyond objective measure. To be sure, not all Europeans espoused this shift from traditional deontology, with its insistence on absolute moral rules, to relativism. But the perception of such a shift nonetheless colored popular thought.

The detective fiction of the interwar period bears witness to these changing views through its engagement with new forms and themes. This body of detective fiction questions what might be termed “formal retrospection”—the tendency to abide by the established structural rules governing the production of the genre—by mixing new structures with conventional ones. On a thematic level, this
challenging of convention manifests itself as a questioning of traditional moral judgment. Though Evans argues that detective fiction questions traditional ideologies “only to reaffirm them resoundingly,” the presentation of ideological conflict is in itself a demonstration of novelty (Evans, 161). In particular, the portrayals of justice in the interwar detective novel—both legal justice and what might be termed retributive or “vigilante” justice—provide a gauge of how contemporary authors of detective fiction aimed to “menace” popular conceptual habits and thus to elevate the genre from a formulaic writing into a meditation on what constitutes proper justice.

Three of Agatha Christie’s most provocative interwar novels—Murder on the Orient Express, Sad Cypress, and Curtain—attest to the truth of this claim. Their experimental qualities—particularly the manner of the murders they depict and the identities of the murderers themselves—suggest the possibility of temporal manipulation, pinning the shortcomings of justice on its regressive, or as Neil Sargent terms it, “past-oriented” nature (Sargent, 288). This portrayal of legal justice as teleological—that is, as premised on the notion that a past crime will be solved and the criminal identified and punished by the legal system—becomes problematic, however, when we are confronted with cases in which the boundary between right and wrong is unclear. The result is a disruption of our expectations of detective fiction. Christie’s thematic innovations—above all, her decision to breach taboo and cast the champion of justice, the detective, as the murderer in Curtain—suggest a belief that the very survival of both detective fiction and the legal system hinges on their capacity to cast off the encumbrances of convention and allow for novelty.

**Moral Relativism, Social Change and the Lot of Detective Fiction**

Before we can discuss the justice system as portrayed in the three aforementioned novels and relate it to the dilemma facing Golden Age detective fiction, however, we must understand the interwar engagement with time and relativity as symptomatic of widespread disillusionment with conventional social and moral values.

Science assumed unprecedented importance between 1919 and 1939, though many of the achievements championed during this period were made well before the First World War. By 1924 Einstein’s Theory of Relativity had acquired tremendous interest throughout Europe, within both the scientific community and the general population. It is worth noting that Einstein, like Darwin before him, never intended his findings to be applied outside of the scientific sphere. Nonetheless, to those without scientific training, the theory of relativity seemed to hold profound social implications that undermined time-held assumptions about human morality. Grace A. de Laguna describes the impact of social relativity in her 1941 article, “Cultural Relativism and Science”:
Beliefs as meanings, and standards as valuations, are determined by, and relative to, the cultures to which they belong, as the meaning of a word or phrase is determined by its linguistic context. [...] In so far as cultures are individual wholes, the members of one culture cannot understand in terms of their own concepts and beliefs and differing ways of thought of an alien culture. The logical conclusion, then, to which a consistent and thoroughgoing cultural relativism inevitably leads, is that no concepts are universally applicable and no standards objectively valid. [145-146]

The absence of objective behavioral standards became especially troubling when applied to individuals within a given culture. Hans Arora writes that such a view rendered heretofore unquestioned notions and even facts contingent upon one’s viewpoint and frame of reference (Arora, 2). What was wrong for one person could be considered right for another, and behaviors previously deemed immoral could, in another context, be accepted, even laudable. Truth itself came to be seen as relative. As Susan Sontag laments in *A Broken World*, this “identification of relativity with relativism was exactly that which many were coming to make. Relativity, [...] an achievement possible only because science was dominated by a passionate devotion to truth, was equated with a vulgarized relativism which made truth, and all values, a matter of time, place, circumstance—and convenience” (Sontag, 182).

Predictably, among the casualties of moral relativism was that staunch proponent of absolutism, Christianity. If truth is a matter of time and circumstance, of individual preference, then Christianity becomes just another product of history, one “truth” relative to a particular culture instead of the absolute Truth it was once thought to be. Moreover, because of the exclusivity of the religion, maintaining the Truth of Christianity often necessitated a disavowal of the beliefs offered up by other ideologies. Such absolutism, as Laguna argues, had no place in the now morally relativistic West, where even the most “cherished convictions” were held to be “as much the expression of an unconscious provincialism as are the fantastic superstitions of the savage” (de Laguna, 143-144).

Moral relativism could lead some to question whether any distinction really existed between the “savage” and the so-called “civilized” man. For a notable instance, Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis, developed before the First World War but not made popular until its conclusion, took an additional toll on long-held assumptions concerning human nature. His classification of human desire into two instinctual drives—*Eros* (love) and *Thanatos* (death or destruction)—forced the Western world to acknowledge man’s primitive origins. Indeed, Freud held that by acting as a check on such primitive impulses, civilization precluded true happiness, which could only come from the satisfaction of *Eros* and *Thanatos* (Sontag, 176). This called into question the notion of the fundamental goodness of society as an institution and the moral tenets it upheld. Freud’s concept of taboo further accentuated the seeming limits of human morality. He suggested that human nature is governed largely by impulses that, when acted upon, cause individuals to
subvert the rules and regulations imposed by religion and society. Particularly shocking was humankind’s intrinsic desire to murder:

- Our temptation to kill others is stronger and more frequent than we had suspected and it produces psychic effects even where it does not reveal itself to our consciousness. [...] We can then assume that this desire to murder actually exists and that the taboo as well as the moral prohibition are psychologically by no means superfluous, but are, on the contrary, explained and justified through our ambivalent attitude toward the impulse to slay. [Totem and Taboo, 861]

Regardless of what one thought about Freud’s assertions, their very existence forced Europeans, in the words of Francois Mauric, to “see [...] ourselves through spectacles which we shall never [...] be able to lay aside” (Sontag, 186). This notion that primitive instincts continued to hold sway over the human unconscious added to the legitimacy of moral relativism by contesting the traditional conception of human beings as more rational than primal.

But the appeal of moral relativism and the related Freudian theory of our primitive impulses were far from universal. “The human spirit,” literary scholar Joseph Wood Krutch wrote in 1929, “breathes freely only in a universe where what philosophers call Value Judgments are of supreme importance. It needs to believe […] that right and wrong are real” (Putney and Middleton, 430). Krutch no doubt intended this statement to bolster the moral absolutism that had heretofore served as the basis for evaluating human conduct. But the most interesting element of the claim lies in its premise. In insisting upon the need for moral constraints on behavior, Krutch ironically testifies to the widespread currency of Freud’s notion of fundamental human savagery and contemporary moral relativism in general. We may conclude from this irony that even proponents of traditional morality found themselves on the defensive in the face of new thought that challenged tradition, a situation that rendered their arguments fragile.

Perhaps it is not surprising that, in light of these shifting moral paradigms, many Europeans, especially those of the older generation, found themselves longing for the stability and security of pre-war culture. Marcel Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past laments the inexorable march of time and the casualties that fell in its wake, chief among them a clear and uniform distinction between right and wrong. In the second volume, published in 1918, he deplores the “decay and degeneration” of modern hedonistic society and mourns the collapse of traditional religious and social values (Sontag, 224). Implicit in such denunciations is a desire to return to times past. The ideas of Freud and the moral relativists may well have constituted new spectacles through which Europeans had to view themselves, as Mauric suggests, but others such as Proust chose to look through another, “restorationist” set of spectacles that returned them to the time when right was as easily separated from wrong as black from white. This restorationist perspective colors much of Golden Age detective fiction, which in its idyllic social settings seems to recall the supposed moral stability of pre-war times.

However impossible Proust’s yearning may be, his nostalgia for better times nonetheless touches on a conflict of ideas that poses important questions for works of detective fiction produced at this time. Detective fiction traditionally hinges on a
clearly discernible criminality, with crime itself serving as more of an aberration than an inherent human proclivity. In the literary genre, law and moral codes are portrayed as sufficient to keep the bulk of the population in check. Specifically, these codes become the basis for punishing those who flout society’s norms. The identification and capture of the murderer in these novels guarantee the expulsion of the intruder from what Christine Evans calls “civilized space” (Evans, 164). Crime in detective fiction thus constitutes an external source of threat that can be isolated and “banished to the far periphery of society” (Evans, 163). However, if the majority of human beings are not rational but are rather fundamentally savage and prone to anti-social, even violent, acts, can the whodunit continue to assume a “benevolent and knowable universe” (Evans, 164)? What is more, if right and wrong can no longer be seen as absolute, how are we to deal with indulgences of “animal impulses,” both in detective fiction and in society?

Most authors of the Golden Age canon responded by effectively evading such questions through an increased emphasis on the consolatory rational ethos of the genre. This entailed in part a focus on the “clue-puzzle” motif wherein the rationally minded detective employs an array of mental techniques to impose order on the disaster that has unfolded. The complexity of the puzzle in these novels is counterbalanced by circumstantial parameters that make the detective’s job easier. Stephen Knight notes that quintessential Golden Age crime takes place in an enclosed, usually comfortable middle-class setting, and however many suspects might appear in the events leading up to the crime, eventually, they will be pared down “to one, or sometimes two working together” (Knight, 87).

Although murder emerged as the featured crime in the interwar years, the physical containment of the murder site, the limited number of suspects and their vulnerability to the detective’s reason minimize the emotional threat of the Golden Age detective story. At the heart of these works is an assumption of the validity of deontological morals, where good is clearly distinguishable from evil. We finish these novels with renewed assurance that we can “shield against criminal disruption” through the use of sheer intellect (Knight, 63). By presenting detectives who differ from us only in their exercise of mental faculties, writers of Golden Age detective fiction effectively indulged the restorationist hope that contemporary moral relativists and proponents of Freudian thought were wrong—murder was always unjustified, an aberration rather than a norm, and could, by dint of rational inquiry, be quarantined and expunged, thereby leaving society intact.

But the possibilities of a more pervasive capacity for atrocity and of justifications for atrocities nevertheless persisted in popular thought, as is evidenced by a provocative group of interwar detective novels by Christie that dared to reject the consolatory ethics of the genre. Christie’s Murder on the Orient Express, Sad Cypress, and Curtain present a stark testimony to the contention between traditional “retrospective” notions of morality and human nature on the one side, and the contemporary preoccupation with moral relativism on the other. Through her disavowal of the “rules” governing the formal and thematic qualities of contemporary detective fiction, Christie rejects the comforts of established, retrospective structures and guides us toward what Neil Sargent calls a “presentist,” or present-oriented, outlook (Sargent, Mys-Reading the Past, 288).
This need to avoid entrapment in the past dictates Christie’s presentation of criminality, or what might be termed evil, in these novels as being not an abnormality afflicting a few, as her predecessors in the genre assume, but an underlying proclivity common to all human beings. Her meditations on how to deal with the problem of this evil, which involve skepticism about conventional legal justice, and her suggestion of alternative strategies for coping with crime, place her work well beyond the conventional bounds of the detective genre.

This is not to say that Christie writes “literature,” as Todorov’s dictum suggests. Nor do her works explicitly endorse moral relativism. Rather, in the three novels Christie’s deviation from the past-oriented parameters governing detective fiction shows how, through the relaxation of traditional rules and the admission of novelty, detective fiction can function not merely as an iteration of past social and moral values but as an engagement with the realities of life and belief in the interwar present.

From Whodunit to “Who’lldoit:” The Fallacy of Retrospection

All written between 1933 and 1941, Murder on the Orient Express, Sad Cypress, and Curtain engage a number of different past-oriented or retrospective characteristics of the Golden Age canon, only to expose their shortcomings and ultimately reject them in favor of more progressive ones. These demonstrations of novelty seem to reflect an increasing awareness on Christie’s part of the need not to fix on the past, real or imagined, but instead, for individuals (and by extension, societies) to adopt a presentist position that allows them to move forward.

This issue of retrospection takes two forms. The first, which I will call moral retrospection, consists of individual entrapment in the events of the past and is depicted through the behaviors and thought processes of Christie’s characters. The second, which I will call formal retrospection, refers to the conventional structural and thematic prescriptions in which the detective fiction genre is, as it were, “entrapped.” Before we delve into the various instances and ultimate rejections of these two forms of retrospection, however, it is helpful to have basic familiarity with the plots of each of the three novels.

Murder on the Orient Express finds Detective Hercule Poirot aboard the Calais Coach on his way back from the Middle East. When one passenger, Mr. Ratchet, is found murdered in his cabin while the train is stalled in a snowdrift outside Belgrade, suspicion falls upon the remaining twelve passengers. On interviewing them, Poirot discovers that Mr. Ratchet is actually the child abductor Cassetti, who was previously involved in the infamous kidnapping and murder of the Armstrong baby, a crime for which, despite his obvious guilt, he was acquitted. That the twelve suspects all prove to have connections to the Armstrong family is no coincidence. As Poirot learns, they planned to board the same coach as Cassetti, a man who had hitherto evaded the legal system. In a perversion of the standard jury of twelve stipulated by the courts, they drugged Cassetti and, while he slept, each in turn drove a blade into his body, thus exacting the justice that Cassetti had eluded for so long. Despite his deep and uncompromising objection to murder, Poirot sympathizes with the twelve passengers, and, in a move that would make adherents of conventional detective fiction wince, he lets the “criminals” go.
In *Sad Cypress* we follow the events largely through the eyes of Elinor Carlisle, the prime suspect in the murder of Mary, who has become Elinor’s romantic rival following the breakup of her engagement to Roddy Wellman. The venomous thoughts that she harbors toward Mary combine with the ambiguity of the events that culminated in Mary’s death so that neither we nor Elinor herself can ascertain her guilt or innocence. Only through Poirot’s deft maneuvering in court do we—and Elinor—learn that the true blame lies with another. The novel ends with Elinor’s realization that the marriage she had hoped for and her sense of her own inherent goodness perished with Mary. She must now strive to begin a “new life,” one that “the past”—and all of the feelings of animosity and guilt therein—“will not serve” (Christie, *Cypress*, 228).

If *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Sad Cypress* contain unconventional elements, then *Curtain*, Christie’s “final” Poirot novel, thrives on its deviation from detective fiction norms.1 Set in Styles, the site of the first Poirot mystery, the novel features a now aged and decrepit Poirot trying not to discover who committed a past murder but rather to prevent a murder that is yet to take place. The ending chapters of the book revolve around the deaths of three characters, the last and most surprising of which is that of Poirot himself. Through the narrative of Poirot’s dim but good-natured sidekick, Hastings, we eventually discover the would-be murderer to be Norton, one of the remaining two who died, and who, as Poirot writes in the letter he bequeaths to Hastings after his death, is a sadist who takes pleasure in subtly inducing others to kill. Because Norton has, in fact, committed no physical crimes, he is immune from legal punishment. The letter—and, indeed, the novel—culminate in Poirot’s confession to murdering Norton. “Who could have killed Norton? Only Hercule Poirot,” Poirot writes in a mild chastisement of Hastings’ simplicity (Christie, *Curtain*, 235). The final chapter ends with the now dumbfounded Hastings reflecting on this unexpected revelation. “I should have known,” he laments, “when I saw the bullet hole so symmetrically in the middle of… [Norton’s] forehead” (Christie, *Curtain*, 238).

Instances of moral retrospection flood these texts, all manifested in fixation on (or, perhaps, entrapment in) the events of the past. It is the drive to correct a past mistake on the part of the justice system that leads the twelve passengers to murder Cassetti in *Murder on the Orient Express*. Given the logistical similarities of the murder scheme to the conventional justice that failed to do its job (twelve executioners serving in lieu of twelve jury members), one could argue that the murderers sought to return to a past in which Cassetti should have been punished by a reliable legal system. A similar fixation on the past plays out in *Sad Cypress* when Elinor’s desire to recover her relationship with Roddy causes her to contemplate murdering Mary. In *Curtain*, this yearning for specific aspects of the past becomes a preeminent theme. “Ah!” Hastings laments in the novel’s opening, “If I could go back—live life all over again. If this could have been that day in 1916 when I first travelled to Styles....What changes had taken place since then” (Christie, *Curtain*, 2). Here we see clearly the restorationist’s adversity to change and longing to return to a past where things were morally—and emotionally—reliable.

These cases of moral retrospection are all shown to be detrimental, culminating, as they do, in either murder or the contemplation of murder. Cassetti
dies as a result of his twelve executioners’ need to restore a lost justice, and Elinor nearly resorts to murder out of the hope that Mary’s death will allow her to restore her relationship with Roddy. Hastings’ desire to return to a past in which he was his daughter’s protector drives him to briefly contemplate murder, and murder attends his past-orientation: so utterly unable is Hastings to focus on the present that Mrs. Franklin dies and Mrs. Luttrell is critically injured, both as a result of Norton’s machinations.

This correlation between retrospection and the desire to kill serves as a tacit admonition against excessive hindsight. Christie seems to be speaking through Poirot when he urges Hastings in Curtain to “not look back,” but “instead, look forward...there is work to be done” (Christie, Curtain, 15). The events of the past are permanently stitched into the tapestry of time, unalterable and irrevocable. Only the future, Christie suggests, is ours to mold for the greatest good. In accordance with this sentiment, the three novels all conclude with the restorationists sloughing off their past encumbrances and focusing instead on the events that lie ahead.

But the manner through which these characters achieve a presentist orientation poses some problems. Because of their fixation on a past injustice, the passengers on the Orient Express take justice into their own hands and kill Cassetti. And in Sad Cypress, again, Elinor, whose retrospective vision of romantic happiness has been disrupted by Mary, seriously contemplates murder, even if she does not commit it. It is only Hastings, himself prepared to murder to recover a past relationship with his daughter, who seems to grasp the dangers of romanticizing the moral clarity of the past. He understands at the novel’s close that even in that “far-off time” he pines for, “there had been no happiness at Styles” (Christie, Curtain, 90). Poirot, always a better psychologist than Hastings, has a still clearer understanding of the dangers of retrospection One must, he says in Sad Cypress, walk through “the valley of the shadow of death” to bridge the chasm “between past and future” (Christie, Cypress, 228).

Turning from moral to formal retrospection, we find that Christie’s rejection of formal retrospection reinforces this need for a present-orientation. Traditional detective fiction seeks to recreate and illuminate events that have already happened. The story concludes with the discovery of the perpetrator of some past wrong. Christie, however, goes beyond discovering the source of past crimes (the culprit, or evildoer, as it were), to the moral problem of what constitutes evil in modern times and how one controls it in order to protect the innocent.

In Murder on the Orient Express, Poirot contemplates whether he should fulfill the traditional role of the detective and turn in Cassetti’s executioners, a problem that is normally out of the purview of the detective genre. Similarly, in Sad Cypress, we enter the courtroom, where Elinor, the alleged murderer, stands trial. That the novel starts here rather than with the events that preceded Mary’s murder indicates that the period following the murder is the true focal point of the novel. In this sense, it is presentist—our view is forced away from the events of the determinate past and onto the indeterminate present, the unfolding of which is still malleable. The delay of the much-anticipated murder until the final chapters in Curtain reinforces this point.
Like *Sad Cypress*, *Curtain* is concerned not with restructuring the events of the past but with preventing a likely series of events from unfolding in the present. One might argue that this places Christie’s “final” Poirot novel outside the detective genre altogether. But as Poirot argues in both *Sad Cypress* and *Curtain*, the detective’s primary objective is “to save the innocent,” not just to discover the guilty (Christie, *Curtain*, 217). Though he saved Elinor from being wrongly convicted, he could not prevent the loss of innocence that left her “a strange, defenseless creature, very crude and raw,” following her brush with murder, any more than he could prevent the twelve passengers aboard the Orient Express from exacting justice by murder (Christie, *Cypress*, 218). Simply to reconstruct the past is to accept the occurrence of murder as inevitable, a past-orientation that relegates the detective to the role of the puzzle-solver. Working in the present, that realm over which the detective still has influence, allows Poirot to prevent the murder-puzzle from developing. By deterring would-be murderers from acting on their impulses, he increases the number of innocents that he can save.

Christie thus underscores the need for detectives—and thus, for detective fiction—to engage the events of the present, as it is here that they can best fulfill the more important role of defenders of those who have done no wrong. In effect, she moves away from the traditional, Golden Age conception of the detective as rationalist revealer of what has already happened to that of the detective as presentist moral philosopher commenting on the great problem of crime and punishment.

The insights afforded by formal retrospection at first seem to clarify the relationship between death and moral retrospection: murder is not necessary for overcoming one’s fixation on the past as long as Christie moves the detective beyond his conventional (formal) orientation as solver of past crimes and toward a presentist engagement with the moral problem of why people commit crimes in the first place. But this answer receives qualification through what seem to be Christie’s final thoughts on the proper role of the detective: *Curtain* concludes with the revelation that Poirot killed Norton. “This was the only way I could do it,” the detective declares, writing of his mission to save the innocent, in his letter to Hastings (Christie, *Curtain*, 217). However one might contest this claim, the fact that Poirot, like the twelve in *Murder on the Orient Express*, perceives the murder as justified leads to some interesting questions as to what, for Christie, constitutes true criminality.

**Diagnosing Evil**

In *Evil under the Sun*, published in 1941, Christie indulges what one might call the comfortable past-oriented understanding of criminality—that is, the view of criminality as a readily identifiable aberration that must be quarantined and expelled from society. This comes across most prominently in the character Stephen Lane, a deranged former clergyman whom Poirot meets at a beach resort. Lane’s identification of criminality with evil and his assertion that “evil is done by those [...] who are underdeveloped” embody the pre-relativistic perception of the propensity for wrongdoing as an anomaly rather than a fundamental part of the human condition (Christie, *Sun*, 10). Evil, in his view, is something that belongs to an earlier time. While it may have once characterized man in his primitive state,
the better portion of humanity has since overcome these savage impulses—hence the implication that those who commit crimes are “underdeveloped.” His targeting of the licentious Arlena as “evil through and through” offers support to this end (Christie, Sun, 14). Her overt sexuality separates her from her morally conservative counterparts, rendering her aberrant and therefore threatening.

Lane’s view of Arlena as a potential source of wrongdoing encapsulates the traditional stance of Golden Age detective fiction—and indeed, all detective fiction that preceded it—on the nature of evil. The criminal is a deviant whose “underdeveloped” impulses are not shared by the civilized majority, and therefore render him unfit to dwell within society. He must be restrained rather than reformed, and his misdeeds cannot be made amenable to reason. As Christie indicates, however, the repeated invocation of this stock criminal and the attending view of criminality as unabashedly evil no longer suffice in a world where the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, is continuously called into question. As Poirot laments, to espouse this view is “to remove all romance—all mystery! Today, everything is standardized! [...] That reminds me very much of the Morgue in Paris” (Christie, Sun, 5-6). Though he is ostensibly speaking about the scantily clad sunbathers reclining along the shoreline, the placement of the passage, just before our introduction to Reverend Lane, elevates it to a commentary on the state of detective fiction in general and, in particular, the criminal characters therein.

The need to dismiss the wrongdoer as a deviant, as Lane does, reduces the criminal to a set of neat, predictable features. Ironically, keeping wrongdoers within the criminal parameters outlined by the genre has resulted in the removal of what is at the heart of detective fiction—the “mystery”—so that criminals come across every bit as interchangeable and devoid of life as corpses in a morgue. Without individualizing differences, without novelty in lieu of formal retrospection, Christie suggests, the stock criminal is as good as dead, and along with him, the detective genre.

Given her views on conventional portrayals of criminality, it is not surprising that Christie demonstrates an increasing deviation from the simplistic clergyman’s portrayal of the criminal as an “Other” in favor of a more Freudian, morally relativistic conceptualization of evil. Murder on the Orient Express, Sad Cypress and Curtain provide a chronological trajectory of Christie’s progress on this score. The different aspects of evil and evildoers that these novels highlight force us to dismiss the comfortable, restorationist view of the criminal as aberrant and point us toward the possibility that the criminal is very much like ourselves.

Murder on the Orient Express begins this process by presenting us with twelve different criminals complicit in the murder of Cassetti. These twelve different individuals come from twelve different walks of life. Their ranks include a middle-aged Swedish nurse, an Italian salesman, a young British governess, a middle-aged British colonel, a Russian princess and her German maid, and an affluent Hungarian couple. This diversity of status and nationality leads Monsieur Bouc to comment to Poirot on first boarding the train that “all around us there are people of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages” (Christie, Orient, 22). That a group of such vastly different individuals could be, as Poirot says, “linked together—by death” lends universality to the potential to commit crime. If all of these
individuals—young and old, Anglo-European and Eastern European, lower-class and aristocratic—can be induced to murder, then the possibility of portraying the murderer as an “Other” is no longer possible. The murderer is not simply “one” of us; he is, potentially, all of us, as these passengers represent “all classes and nationalities” (Christie, Orient, 235). Poirot’s decision to let the twelve co-conspirators go ballasts the notion that the potential for violence is fundamental to the human condition; though he does not condone murder, he recognizes the fact that agreement among twelve such diverse individuals on the “rightness” of committing murder lends legitimacy to the crime, much as a jury’s agreement in a murder trial can affirm the rightness of their determination of guilt or innocence on the deed in question.

What is more, Cassetti’s death is not a spontaneous act of violence on the part of an “Other”; it is, instead, an act stemming from a perceived injustice and based on a consensus that transcends class, status, and racial barriers. The capacity for violence thus comes across as inherently human rather than aberrant. In this light, the true “Other” would be one who would not commit murder under such circumstances.

Sad Cypress takes the omnipresence of evil a step further by allowing us to experience the thought process that drives one to murder. Told largely through the third-person narrative of Elinor, who is later implicated in Mary’s murder, the novel lets us see beyond Elinor’s outward veneer of civility to the struggle that leads her to contemplate killing her romantic rival. We feel her heartbreak when Roddy calls off their engagement, her white-hot fury at discovering that his infatuation with Mary is to blame, and, finally, her festering yearning to do away with the woman who seems to be the one obstacle to recovering the relationship she and Roddy once had. The contrast between Elinor’s outward semblance of calm and the welter of emotions rolling within her makes Dr. Lord’s rather Freudian assertion that “the human face is [...] nothing more or less than a mask,” underneath which lurks “a primitive human man or woman,” particularly apt (Christie, Cypress, 44). Indeed, we cannot help but commend Elinor’s skill at keeping the mask on, given the intensity of her feelings. “If Mary Gerrard were to—die, for instance, wouldn’t Roddy some day [sic] acknowledge: ‘it was all for the best?’” Elinor wonders to herself. Wouldn’t he “come back to her—Elinor” (Christie, Cypress, 81-2)?

Because we have experienced Elinor’s heartbreak, we can well appreciate the seductive appeal of such queries. The same primitive impulse to kill Mary that passes through Elinor like a “dark, sinister” presence vicariously possesses us, showing us firsthand how the desire to kill develops (Christie, Cypress, 82). No longer can the criminal or would-be criminal be dismissed as a lunatic or as possessed of somehow anomalous mental faculties. We have experienced the coolly rational thought pattern that drives one to contemplate murder, felt injustice at what seem to be circumstances conspiring against us and preventing our visions of future happiness from ever coming to fruition. Through Elinor, Christie cultivates our empathy for the criminal, whose actions are no longer blatantly wrong, but might, through a different perspective, be justifiable.

But true identification with the criminal does not come until Curtain, where not only is the detective himself induced to commit murder, but so also, perhaps more disturbingly, is Hastings. As Poirot’s Watson figure, Hastings articulates our
surprise, horror and, at times, utter bafflement at Poirot’s revelations in many of Agatha Christie’s novels. He is, in many ways, our consciousness in the stories. What is more, because *Curtain* is told through Hastings’ first-person narration, the distance between us and his thoughts is narrower than it was between us and Elinor in *Sad Cypress*. We hear not only select thoughts, but everything, from his lamentation about the toll that time has taken on the now old and decrepit Poirot, to the acute, almost physical pain that the return to Styles inflicts upon him.

By reading his narrative, we, in a sense, become him, seeing everything through his eyes, sharing in his confusion. This proximity becomes especially important when Hastings contemplates murdering his daughter’s disreputable suitor, Allerton. “I had my plan,” Hastings reflects, “I should just be pouring myself out a drink when Allerton came up. I would hand that to him and pour myself out another. All quite easy and natural” (Christie, *Curtain*, 137). That Hastings—affable, “dim” Hastings, who is always so preoccupied with doing the right thing and who, more importantly, is our persona in the novel—could go so far as to lay out plans to commit the evil act of murder strikes a powerful chord, one that forces us to internalize our developing concept of criminality. If Hastings, who is “one of us,” could somehow convince himself that murder is the only way to control the events unfolding around him, might not we, under certain circumstances, do the same?

Christie thus completely inverts our perception of the criminal. By taking us through a progression from a situation in which Poirot condones murder (*Murder on the Orient Express*), to a sympathetic psychological portrait of how a person may wish to commit murder (*Sad Cypress*) and toward the notion that murder can be committed for the public good (*Curtain*), she suggests a presentist attitude toward criminality. No longer is the criminal merely an “Other,” or a member of our own social group, or even someone with whom we can empathize—he is *us*. In espousing this view, Christie essentially upholds the ideas of Freud. The potential for savage acts resides in all of us, and to pretend otherwise is to mask truth, not change it. The omnipresence of the capacity for criminality in turn calls for new ways of coping with the problem. Christie’s concern with this issue as presented in these three novels further distances her from the bounds of the detective genre.

**Coping with Evil: The Shortcomings of Legal Justice**

Though Christie portrays the capacity for evil as a fundamental human characteristic, she does not see its ubiquity as a license for the free exercise of violence. Much as the restorationists argue, she feels that demonstrations of savagery must be managed or contained. As she shows in *Murder on the Orient Express, Sad Cypress, and Curtain*, her new understanding of evil calls for new methods for containing criminality, methods that acknowledge the difficulty of labeling deeds as explicitly right or wrong. This comes across most prominently through her depictions of the shortcomings of legal justice, which, as an institution of the “past,” is ill-equipped to deal with the ambiguity of evil.

Cassetti’s escape from legal justice in *Murder on the Orient Express* showcases the difficulty of convicting and punishing guilty parties. Prior to the discovery that all twelve passengers are complicit in Cassetti’s murder, Dr. Constantine remarks that one of the twelve, Miss Debonham, should be ruled out. “She would not stab a man,” he says, “she would sue him in the law courts”
(Christie, *Orient*, 140). Another passenger, the Colonel, later speaks for all of the conspirators when he says that Cassetti “deserved what he got, though I would have preferred [...] law and order to private vengeance” (Christie, *Orient*, 120). The group’s decision to murder Cassetti was inspired not by greed but by the need to correct a legal error. As Poirot notes, Cassetti “had escaped justice” by means of “the enormous wealth he had piled up, and owing to the secret hold he had over various persons,” even though “there was no question as to his guilt” (Christie, *Orient*, 239, 65).

That a man known to be involved in several child abduction and murder cases could manage to elude legal justice calls into question the reliability of the court system. In this light, one can almost understand the appeal of taking matters into one’s own hands. “Private” justice—that is, indulgences of purportedly evil impulses to murder—is thus portrayed as a last resort, a brutal tool to be employed when the law fails to do its job. Poirot himself seems to condone this view when, at the novel’s end, he lets the twelve go unpunished.

The depictions of the court system in *Sad Cypress* take this indictment of legal justice a step further by demonstrating the inadequacy of the law. Elinor likens her part in the murder trial to that of an actress upon a stage. Every word that leaves her lips, every expression that graces her face, is scripted, the instructions of the defense lawyer made flesh. Never does she dare to articulate the confused jumble of thoughts raging inside of her, for Elinor knows that any expression of remorse over having contemplated killing Mary will be construed by the jury as evidence of her guilt.

Expressions of thought on the part of the witnesses are similarly stifled. When Nurse O’Brien offers up an elaborate response to the defense lawyer’s query, the attorney halts her flow of speech and demands a simple “yes” or “no.” It is no wonder that Elinor likens the court to a “smooth-running, well-oiled machine—inhuman, passionless” (Christie, *Cypress*, 185). This legal system, which reduces the complexity of human experience to so many verdicts of “guilty” or “innocent,” presupposes a neatly quantifiable, black-or-white, right-or-wrong reality. This understanding of criminality does not align with human nature, at the heart of which, as we have seen, is a capacity for evil. We see especial evidence of this with the defense lawyer’s farcical attempt to strike evidence from the record. “How queer,” Elinor marvels, that “when anyone says what’s true, they strike it out” (Christie, *Cypress*, 185). The legal system is thus presented as a battle of wits between lawyers rather than as a means of arriving at truth. The need to emerge victorious from this battle takes precedence over seeing justice served.

The problems with legal justice come to a head in *Curtain*, where the law proves to be constitutionally unable to deal with wrongdoing. “Where X was present, crimes took place,” Poirot writes of Norton, but because “X did not actively take part in these crimes,” he could not be punished by law (Christie, *Curtain*, 215). Implicit in this legal shortcoming is the difficulty of distinguishing guilt from innocence, a problem that recalls an earlier conversation between Franklin and Poirot, when Franklin states that West African tribes are believed to have an “ordeal bean,” the consumption of which allows them to determine whether the consumer is guilty or innocent of a crime. So great is their faith in the bean that they believe that its consumption will kill the eater if he is guilty and preserve him if he is innocent. “It would certainly make my profession much easier,” Poirot declares, “if
I could test guilt and innocence so easily” (Christie, *Curtain*, 59). Franklin responds that the matter is not so simple:

> After all, [...] what is evil? What is good? Ideas on them vary from century to century. What you would be testing would probably be a sense of guilt or a sense of innocence. In fact, no value as a test at all. [...] Suppose a man thinks that he has a divine right to kill a dictator or money lender or a pimp or whatever arouses his moral indignation. He commits what you consider a guilty deed—but what he considers an innocent one! What is your poor ordeal bean to do about it? [Curtain, 59-60]

If one views the ordeal bean as an allegorical representation of the legal system, some jarring implications emerge. Like consuming the ordeal bean, standing trial in court has two possible outcomes: “guilty” or “innocent.” Being “a bit” guilty or “mostly” innocent has no place in this dichotomous system; all situations must be categorized as either wholly right or wholly wrong. But whereas the ordeal bean can only gauge intent, as Franklin suggests, the legal system engages only physical evidence as a means of determining innocence or guilt. This is good news for people like Elinor, for whom contemplating murder is tantamount to doing murder and who, therefore, would be considered “guilty” via the ordeal bean. But the court system’s strict reliance on directly sequential, tangible evidence as a means of assessing guilt proves to be equally shortsighted. Material evidence renders the twelve passengers aboard the Orient Express criminals in the eyes of the law, even though they killed Cassetti with the intent to exact justice rather to gain personally; on the other hand, the sadistic Norton could never be convicted of a crime, despite having induced vast numbers of individuals to commit murder. Neither of these situations conduces to justice.

The legal system thus hinges on the neatly quantifiable, “past” conception of criminality espoused by the restorationists, where the criminal not only contemplates murder, but goes through with the deed, and is always blatantly wrong in doing so. This works well for most members of the Golden Age canon of detective fiction, in which the ability to effortlessly identify the criminal serves as the consolatory ethic at the heart of the genre. For Christie, however, such a system is insufficient to deal with crimes that can no longer be construed as purely wrong or right. The question then arises, is there any solution to the problem of evil? Or do the varying degrees of criminality that can be assigned to crime make resolution impossible?

**Alternate Solutions and Their Merits**

Having called into question the traditional means of reining in criminality, Christie offers up several possible alternatives to contain or counteract it. Chief among these are religion, vigilante justice, and romance.

Religion emerges as a possible solution at the end of *Sad Cypress*, with Poirot’s invocation of Psalm 23. Now acquitted, Elinor, according to Poirot, “has walked in the valley of the shadow of death and come out of it into the sunshine” (*Christie, Cypress*, 228). She has an opportunity for a “new life,” one that “the past will not serve” (*Christie, Cypress*, 228). This casts the events of the novel in an explicitly Judeo-Christian context. Indeed, in many ways, Elinor’s confrontation
with death constitutes an experience of her own loss of innocence. The marriage she had hoped for, her dream that one day Roddy would grow to love her as much as she loved him, even her sense of her own innate goodness—all have crumbled in the events that culminated in Mary’s death. That Edenic time has passed; it cannot be restored. Faith, we are led to believe, will keep Elinor on the straight and narrow, restraining her savage impulses while at the same time giving her hope for happiness in the future. In many ways, religion seems to be the ideal response to the problem of crime, affording, as it does, both a means of recovering from past woes and clear criteria for distinguishing right from wrong.

A closer analysis, however, reveals faith to be fraught with shortcomings. Faith did not keep Elinor from considering killing Mary, and only the realization that she and Roddy are not as compatible as she once thought stops her from going through with the act. Indeed, as we see in Murder on the Orient Express, the absolutist values prescribed by Christianity seem to be called into question by the presence of conspicuous evil. “That there are in the world such evil men!” The Swedish woman exclaims of Cassetti. “It tries one’s faith” (Christie, Orient, 98). Religion may provide consolation to those who have already suffered as a result of crime, but, for those contemplating murder, the very fact that “the good God” allows evil to persist might be perceived as additional justification to commit murder (Christie, Orient, 145). Like the legal system, the effectiveness of religion as a remedy to crime hinges on a clear distinction between right and wrong. Religion thus fails on two levels. First, it does not seem powerful enough to prevent evil, as the Swedish woman’s complaint indicates. Second, it does not recognize the relativity of morals in the modern world. These two shortcomings cast doubt on its legitimacy as an ideology—and, therefore, as a reason to abstain from wrongdoing.

Christie presents us with another alternative to legal justice in what might be termed vigilante justice—or, to put it bluntly, murder. As has been mentioned, murder emerges as a possible solution to crime in both Murder on the Orient Express and Curtain, where murder accomplishes what legal justice can’t or won’t. But if murder is the solution par excellence, it is not without contingencies. It is only because the twelve aboard the Calais Coach are fortunate enough to meet a detective who is sympathetic to their plight that they are not jailed for their “crime,” and, though Poirot saves “innocent lives” by doing away with Norton, he commits the very act that he as a detective is supposed to abhor (Christie, Curtain, 237). We see something of this conflict of interests at the end of Poirot’s final letter to Hastings:
I do not know, Hastings, if what I have done is justified or not justified. [...] I do not believe that a man should take the law into his own hands. [...] But on the other hand, I am the law! As a young man in the Belgian police force I shot down a desperate criminal who sat on a roof and fired at people below. In a state of emergency martial law is proclaimed. By taking Norton’s life, I have saved other lives, innocent lives. But still I do not know…It is perhaps right that I should not know. [Curtain, 237]

What is perhaps most interesting about this passage is not Poirot’s ambivalence toward Norton’s murder but his rather ironic invocation of the legal system to justify his actions. Poirot’s supposed interchangeability with the law, which, as we have seen, fails to bring criminals to true justice, underscores his need for order. He is not simply a disgruntled man acting for what he perceives to be the greater good; he is “order” made flesh and, as such, is beyond reproach, at least in a conventional sense. This need for order even dictates the manner in which he murders Norton; he shoots him not in the temple but “symmetrically, in the exact centre of the forehead” (Christie, Curtain, 236).

But if the order afforded by law is inadequate to deal with evil, it follows that Poirot, as the embodiment of this order, must be equally fallacious in his actions. That he must resort to “disorder” (murder) to restore order to Styles indicates as much. The key here, however, is Poirot’s temporal orientation. By invoking the law, an institution premised on an overly simplistic “past” understanding of criminality, Poirot essentially justifies his actions using the past, where the law was construed as an unquestionable source of good. Such retrospection seems especially misplaced in Curtain, where Poirot functions chiefly to admonish against becoming entrapped in the past.

Christie may intend this disparity to highlight the difficulty of overcoming the past-oriented parameters governing detective fiction, which hold that the detective should embody the law and that the law is a source of absolute good. Be that as it may, the fact that novelty (the detective committing murder) is justified using the conventional, “past” notion of the detective as the upholder of an unquestionably righteous legal system illustrates the fallacy of clinging to past ideas, as doing so can induce even the detective to commit murder. To relegate the detective to the role of murderer, regardless of what good may come of it, is to push the novel out of the bounds of the genre; it simply is not viable. Indeed, Poirot dies a few hours after killing Norton, and the detective’s death ensures that Curtain will conclude the Poirot novels as a series.

On the other hand, Poirot’s sudden death can also be seen as the ultimate exhortation toward a “present-orientation” not simply in its rejection of formal retrospection, but precisely because its publication precludes subsequent Poirot adventures. Poirot’s death ensures that we cannot again “return to the past” through his restructuring of events that culminate in murder. Only the present—and the future—remain. Risks such as Poirot has taken in killing Norton—and as Christie has taken in allowing the conventionally inculpable hero-detective figure to kill—thus seem to be necessary for a true present-orientation. Just as Todorov tells us that the victim in detective fiction must die before we can be transported from the remote past prior to the murder to the more recent past in which the detective
attempts to solve the crime, so, too, must the detective be eliminated before the detective novel can truly usher us from past to present (Todorov, 140).

This brings us to the third and final response to evil, romance, the ultimate embodiment of a present-orientation on the level of the detective novel. Each of the three novels we have discussed includes the hint of amorous affection between one or more couples—two passengers, Mary Debonham and the Colonel, make their love public after Poirot discovers their complicity in Cassetti’s murder; Elinor gets a second chance at happiness with Dr. Lord at the end of Sad Cypress; and, in a gesture that reinforces the fact that this is the end of the Poirot adventures, Hastings finds romance with Elizabeth Cole in Curtain. That these romances blossom at the end of these novels, when the detective is about to exit the scene and the murder has been solved, labels romance as a wholly present-oriented concept. What is more, romance forces us to forgo absolute certainty and order—both of which can be achieved only through hindsight—and to look with faith toward the future and the happiness therein.

Romance, then, affords less of an answer to the problem of evil and how to control it than a consoling alternative version to the human situation. The capacity to love—to put faith in others—serves as an antidote to the capacity to murder, that relic of the violent human past and which still persists within us. By deploying this romance motif at the end of, not just these three novels, but all her novels, Christie suggest that, even though love cannot undo the atrocities that humans commit, it does give us the hope that there is more to our character than mere savagery. Eros conquers Thanatos.

If Christie offers any solution to inadequately punished evil, it seems to be to move beyond this evil and to focus instead on the present and the future. As Poirot indicates in Murder on the Orient Express, when he lets the twelve go free, and in Sad Cypress, when he suggests that Elinor can now begin a “new life,” time is not doomed to repeat itself. It is uncharted, malleable, ours to mold to our liking. To remain fixated on the past is to entrap oneself within set parameters, confine oneself to the already known.

There is a lesson here for detective fiction as well. If the true purpose of the genre is to console, as Christine Evans suggests, this is hardly accomplished by limiting the scope of our engagement to iterations of set themes and structures. Detective fiction should instead show us, through a rejection of moral and formal retrospection and conventional interpretations of criminality, that the past is gone, the future full of untested possibilities.

This is indicated most prominently at the end of Curtain, with Hastings’ final note on Poirot’s manuscript. “I have finished reading,” he writes, “I can’t believe it all yet” (Christie, Curtain, 238). The use of the present perfect tense, coupled with an indicator of futurity (“yet”), narrows the gap between the events that have been depicted and Hastings’ recording of them.

We are moving toward the present, as it were, beyond the depiction of past events that constitutes the bulk of conventional detective novels and, like Hastings, toward our own uncharted future. Christie is pushing us, and with us, detective fiction, toward a presentist view. The need for novelty is thus portrayed as a fundamental characteristic of human experience. If the detective novel truly wishes
to fulfill its consolatory purpose, it must eschew the repetition of past forms and themes in favor of the new.

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**Notes**

1. Fearing that she would not survive the Second World War, Christie wrote *Curtain* to conclude the Poirot novels. After the war, she continued to write Poirot novels. *Curtain* was, in the words of essayist Elizabeth Walters, “salted away” until shortly before Christie’s death in 1975, making it the last Poirot novel to be published (“The Case of the Escalating Sales,” 21).

2. Christie suffered a breakdown in 1926, following her first husband’s announcement that he was leaving her for another woman. The popularity of psychotherapy at this time makes it likely that Christie would have become acquainted with Freudian concepts in her own psychotherapy sessions following her breakdown. Her use of the “family romance” in *Hercule Poirot’s Christmas* (1939) further suggests her knowledge of Freudian concepts. See Susan Rowland’s *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, Ch. 1.
Works Cited


