

The Research of *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* in the View of Narratology

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Abstract

The narrative artistry on display in Agatha Christie's *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* is both significant and outstanding. Central to this seminal work's success are its deft employment of a limited third-person narrative perspective, a narrative structure that seamlessly interleaves dialogue with clue collection, as well as several highly effective narrative techniques such as foreshadowing and misguiding. By utilizing a limited third-person perspective, Christie is able to adeptly provide the reader with enough information to remain engaged and invested, while simultaneously keeping a distance that allows for unexpected plot twists and revelations. In addition, the book's unique narrative structure serves to further highlight the cleverness of Christie's approach, with the novel flowing effortlessly from one clue-gathering scene to another, interspersed with revealing conversations between the characters and the ever-present Poirot. Finally, the use of narrative techniques such as foreshadowing and misguiding showcase Christie's unparalleled skill as a writer of mystery and suspense. Through her employment of these techniques, Christie is able to further engage the reader, keeping them guessing and questioning their assumptions until the final revelation.

Keywords: *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, Agatha Christie, Narratology.

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INTRODUCTION

Agatha Christie, hailed as one of the greatest English detective novelists of the 20th century, was able to weave intricate and suspenseful stories despite limitations in the conditions and source material available to her in her daily life [1]. For instance, her novel *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* is renowned for its exquisite plot and unexpected twists, and stands out as a remarkable achievement in the art of narrative. This final book in the Poirot series masterfully delves into complex themes such as human nature and emotion through its meticulous exploration of characters, while also delivering a unique and unforgettable reading experience for fans of the genre. Christie's ability to create such rich and captivating narratives, with limited resources, is a testament to her extraordinary talent and unparalleled mastery of the craft. It is no surprise that her literary contributions continue to be celebrated and inspire new generations of writers and readers alike.

1. Narrative Perspective of *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*

In her seminal work on narrative perspective, scholar Dan Shen notes that the use of third person narration as a means of observing the past is a natural

technique in literature. It is, in essence, a figure of speech that represents a clever shift in perspective [2]. Agatha Christie's *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, a masterpiece of detective fiction, employs the limited third person perspective to great effect. The third person narrative perspective involves the unfolding of a story through one or more narrators, who relate only what they see, hear, or are involved in. This differs from an omniscient point of view, which possesses absolute knowledge and can describe events' origins, development, and conclusion without constraint or difficulty. The unique angle of view of Arthur Hastings, one of the main characters in *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, provides the reader access to the intricate storyline. The tale's events are narrated solely from Hastings' perspective, highlighting his indispensable role as Detective Hercule Poirot's assistant. This narrative device yields four significant benefits for the reader.

Through its masterful use of limited third person narrative perspective, *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* boasts a compact and concise plot that enhances the reader's aesthetic experience. Since the entire story is told from the perspective of Hastings, there are few emotional or psychological descriptions of the other characters. This allows readers to enjoy the novel

without being distracted by competing viewpoints or ideas, making the plot even more streamlined and focused. Given that the book belongs to the detective fiction genre, known for its brisk pace, clear storytelling, and tight plot, the limited third-person perspective undoubtedly enhances the book's readability and readers' aesthetic experience. From the opening scene of Hastings' reading the letter from Poirot to the novel's concluding revelation, readers follow his steps as he witnesses the case's beginning, development, and ultimate resolution. Because there is no competing storyline or perspective, the novel appears unequivocal and unfolds seamlessly. Christie's masterly use of narrative perspective reinforces the book's tight plot and clear storytelling while heightening suspense, making it a classic of detective fiction that continues to inspire readers and writers alike.

Through its masterful use of limited third person narrative perspective, *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* forges a deep, intimate bond between the reader and the narrator. The narrator in limited third person perspective typically reveals the inner activities of a single main character, creating an intimate link between the reader and the protagonist [3]. In this novel, the perspective of Hastings is applied throughout, inviting the reader to share his thoughts and feel his emotions, including confusion, anger, and depression, as he progresses through the story. Readers can sense the emotions of narrator Hastings throughout the novel, such as when he is caught in a tense and troubled relationship with his daughter. Their frequent arguments often leave him angry, frustrated, and deeply saddened, as evidenced in this passage:

"I found my knees trembling. I sank down on to a chair. It was worse - much worse than I thought. The child was utterly infatuated. There was no one to whom I could appeal. Her mother, the only person she might have listened to, was dead. It all depended on me. I do not think that either before or since I have ever suffered as I suffered then" [4].

Thanks to the limited third person narrative perspective, the psychological distance between the reader and the narrator is subtly lessened, creating a stronger and more immersive flow of storytelling. This bond enables the reader to better understand the emotions and experiences of Hastings, enhancing their overall aesthetic experience and enjoyment of the book.

The limited third person narrative perspective employed in *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* creates a certain distance between the reader and the full picture of the case and the truth. This blank space in the plot, arising from restrictions on the narrative perspective, becomes the space of reasoning for the reader, mingling virtuality and reality, truth and falseness. As a result, the artistic enjoyment of the reader is enhanced [5]. Since detective stories depend on mystique and surprise, the

truth can only be made known to readers at the end. Employing a limited third person perspective appropriately disconnects the readers from the truth while concurrently improving their reading experience. The narrator, Hastings, reveals most of what he sees and hears- the clues and evidence to solve the case- instead of giving the reader the truth directly. This is because Hastings himself is set up to be clueless about the truth, putting the onus on the reader to unravel the mystery themselves. By conveying all the necessary clues to the reader through the narrator, the novel enhances the reader's aesthetic experience by requiring them to find the murderer and the truth on their own. For example, in the novel, Hastings already knows all the essential clues, but he is unable to deduce the truth directly due to the nature of the novel:

"Cast your mind back, Hastings. Remember the very first evening you played bridge. Norton's remarks to you afterwards, uttered so loud that you were afraid Colonel Luttrell would hear. Of course! Norton meant him to hear! He never lost an opportunity of underlining it, rubbing it in - And finally his efforts culminated in success. It happened under your nose, Hastings, and you never saw how it was done" [4].

The limited third person perspective enhances the enjoyment of the reader while allowing them to fully engage with the unfolding of the mystery.

The limited third person narrative perspective in *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* presents the author with opportunities to introduce crucial information within the narrative such as background, environment, and other related details. The secondary necessary information is communicated to the reader through the naturally flowing narration of the narrator. This not only completes the story elements but also enables the novel to be both concise and compact. For instance, in the novel, the location, Styles, and the protagonist, the detective Hercule Poirot, are introduced through the narrator's observations:

"What changes had taken place since then! What gaps amongst the familiar faces! Styles itself had been sold by the Cavendishes... Changes -- changes everywhere...The last time I had seen him I had been shocked and saddened. He was now a very old man, and almost crippled with arthritis. He had gone to Egypt in the hopes of improving his health, but had returned, so his letter told me, rather worse than better. Nevertheless, he wrote cheerfully" [4].

Through the narrator's narration, the background information of the story is smoothly and naturally communicated to the reader, enabling them to have a preliminary understanding of the story's setting and the protagonist who will grace the story's stage. By doing so, the narrative enables the reader to

subconsciously visualise the story's environment and understand the protagonist's past experiences, rooting them more firmly in the story world. Therefore, the use of the limited third person perspective in *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* is not only effective in building suspense and enhancing the reader's mystery experience. It also helps the author introduce and convey important information naturally and concisely, enabling the novel to be an immersive and enjoyable read.

2. Narrative Structure of *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*

The narrative structure of *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, as seen through the perspective of Hastings, follows a well-crafted formula of "collecting clues - having a conversation with Poirot - collecting clues". In this novel, the plot is advanced mainly through chapters 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, 16, 18, and 19, which provide essential clues, evidence, and information for the reader. On the contrary, chapters 2, 3, 5, 8, 10, 13, 15, and 17, record the narrative conversation between Hastings and Poirot. Hastings and Poirot's dialogue can be seen as the process of gathering and analyzing clues and information. In other words, the narration of the story and the gathering of data are intertwined, with each taking up one or two chapters of length. The frequent scene changes require the reader to follow the train of thought and logic of the narrator and author, resulting in an immersive mystery experience. For instance, in the novel, the reader follows the footsteps of Hastings as he unveils necessary clues and converses with Poirot, leading the reader to uncover the mystery's intricate web. A sample of this is found in the following extract: "About the evidence?" "Yes." Poirot tapped his forehead gently. "It is not yet here. But it will come. It will come. Trust Hercule Poirot to know everything. Only give him time" [4]. Therefore, through this cunning plot structure, the reader is held in suspense, eagerly anticipating the next clue while also enjoying the continuous interplay between Hastings and Poirot. The process enables readers to see the elements of the mystery being pieced together, resulting in an intellectually satisfying read. The combination of well-placed narrative and dialogue creates a dynamic read, elevating the reader's mystery experience.

Furthermore, the narrative structure of *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* is enhanced by the incorporation of two letters from Poirot at the book's beginning and end. These letters serve to unify and complete the novel, offering a satisfying conclusion to readers. The first letter provides introductory information about the setting and main characters, including Colonel Luttrell, Mrs Luttrell, Sir William Boyd Carrington, the Franklins, and Judith. The letter introduces each person's name and offers a glimpse into their personality and occupation, providing readers with a preliminary understanding of the characters who will appear throughout the story: "The Franklins and your charming Judith have been here for some days" [4].

In the final letter, the detective Poirot reveals the murder method, motive, and identity of the perpetrator, bringing the novel's overarching mystery to a satisfying conclusion. The murderer, Stephen Norton, is described in intricate detail, with Poirot highlighting Norton's ability to manipulate and control others, forcing them to do things against their will: "Here was he, Stephen Norton whom everyone liked and despised, and he would make people do things they didn't want to do - or (mark this) thought they did not want to do" [4].

Poirot's final letter also reveals the identity of the murderer's killer, providing readers with a twist in the tale: "He asked me what I thought I was going to do about this amusing idea of mine. I told him that I proposed to execute him" [4]. This novel's use of letters, as a literary device, improves the narrative structure and artistic level of the novel, providing readers with a cohesive and satisfying read.

Thus, the incorporation of these "bookend" letters from Poirot elevates *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, providing an all-rounded narrative structure that ties the novel together. It gives readers an opportunity to satisfy their curiosity by providing answers to the story's mysteries and a glimpse into the characters' personalities, resulting in an enjoyable and engaging read.

3. Narrative Techniques of *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*

3.1 Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a literary technique that many writers deliberately use in a novel or drama to create interest and suspense by providing hints or clues about what will happen next. Juxtaposing this technique to *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* reveals its abundant use throughout the book.

An exemplar instance of foreshadowing can be found towards the end of chapter 2, when the protagonist Poirot gravely declares that a murder will soon occur in Styles, where he has been invited: "A murder will shortly be committed here--here" [4]. This sentence effectively reveals the motive behind Poirot's invitation to Hastings, which is to assist in his quest to find the murderer while also preventing the murder from happening in the first place. Thus, the use of foreshadowing throughout the novel piques the reader's interest and builds suspense around the coming murder. Here, foreshadowing is an effective literary technique that is used to create an atmosphere of intrigue, captivate the reader's imagination and cast a dark shadow over the story's plot. In *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, the foreshadowing of the upcoming murder encourages the reader to stay engaged and anticipate what is to follow. Indeed, anticipation builds towards the big reveal of the murderer's identity, culminating in a satisfyingly dramatic and unexpected denouement. Therefore, through the use of foreshadowing, Christie holds her

readers captive, attracting their attention and keeping them interested throughout the novel.

At the conclusion of chapter 7, Christie employs foreshadowing to hint at Norton's nefarious behaviour and the role it will play in future events: "How little we realized that Norton's hobby might have an important part to play in the events that were to come" [4]. The phrase "Norton's hobby" in this quote alludes to his pastime of stalking and observing birds through binoculars, implying that he enjoys observing and gathering information about other people, laying the foundation for a revelation that Norton is the true perpetrator of the murder. Indeed, this use of foreshadowing imbues the readers with a sense of foreboding and raises their curiosity about the direction of the novel. As the narrative progresses, the reader is continually reminded of Norton's hobby and the hint of his culpability, adding depth to the novel's central mystery. Furthermore, the effective use of this literary device encourages the reader to carefully consider the story's various clues, culminating in a satisfying and surprising reveal in the book's conclusion.

In *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, Christie leverages foreshadowing to plant the seeds of suspicion and to keep readers engaged in the unfolding mystery. Specifically, the use of this device at the end of chapter 7 augments the novel's layers of intrigue while building anticipation and adding depth to the characterization. By the end of the novel, we find that Norton's hobby was no mere quirk, but rather foreshadowed his culpability in the murder. In this way, Christie expertly employs foreshadowing to keep readers guessing and add nuance to the central mystery.

A further instance of effective foreshadowing can be found at the culmination of chapter 8 when the narrator refrains from speaking the truth to the character Mary Cavendish, stating, "Words trembled on my lips, but I did not say them. The time had not yet come when I could say to her: 'You are right. It wasn't Maggie...'" (Christie, 110). This statement serves as a clear indication to the reader that the mystery will soon be solved and that the truth will be revealed: the real murderer of Matthew Litchfield was not Miss Margaret, as previously suspected, but rather someone else. This use of foreshadowing is instrumental in building suspense and anticipation, holding the reader's interest and encouraging them to carefully scrutinize the unraveling plot. Moreover, it provides the reader with a deeper sense of the protagonist's thought processes, highlighting their internal conflicts and uncertainties. Furthermore, the expert utilization of this literary technique sets the stage for the pivotal scene in which the true murderer is revealed, culminating in a satisfying payoff for the reader.

Chapter 17 of Christie's *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* displays an additional occasion of masterful

foreshadowing through the words of the titular detective himself: "Slowly Poirot shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'Norton did not shoot himself. He was deliberately killed'" [4]. In this quote, Poirot expresses certainty in his belief that Norton's death was the result of deliberate murder, hinting at the novel's climactic revelation that Poirot was the one who killed Norton. Moreover, the description of Norton's remains further supports the theory that his death was not self-inflicted, as there is "a small hole in the exact center of his forehead" [4]. The language used to describe this wound serves as a symbol for Norton's guilt, as "it was like the brand of Cain..." [4], a reference to the Biblical character Cain who was marked by God after committing the first murder. Poirot cleverly employs this symbol to suggest that Norton was a sinner and that Poirot himself was the judge who branded him. Through the effective use of foreshadowing in Chapter 17, the reader is able to sense the complex undercurrents of the plot and anticipate the eventual reveal of Poirot's culpability. By planting these subtle hints and allusions throughout the novel, Christie creates a sense of interrelatedness amongst the various elements of the narrative, leading to a satisfyingly cohesive conclusion.

Moreover, two of the most crucial foreshadowings in *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* involve the books left to Hastings by the legendary detective himself. One of the books is a small, cheap edition of Shakespeare's *Othello*, while the other is St. John Ervine's *John Ferguson*, with a marker left at the third act [4]. *Othello* is a play that narrates the story of Iago, who manages to incite Othello's jealousy and subsequently inspire him to kill his wife before ultimately committing suicide. This narrative suggests that the real murderer in Poirot's case is someone who influences others to carry out the crime rather than committing it themselves. The third act of John Ferguson tells the story of the "half-witted" character of Clutie John, who convinces others to kill the man he hates, a plot intricately woven with complex psychological themes [4]. The inclusion of these books and their respective markers serves as a powerful indicator of Poirot's expertise in understanding the psychological underpinnings of human behavior. It is through these hints that the reader is able to discern the eventual unraveling of the case, the identity of the real murderer, and the manner in which they incited others to conduct the dastardly deed. Thus, Christie's masterful use of foreshadowing in *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* is evident not only in dialogue or description but also in the physical objects within the narrative itself.

2.2 Misguiding

The technique of misguiding is a commonly employed literary device in detective novels. It refers to the author providing information or words through the narrator that initially lead the reader in the wrong direction. This commonly results in the reader assuming innocent characters as potential murderers or

misinterpreting the methods employed by the true murderer. Ultimately, the intended effect is that when the truth and the identity of the murderer are revealed, the reader is left shocked or surprised, resulting in an enhanced reading experience. Through the use of misguiding, the author expertly constructs a narrative full of clues and red herrings designed to mislead and confuse the reader. The purpose behind this technique is to increase the suspense and complexity of the plot and to encourage the reader to actively engage in solving the mystery alongside the detective. In successful implementations of this technique, the revelation of the murderer serves as a satisfying and unexpected twist in the plot, allowing the reader to see the narrative in a new light. Furthermore, it elevates the reading experience since the reader becomes more invested in the truth while actively considering and recalibrating previous assumptions about the characters and plot.

Within *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, Agatha Christie skillfully employs the technique of misguiding the reader on three distinct occasions. The first instance of such misdirection surfaces in chapter 6 when Hastings states, "For it came to me very strongly that Allerton was almost certainly X. And I had let him see that I suspected the fact" [4]. Allerton, a womanizing and morally suspect young man, repeatedly attempts to seduce Judith, Hastings' daughter, provoking an intense feeling of anger toward him from Hastings. Through the narrator's descriptions of Allerton's behavior and character, the reader is led to assume that he is the murderer, in line with Hastings' own judgments. However, Christie's use of misguiding is apparent through the subtle clues embedded in the narrative that ultimately reveal Allerton to be innocent, thereby subverting the reader's assumptions. Through the carefully crafted portrayal of Allerton's character, Christie blurs the boundary between what is true and what is not, creating an effective and lasting mystery in the story. In this way, Christie's skillful manipulation of the reader through the art of misguiding creates a sense of profound confusion, ambiguity, and unpredictability, which ultimately fuel the suspense and intrigue of the plot.

The second instance of misguiding within *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* is present in chapter 16, where Hastings discusses with Boyd Carrington who the murderer of Barbara Franklin, Doctor Franklin's wife, might be. Hastings conjectures,

"That husband of hers is the one who's responsible for her death. Naged at her, I expect. She was always happy enough when she was with me. He let her see that she handicapped his precious career (I'd give him a career!) and it broke her up. Damned callous, that fellow, hasn't turned a hair. Told me as cool as anything he was off to Africa now. Really, you know, Hastings, I shouldn't be surprised if he'd actually murdered her" [4].

Christie's use of misguiding is evident in the way in which the reader is encouraged to believe that Doctor Franklin has an apparent motivation for killing his wife. Through the characters' dialogue and the subtle descriptions contained within the narrative, the reader is led to believe that Doctor Franklin's aloof and dismissive demeanor towards his wife's death is indicative of his guilt as a murderer. However, Christie cleverly embeds clues throughout the narrative that reveal the true identity of the murderer and the motive behind the crime. In this way, she subverts the reader's expectations, leading to a heightened sense of anticipation and urgency as the plot thickens.

The final instance of misguiding within *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* is found within chapter 18, where Hastings entertains the possibility that his own daughter, Judith, might be the murderer. Expressing his distress and confusion, Hastings considers aloud, "Was the whole heart of the tragedy Judith, my daughter?... Judtih that night looking, so someone had said, like her namesake before she cut off the head of Holofernes. Judith - with death in her heart?" [4]. This passage highlights Christie's ability to skillfully manipulate the reader's perceptions through subtle claims and innuendos. By introducing the possibility that Hastings' own daughter might be responsible for the murder, Christie instills a sense of chaos and unpredictability that heightens the suspense of the novel. However, as with the previous instances of misguiding, Christie artfully reveals, through subtle narrative clues and surprising plot twists, that the true identity of the murderer is not Judith but another character entirely. Christie's intricate plotting and deft use of misguiding serve to keep readers on the edge of their seats and ensure that *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* remains a remarkable and timeless example of the mystery and suspense genre. In this way, Christie employs misguiding as a highly effective and engrossing literary technique that keeps readers captivated and engaged throughout the novel.

CONCLUSION

Curtain: Poirot's Last Case is a remarkable work of fiction, distinguished by its brilliantly executed artistic methods such as the narrative perspective, narrative structure, and employment of various narrative techniques. Authored by the incomparable Agatha Christie, this classic novel remains a compelling and profound achievement in the world of literature. Through her masterful use of narrative perspective, Christie draws the reader into the story, immersing them in a world full of intrigue, suspense, and mystery. Her unique narrative structure, which juxtaposes past events with present circumstances, deepens the sense of apprehension and intensifies the reader's investment in the story. Furthermore, Christie's use of narrative techniques such as misguiding and misdirection effectively subvert readers' expectations and keep them guessing until the final reveal.

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