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Source: *New Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Soviet Semiotics and Criticism: An Anthology (Winter, 1978), pp. 385-388

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/468580>

Accessed: 15/06/2014 20:03

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Notes on the Semiotic Analysis of Detective Novels: With Examples from the Novels of Agatha Christie*

I. I. Revzin

FUNDAMENTAL to modern structuralist poetics is the principle that, before applying structuralist methods to the study of the large forms of great literature (if indeed this turns out to be possible at all given our present level of knowledge), these methods should be worked out on simpler objects, such as literature with mass appeal. Here structuralist poetics relies upon traditions which stem from Descartes and Bacon and which have found favor in the natural sciences.

It therefore seems expedient to turn our attention to certain "technological processes" that have to do with the production of detective novels. Our choice fell not on Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, which have been studied more than once (by V. B. Shklovsky¹ and Yu. K. Shcheglov²), but on the more run-of-the-mill and more numerous novels of Agatha Christie, which are distinguished, on the one hand, by a fairly high level of professionalism and, on the other, by the lack of any artistic pretensions, a combination of factors which favors their study.

In semiotics it is conventional to distinguish: (a) meaning, (b) denotation, i.e., that reality which stands behind the sign, and (c) sense, i.e., the means by which reality is represented in the sign. The detective novel is a construction in which no reality stands behind the sign. This statement refers, obviously, not to the level of natural language in which the work is written (here the sense of the sign is, as we shall see, extremely important), but to the level of the aesthetic sign-system of literature.

In the detective novel, then, the situation is simplified, inasmuch as the sign does not have a semantic function linked with sense, but only the syntactic and pragmatic functions (in this respect the detective

* This article first appeared in *Programma i tezisy dokladov v letnei shkole po vtorichnym modeliruyushchim sistemam* [Program and abstracts for the summer school on secondary modeling systems] (Tartu, 1964).

novel is like a work of abstract art), and this greatly simplifies its study. In addition, as we shall see, the detective novel copies without originality the plot-construction schemas which have already been worked out and discarded in great literature.

The syntax (the plot construction of the detective novel) can most conveniently be described by first isolating a small number of invariant figure-types. For the novels of Agatha Christie the most important are: (a) the person who has an interest in the murder (usually not the murderer), (b) the person who planned the murder (not necessarily the murderer), (c) the person who committed the murder, (d) the investigator, (e) the investigator's assistant, who is also the narrator (Doctor Watson in Conan Doyle; see Shklovsky's analysis of the functions of Doctor Watson in his *O teorii prozy*), (f) a sympathetic but weak young creature (of either sex), (g) a kind old creature (of either sex), and (h) the victim.

It is important to note that as a rule in Agatha Christie's novels the set of these figure-types (some of which may be duplicated) is introduced at the beginning and remains unchanged to the end. The essence of the construction consists in the fact that some of these types are "fused together." Possible "fusions" are represented in the table:

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h
a								
b								2
c					3	1		
d								
e			3					
f			1					
g								
h		2						

Key:

1. *The Murder in the Clouds*
2. *The Murder on the Links*
3. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

The examples cited are merely the most characteristic of such fusions (though in cases 2 and 3 far from trivial). In practical terms the only limiting factors to the fusing of types are external ones, for example, the impossibility of fusing (f) with (g).

One has further to distinguish between actual fusion and fusion as one of the protagonists of the work imagines it. For each character a special table can be drawn up (thus for Bella Duveen and, by analogy, for Jack Renauld in the novel *The Murder on the Links* (c) and (f) are fused); this determines the way each of them behaves (giving false testimony, and so on).

The detective novel still uses for the external expression of fusion

such ancient devices as the introduction of twins, the substitution of a corpse, and so on (both these devices are used in the novel *The Murder on the Links*).

Another ancient literary device is the use of parallel construction, i.e., symmetrical fusion. For instance, often a murder is carried out according to a plan that has already been successfully tried. In *The ABC Murders* the schema of triple murder is used; in *A Murder is Announced* it is known in advance that a murder is planned and who the victim is. From the point of view of such parallelisms, the detective novel is comparable to those plot-construction schemas which were successfully analyzed by Shklovsky in his *O teorii prozy*: "Repetition occurs more frequently in literature than in life."³

The third ancient literary device used by Agatha Christie is retardation. The detective (usually Poirot) appears on the scene as late as possible. Before this he may turn up as a chance character (again a fusion). Retardation is also served by digressions which lead the reader along a false track.

If, on the level of the semiotic system of literature, signs in the detective novel lack the semantic function that is linked with sense, so much greater is the meaning which the semantic function of the signs receives on the level of language. Here a role parallel to syntactic fusion is served by homonymy: almost every piece of evidence (and also such extralinguistic signs as clues) is polysemic. The best example is in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (polysemia, a direct consequence of the fusion, in the narrator's words about how he committed the murder: "I did everything that remained to be done"). Or in *The Murder on the Links*, when Madame Renauld is asked whether the woman who is suspected of the murder was the mistress of the murdered man, she answers, "She may have been," and, although she is talking of a period twenty years ago, everybody thinks she is referring to the time directly before the murder.

If we consider that fusion is analogous to homonymy, then the relationship between reader and author can be compared to the relationship between analysis and synthesis in a generative model.

Just like a person pronouncing a homonymic word, the author knows who the murderer is. For him the problem of choice is the problem of synonymy, to choose one from a series of signs with identical meaning. Just as the person who hears a homonymic word can establish its meaning only after it has been placed sufficiently in context, so the reader does not know until the end which was the actual fusion of figure types. Thus the "context" on the level of literary semiotic system is the whole text. Epilogues, happy endings, and similar features have, properly speaking, no relation to the

construction. The only thing that can be included in the construction after the “un-fusing” is the investigator’s account of how he did it.

In the construction taken overall there is a fairly rhythmical succession of elements of “language,” i.e., descriptions of facts, and elements of “metalanguage,” i.e., discussion about the meaning of those facts for the discovery of the murderer.

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(Translated by Julian Graffy)

NOTES

- 1 In the chapter entitled “Novella tain” [The mystery story], in Shklovsky’s as yet untranslated *O teorii prozy* [On the theory of prose] (Moscow, 1925).
- 2 “Towards a Description of Detective Story Structure,” *Russian Poetics in Translation*, 1 (1975).
- 3 See the chapter entitled “The Connection between Devices of Plot-construction and General Stylistic Devices,” in *Russian Formalism*, ed. Stephen Bann and John E. Bowlt (Edinburgh, 1973).