

PATTERNS IN MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

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Received: January 09, 2023

Accepted: April 19, 2023

Published: June 30, 2023

Suggested Citation:

Özbaş, L. F. (2023). Patterns in murder on the orient express. *International Journal of Su-Ay Development Association (IJOSDA)*, 2(1), 11-16.



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Abstract

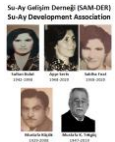
The novel takes place in a narrow space where everyone knows each other. Space is narrow and defined within the limits of the village. Time is also very important in this novel. In this work where events begin in media res are conveyed in an alternating order by going back to the beginning and moving toward the end. In this novel where solution depends on time, especially on the time of the murder, there are “two dimensions of time”. The story begins with “near past” and develops with Poirot’s taking the matter in his hands. “Past” comprises Mrs. Farer’s death and the events related with Ackroyd. “Now” is the time dimension when the murder is solved, and the murderer confesses. When the sequence of events that take place in the novel are listed within the past-now dimensions of time, there appears a symmetrical pattern. There are twenty-seven sections in the novel. The plot is built around a love triangle. Mrs. Ferars who forms one corner of the triangle has tried to unite with Roger Ackroyd by killing her husband, but, with the intervention of Doctor James Shepard, kills herself. At the same time, with his intervention, the doctor functions just like Mrs. Ferars, and by killing Roger Ackroyd in the third corner of the triangle he condemns himself. There are fifteen characters in the novel. The fact that twelve of them are witnesses brings to mind the functioning of the jury of twelve in the British legal system, and the rest are the victim, the murderer and the detective who are essential in the functioning of the jury system. The biggest diversion in the novel is that the narrator is the murderer, and he tells the truth. Except in the section the novel which is not conveyed to the reader the doctor puts into words everything that happens objectively. Solution is reached by, first, the creation of events where there is more than one relationship between what is shown and what is meant and then clarifying what is meant by revealing the truth.

Keywords: Murder, characters, space, time, diversion, solution.

INTRODUCTION

Murder on the Orient Express, one of Agatha Christie’s most known novels, was written in 1933. The story in this work which was later filmed is compatible with the melodrama tradition due to its exaggerated elements like the kidnapping of a little girl and the death of three more people due to this incident.

Poirot, the famous detective who has solved an incident upon the invitation of the French Armed Forces in Egypt sets off to Istanbul from Aleppo on the Toros Express. There are only two more passengers apart from him on the restaurant wagon; one of them is Colonel Arbuthnot and the other Mary Debenham. Poirot understands from their conversation that Debenham is a governess. When he steps down the train for a breath of air in Konya, he overhears Debenham saying to the Colonel, “Not now, not now, when it’s all over, when everything is in the past, then...”. After he gets to Hotel Tokatlavan, he is urgently summoned to London with a telegram. After asking for a reservation on the Simplon Orient Express he only has enough time to eat something. He runs into M. Bouc, an old Belgian friend who is the director of Wagons Lits. During the meal two people sitting at the table across from them attract his attention. One of them is around sixty or seventy while the other is young. From their conversation he learns that the elderly one is Mr. Ratchett and the young one is Arthur. Both are Americans. He gets on the Orient Express with his friend M. Bouc, but stays in the same compartment with Hector MacQueen whom he has seen at the hotel because the train is packed. The season being winter, this is extraordinary.

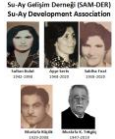


At lunch the next day the diversity of the passengers' nationality in the restaurant attracts Poirot's attention. There are British, American, Russian, German and Hungarian nationals in the wagon. When dinner is over, Mr. Ratchett whom he has seen at the Tokatlayan Hotel comes up to Poirot to ask for protection in return for a large sum of money because his life is in danger. Saying "If you'll forgive me for being personal, I do not like your face", Poirot turns down the offer. That night upon arriving in Belgrade Poirot is given a first-class compartment adjoining Ratchett's compartment. The compartment is right in the middle of the wagon. Poirot wakes up in the wee small hours, thinking he has heard a scream. A bell rings at that moment. The train has stopped at a station. Remembering Ratchett is in the adjoining compartment, he gets up and opens the door. Mr. Ratchett is talking with the conductor in French and says the bell was rung by mistake. Poirot goes back to bed. At 01.15 he decides to ask for mineral water from the conductor and overhears an argument between the conductor and the American Mrs. Caroline Hubbard who is staying on the compartment on the other side of Mr. Ratchett's compartment. The conductor comes to Poirot and tells him that Mrs. Hubbard claims there is a man in her compartment. The train is snowed in at one point between Vincovi and Brod in Yugoslavia. Poirot goes back to bed again. Just as he is about to fall asleep he jumps out of the bed with the noise of a heavy object hitting the door. (It should be around 02.00) When he opens the door of the compartment and looks out, he sees a woman "in a red kimono" walking in the corridor. The train hasn't moved yet. Poirot goes to bed for the last time that night and sleeps till 09.00 in the morning. After breakfast, while he is talking with the other passengers disturbed by being snowed in, another conductor comes up to him and says M. Bouc is calling him. Mr. Ratchett who wanted help from Poirot one day ago because his life was in danger has been stabbed. The door to the compartment is chained from the inside and the window is open. There are twelve knife marks on the man's body. Poirot undertakes to solve the case upon his friend M. Bouc's request.

This detective novel comprises three sections and twenty-four mini sections. The first section is the murder phase; the second section is the investigation phase and the third section is the solution phase. In the first mini section of the first section Poirot boards the train having solved "an unexplained event". This is the piece where "the first setting off" takes place. The second mini section is the piece where all passengers are gathered in the Orient Express and there is a "second set off". The third mini section is when Poirot turns down Ratchett's business proposition, and passengers are introduced to the reader in the fourth. Also in this section it is said before the murder is committed that Ratchett does not know any other language. Thus, fake evidence is placed between the lines, giving the impression that he was alive at 00.30. That murder is committed is understood in mini section five. It is obvious that the murderer is still on the train because the train is snowed in. There is another fake evidence in mini section five. Poirot is made to see a woman in a "red kimono" when he looks out by opening he compartment door around 2 AM. Mini section six is when Poirot talks with Ratchett's secretary, Hector MacQueen, and learns that Ratchett received letters of threat before being killed. Poirot sees the body of Ratchett in mini section seven. Although he was stabbed twelve times, there is little blood. This shows that Ratchett was dead before he was stabbed. Furthermore, one of the wounds was inflicted by a left-handed person. There is a loaded gun under Ratchett's pillow. The remains in an empty glass found in his compartment show that he has taken some medicine. This section also contains fake evidences like a handkerchief and a pipe cleaner but also a real proof, that of a small burnt piece of paper which Poirot burns again and is able to read the contents. The last mini section of the first section throws light on the reason Ratchett was killed. Ratchett is the Cassetti who kidnapped little Daisy Armstrong in the "Armstrong Kidnapping Incident" that took place three years ago in America.

The twelve mini sections of the second section contain the following: first twelve mini sections: Poirot talks one by one with thirteen people, mini section thirteen: the summary of the passengers statements, mini section fourteen: finding the murder weapon, mini section fifteen: the presence of the red kimono in Poirot's compartment. These sections contain five pieces of "real evidence" between the lines.

Third section comprises the mini sections where Poirot reaches the solution. The first and the second mini sections are where evaluation is made. The third and the fourth mini sections are where Countess



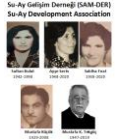
Andrenyi's involvement with the Armstrong incident is revealed. In the fifth mini section the owner of the handkerchief is revealed. In the sixth and seventh mini sections Mary Debenham's relation with the Armstrong incident is revealed. In the eighth mini section the relations of Antonio Foscarelli, Greta Ohlson and Edward Masterman with the Armstrong incident are revealed. Thus, we reach the last mini section where Poirot explains the "real situation".

Colonel Armstrong has an American mother. His mother is the daughter of the millionaire Van der Halt. He marries Sonia Goldenberg, the daughter of the famous American actress, Linda Arden. The Armstrong family reside in America. Their daughter, Daisy, is kidnapped by Cassetti, the American gangster, three years ago at the age of three. The family pays a ransom of 200,000 dollars, but it is understood later that the little girl was killed immediately after the kidnap. (She is found dead later.) The second child of Sonia who is pregnant is stillborn, and Sonia dies in childbirth. Colonel Armstrong, unable to bear the pain, shoots himself. The police think the nursemaid has helped the gangster and put the arm on her. The assistant nurse jumps out the window and commits suicide. (Her innocence is later understood). Cassetti is captured but released due to a technical procedure. He bribes the authorities, flees the country and takes the name Samuel Ratchett. The only person left from the family, Linda Arden, Helena Goldenberg (Sonia's sister who later married the Hungarian Count, Andrei), friend of the family, Colonel Arbuthnot, friend of the family Hector MacQueen, Daisy's godmother Princess Dragomiroff, Daisy's nursemaid Susanne's father Wagons Lits conductor Pierre Michael., Susanne's boyfriend private detective Cyrus Hardman, Daisy's nurse Greta Ohlson, driver of the family Antonio Foscarelli, cook Hildegard Schmidt, and Daisy's governess Mary Debenham get together to form a jury of twelve and decide to try Cassetti and punish him themselves. For this purpose, the family friend, detective Hardman, finds out the place of Cassetti who is now Ratchett. The other family friend, Hector MacQueen, becomes Ratchetti's secretary while Antonio Foscarelli the driver is the valet. Helena's husband, Count Andrenyi plus twelve people arrange to get on the train at the same time with Ratchett when Susanne's father Pierre Michael is on duty. First they ensure that Ratchett takes an overdose of sleeping pill and dies. Then, each one stabs Ratchetti once. Of the thirteen people Count Andrenyi substitutes Helena, and thus, the jury of twelve perform the duty of "punishing" Ratchett. A murder case unresolved by the justice system is resolved by Nemesis, the Goddess of vengeance.

Hence, the relation between "piece" and "piece" is revealed, and at the same time the relation between "piece" and "whole" is revealed. Symmetry in the context of the sections and the mini sections can be explained as follows:

- a) Poirot solves an "unexplained incident" in the first mini section and solves an "incident the truth of which will not be explained" in the last.
- b) In the second mini piece all characters meet in the Orient Express. In the penultimate mini section all passengers gather in the restaurant.
- c) In the ninth piece in the novel Poirot begins "investigation". In the ninth piece from the last is "evaluation of data".
- d) "Red kimono" is mentioned for the first time in the tenth piece; in the tenth piece from the last "red kimono" is found.
- e) Right in the middle of the novel "jury of twelve" which is directly related with the solution of the murder and crucial in the way murder is committed is mentioned.

Man lives in space. Just as we are tied to space, "Existence is spatial". (Merleau-Ponty, 293) *Murder on the Orient Express* is an example to the class of "transportation vehicles, narrow space" where nobody knows each other. Murder and the whole solution process take place on the train. Because the space is a train, thirteen people have planned the murder to the minutest detail. That the train would be snowed in and that the world-famous detective, Poirot, would be on the train are the two things they could neither guess nor prevent. The people who joined in the murder plan to make the whole thing look as follows:



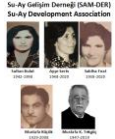
Arbuthnot and MacQueen leave the door open when they get down in Vincovi. (Hardman's statement is important at this point) The man who threatens Ratchett gets on the train in Vincovi, wearing a Wagons and Lits uniform and he has all the keys to the compartments. Having taken a sleeping pill, Ratchett is asleep. (We need the statement of the valet who says Ratchett takes sleeping pills) The man stabs him twelve times with a dagger. He enters Mrs Hubbard's compartment by the side door. He leaves the bloody dagger in her make-up bag. Meanwhile he loses a button from his uniform. Ratchett rings the bell and calls the conductor at 00.37 AM. He talks with the conductor in French and says it was a mistake. (The person next door has to witness this. Poirot is awakened at this point) At 00.58 AM the man nearly collides with Princess Dragomiroff's maid Hildegard Schmidt as he leaves Mrs. Hubbard's compartment to get down the train in Brod. (Schmidt's statement is necessary at this point). Then, he leaves the and disappears in the crowd.

If the rain weren't snowed in, characters would vindicate each other and thus there would be one more unresolved case in history. In this murder committed paying attention to space twelve people have to make a change in their plan. They decide to complicate the incident. At 01.15 AM Poirot is awakened with the ringing of a bell. At that moment Mrs. Hubbard rings the bell with all her might, calls the conductor and tells him there is a man in her compartment. The conductor tells Poirot this. It is at this moment around 01.15 AM that Ratchett is stabbed. When Poirot is about to fall asleep toward 2 AM, he is awakened because of a heavy object hitting the door and made to see "the woman in a red kimono". Then, a lacy handkerchief with the initial "H" and Arbuthnot's pipe cleaner are placed in Ratchett's compartment. The letter of threat bearing the name of Daisy is burnt. The bloody dagger is placed in Mrs. Hubbard's compartment.

Thus, except the Countess twelve characters make full use of the possibilities of space to kill Ratchett, alias Cassetti. They have tried to reserve the whole train as a group, but compartment number 1 was already reserved for Poirot's M. Bouc, the director of Wagons and Lits Company. The second bed in MacQueen's compartment was reserved for somebody called Mr. Harris. When this person does not show up, a place is found on the Orient Express for Poirot who is urgently summoned to England. Poirot's presence on the train enables the jury to make use of his witness to what happens in creating "a reality in appearance".

Thus, Agatha Christie has created three separate dimensions of time. What complicates the plot is the fact that the order of "yesterday", "today" and "previous days" dimensions are given next to each other in disrupted order. The dimension of "today" is the "time" dimension in which events reflected as "reality in appearance" and the reality behind these events are given. What really happened after the Orient Express set off takes place in the "yesterday" dimension. The "previous days" dimension comprises the Armstrong incident which is given in the eighth mini section of the first section. All these dimensions are intertwined and creating a diversion, they form a highly complex appearance.

The number of the characters related with the "Armstrong Incident" that happened three years ago in America is thirteen. With the addition of Poirot, M. Bouc, Ratchett and Doctor Constantine the number of characters rises to seventeen. Poirot, in the position of "subject" is the detective who solves the murder committed on the train. Ratchett, the secret of whose murder is revealed is both the victim and the murderer. The presence of the doctor is instrumental in the revelation that murder has taken place before the stabbings. M. Bouc is instrumental in finding a place on the train for Poirot. Of the thirteen people who are directly related with the murder, Caroline Hubbard plays the role of the mother doting on her daughter who is a teacher in the American Collegiate Institute in İzmir. In fact, she is acting in the role of her life because she is the grandmother of little Daisy Armstrong who was kidnapped and killed, and her real name is Linda Arden, the famous actress. Countess Andrenyi is the maternal aunt of Daisy and the daughter of Caroline Hubbard. Count Andrenyi, the seventh character, takes her place in the stabbing because she is very young. The eighth character, Pierre Michel is the father of the nursemaid. The ninth character, Cyrus Hardman is the boyfriend of Susanne who commits suicide. Colonel Arbuthnot, the tenth character, and Hector MacQueen, the eleventh, are the friends of the



family. The twelfth is Greta Ohlson, teacher in a missionary school in İstanbul. Edward Masterman, Ratchett's valet, is the butler of the Armstrong family. Antonio Foscarelli, factory worker, is the driver of the family. Mary Debenham is Daisy's governess, Princess Dragomiroff's servant, Hildegard Schmidt, is the cook of the family. The seventeenth character, Princess Dragomiroff is Daisy's godmother. The function of these seventeen characters is crucial in the novel. However, the presence of the lieutenant who helps Poirot get on the train in the first section is not important at all.

Characters in the novel and Poirot get together in three different time dimensions within the context of kinship, friendship and business relations and form the "fundamental story-line". Poirot's getting on the Orient express and staying in the compartment reserved for M. Bouc, on the other hand, forms the "sub story-line", enabling Poirot to join the "fundamental story-line".

The other diversions in the formation of the pattern are "fake" evidences which the murderers prepared (especially those placed in Ratchett's compartment). One of these is the letter "H" on the handkerchief.; although the lacy handkerchief belongs to Princess Dragomiroff, it is mistakenly believed that it belongs to Countess Andrenyi because her first name is Helena. Thus, all doubt is gathered around the Countess because she is Daisy's maternal aunt. Factors which detain the solution are the following: twelve people come to the investigation all prepared to absolve each other; most importantly Poirot is made the eye-witness to the "diversions" (his hearing Ratchett talk in French and seeing the woman in the red kimono).

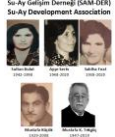
Linguistics tells us human language is a system of signs. According to Ferdinand Saussure who created this axiom, a linguistic "sign" comprises a "signifier" and a "signified". Signifier is the letters on the page or the sound that bounces off in our ears, and signified is the concept that appears in our brain when we read or hear the signifier.

The relationship between these two is arbitrary. (Saussure, 28) For example, when we say "apple" the red, green or yellow juicy fruit in nature is the "signified. Signifier is the word apple which is made up of the sounds a.p.p.le. With homonymy, we immediately think of the signifier, the word apple, and the signified, the apple in nature. But with polysemy the word bank is both the financial institution and side of a river. Therefore, it is possible to separate the the signifier and the signified or to change the relationship between them. This makes possible the idea of a single signifier which could be associated with more than one signified, or vice versa, which makes ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning possible.

Similarly, in Agatha Christie's novels solution of a murder is reached by the creation of situations or events where there is more than one relationship between the signified and the signifier. First, signifier is united with the wrong signified and thus "implicit sign" is formed. Solution is when signifier is united with the correct signified and "explicit sign" is formed. For this purpose Christie diverts the reader by making use of conflicting situations and events which we call "diversions". "Diversion" is uniting signifier with the wrong signified and forming "implicit signs". Solution is forming "explicit signs" by uniting signifier with the correct signified. It is the job of the detective, Poirot, to observe the discrepancy between appearance and reality and resolve the issue.

Hence, the wrong signifiers which comprise these diversions (thirteen people absolving each other in their statements, the letter H, Ratchett's talking in French at 00.37) are united with the wrong signified (all the thirteen passengers are innocent, the handkerchief belongs to Helena Andrei so she is the murderer, Ratchett is alive at 00.37 because he does not know French) are united to form the "implicit signifier". As a result of Poirot's investigation, explicit signifiers are united with the correct signified (all thirteen have played a role in the murder, because the capital letter in Princess Dragomiroff's name (Natasha) is written as H in the Russian alphabet, the handkerchief belongs to her and Ratchett is dead at 00.37 yet) and "Implicit signifier"s thus turn into "explicit signifier"s.

In the world of Christie novels no crime is left unpunished and just as what Todorov says regarding the detective, the detective has immunity (Todorov, 1988) Nothing happens to her/him. In her world, also,



there is no escape from justice. But, there is an exception to this rule in this novel. Poirot proposes two possible solutions. The first solution is: a stranger boarded the train when it stopped at iVincovi, killed Cassetti due to a Mafia feud, and disembarked through the snow. The second solution is: all clues, except the handkerchief and the pipe cleaner were planted and all the passengers in the coach, except Helena stabbed Cassetti, acting as their own jury. Bouc and Dr. Constantine decide to relay the first solution to the police. Poirot retires from the case. Thus, solution is reached and justice is restored.

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