

## Agatha Christie and Gothic Horror

# Horror and Gothic Media Cultures

The *Horror and Gothic Media Cultures* series focuses on the influence of technological, industrial, and socio-historical contexts on the style, form, and aesthetics of horror and Gothic genres across different modalities and media. Interested in visual, sonic, and other sensory dimensions, the series publishes theoretically engaged, transhistorical, and transcultural analyses of the shifting terrain of horror and the Gothic across media including, but not limited to, films, television, videogames, music, photography, virtual and augmented reality, and online storytelling.

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# Agatha Christie and Gothic Horror

*Adaptations and Televisuality*

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Dedicated to Josh, with love.



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# Introduction: Dark Moods and Deadly Puzzles

## Abstract

In the introductory chapter, I posit the book's core argument—that the increasing engagement with Gothic horror aesthetics is not new to Agatha Christie adaptations. These darker moods, however, have the potential to compete with the centrality of the puzzle in Christie's stories. First, I establish the importance of the puzzle in Christie's work. Second, I provide an overview of Agatha Christie adaptations that draw on the horror genre. This provides a historical overview of Agatha Christie adaptations for the small screen. I engage with television aesthetics and how Christie adaptations increasingly display a stylistic excess. This grounds my use of the horror and Gothic mood. I will argue that the debate on fidelity will always be relevant and a topic of concern because it matters to audiences and critics. Finally, I establish the subsequent chapters' arguments and conceptual frameworks.

**Keywords:** Agatha Christie, crime fiction, mood, aesthetics, genre studies, fidelity, adaptation studies, Gothic horror

*We begin by closely examining the moving hands of a clock. Dorothy Squires' "Anything I Dream Is Possible" warbles faintly in the background. The next shot in this opening montage pans across a newspaper clipping that depicts a woman surrounded by smiling children. The article's title tells us that she is "The Orphan's Saviour." The screen then cuts to black with the sound of a WHACK and a THUD. Dorothy Squires is slowly drowned out by menacing, low-pitched strings. This is followed by a blurry sequence of the woman, the "orphan's saviour," on the ground, arm up, feebly attempting to stand. When we return to being in focus, we are given an extreme close-up shot of blood dropping onto fabric; it lands with a loud sizzle as if it burns to the touch. Blood drips down a more recent photograph of the woman with her now adult children; a smiling young man has his arm around her in an embrace.*

*Cut. We are now outside under the bright moonlight. That same man in the photograph exits the household grounds. A sign indicating the estate's name ironically reads "Sunny Point." The man seems to be in a total panic and hurriedly stops a car. When we return to inside, we first see the pendulum of a grandfather clock ticking. The camera tilts up to the face of the clock where we see the reflection of another woman screaming, having discovered the murder scene.*

And so, *Ordeal by Innocence* (2018b) begins, and the series' gloomy tone is established. The miniseries is adapted by screenwriter Sarah Phelps from Agatha Christie's novel as part of her quintet that she has adapted for the BBC. Her other titles include *The Witness for the Prosecution* (2016), *And Then There Were None* (2015), *The ABC Murders* (2018a) and *The Pale Horse* (2020). These series, often dubbed "grim" and "gross" by critics, are a far cry from the quaint family-friendly murder that we have become accustomed to from Agatha Christie adaptations (see Hale 2019; Haigis 2019; Rabinowitz 2018). In this book, I will argue that these television series draw on varied generic codes to achieve a dark and gory aesthetic, ultimately challenging the conventionally charming treatment of Christie that we may be familiar with. They are adaptations that raise the indignation of Christie diehards. While Agatha Christie is no stranger to darker territory; it is rare that her mysteries are so consistently depicted with Gothic horror aesthetics. An exception to this rule, and a key case study of this book, is *And Then There Were None*, which has long been associated with the horror genre well before Sarah Phelps' adaptation.

The primary focus of this book is television. In doing so, I aim to advance knowledge on how these controversially dark Christie television adaptations contribute, not just to contemporary studies of Christie's work, but more broadly to adaptation studies, television studies and genre studies—specifically horror, the Gothic and the murder mystery. This book resides in the junctures in which these fields intersect. Attention will also be paid to adaptations in other media forms of note. *And Then There Were None*, for instance, has been adapted into both a graphic novel and video game, both of which draw on horror imagery. Christie has long been primarily associated with television. Cosy British-set murder mysteries are a televisual staple, such as *Midsomer Murders* (1997–present), *Vera* (2011–present), *Shetland* (2013–present), *Inspector Morse* (1987–2000) and so on. As Mark Aldridge notes in his monograph *Agatha Christie on Screen*, "many people's first experience of Agatha Christie is not through her original texts, but through adaptations of her work for film and [in particular] television" (2016, 1). The

enduring popularity of small screen adaptations of Christie's work is all the more ironic given how much she hated television. "Entirely a personal idiosyncrasy," she wrote to her agent Edmund Cork. "I have to admit I am not television-minded" (Christie, qtd in Aldridge 2016, 35). Agatha Christie adaptations are perhaps best known as charming made-for-television whodunits set in either "exotic" locations or quaint British villages. David Suchet is beloved as Poirot as are Geraldine McEwan, Julia McKenzie and Joan Hickson as Miss Marple. The evolution of Agatha Christie on television is a study on the evolution of television itself.

Agatha Christie's stories feature heavily in the contemporary media landscape; reruns of various incarnations of the ITV series regularly appear in television schedules and her influence on the murder mystery genre cannot be overstated. Most recently, a key element to the solution of *Knives Out* (2019) draws heavily on *Crooked House* (1949). Her work is consistently liberally adapted, much to the anger of Christie's diehard fans the world over. One must only look at the denigration of Kenneth Branagh's *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017), dubbed "self-indulgent and thoroughly unnecessary" (Orr 2017, para. 9), to see how dear her stories are to her fans. Typical iterations of Agatha Christie aren't strangers to controversy, though, as these series have also been known to deviate from the source text. For instance, a lesbian couple is introduced into *The Body in the Library* (2004), an episode of the series *Agatha Christie's Marple*, and several changes were made to the 2005 adaptation of *Cards on the Table*, including the addition of a gay tryst and the identity of one of the killers being altered. Bold is the adapter who messes with Poirot and plays with Christie's puzzle logic. While ITV's *Agatha Christie's Marple* and Phelps' adaptations do have notable fans, the matter of fidelity for some Agatha Christie diehard fans concerns *how* her detectives deal with this puzzle format. Do the clues remain the same? Is the ensemble of suspects faithful to how they are presented in the source text? And, most importantly, how does an engagement with a darker tone impact upon the untangling of these puzzles? Implications being: Can style detract from a complex narrative?

It may have come as a shock for diehard Christie fans when Sarah Phelps' adaptations were all heralded as considerably grislier than their charming predecessors. While the first three miniseries were generally viewed positively by critics, scoring 82, 79 and 71 on Metacritic, respectively, the critical response to *The ABC Murders* was considerably more mixed, achieving only a 58. Her most recent adaptation, *The Pale Horse*, has received only mildly favourable reviews, receiving a 69. The social media backlash against *The ABC Murders* was noticeable, so much so that Sarah Phelps, herself, took to

Twitter to respond to criticisms, albeit in a derisive manner: “And thanks to all of you, those who enjoyed it and those who didn’t. See you next time when I rewrite *Pride and Prejudice* in a crack den. You’re all lovely. A bientot, mes enfants. #TheABCMurders” (Phelps 2018c).

Upon the release of Phelps’ *And Then There Were None*, author Sophia Hannah (2015) observed that “some people still see Christie as a writer of cozies—fun puzzles that are all surface and plot, with little depth or substance to them.” Phelps, herself, likens this divisiveness to “manufactured outrage” (qtd in Ling 2018, para. 4). In his review of *The ABC Murders* for the *New York Times*, Mike Hale took issue with the emphasis on everything being grimmer and grosser, writing that the adaptation is so “suffocatingly revisionist that what’s left isn’t really Christie at all” (2019, para. 4). The grimy, shadowy tone that worked for *The Witness for the Prosecution*, *And Then There Were None* and *Ordeal by Innocence* is seen as a distraction in *The ABC Murders*. This Gothic horror twist rebels against the association of Christie’s stories with quaintness. In this book, I argue that Phelps’ quintet, namely *And Then There Were None*, *The Witness for the Prosecution*, *Ordeal by Innocence*, *The ABC Murders* and *The Pale Horse*, draw upon a broad cross-section of Gothic horror to generate a gloomy mood that permeates through the texts. Rather than being a genre, the Gothic is a tone that employs political and cultural discourse to make us uncomfortable (Smith 2008). As Catherine Spooner notes, the “Gothic remains an incredibly fertile and diverse cultural form.... [It] continually reinvents itself, and is reinvented” (2007, 196). This book explores this “Gothicisation” of Agatha Christie’s work. Fred Botting defines the Gothic as signifying excess, gloomy atmospheres and the past haunting the present, where these threats are “associated with supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption” (1996, 1). Christie’s murder mysteries are fertile grounds for these themes to be explored.

## The Puzzle

Agatha Christie largely adhered to a puzzle-like formula in her stories, which quickly became her trademark. The detective was largely a channel through which the reader could decipher the puzzle. In an obituary for her in 1976, *Time* wrote that she was “the genre’s undisputed queen of the maze.” Her work was born out of the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, which is cited as occurring anywhere between 1918 and 1945 (Curran 2011, 21–30;

Rowland 2010, 119). These clue-puzzle narratives, Knight (2010, 91) writes, gave the reader enough information to try to solve the mystery without offering much in terms of plot or style; a charge applicable to *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), but perhaps unfair to more atmospheric mysteries, such as *Sleeping Murder* (1976) or *And Then There Were None* (1939). Works published during the Golden Age were highly stylised and featured both a murder and a detective, someone positioned externally to law enforcement. Writing on the mystery novel, Brooks argues that they are “pursued both for the solution of enigmas and their prolongation in suspense, in the pleasure of the text: the best possible case of plot for plot’s sake” (1984, 170).

Agatha Christie was particularly known for her “Closed Circle” mysteries. These featured a murder in a closed off location which was ostensibly impossible for anyone to come and go from the scene except for the suspects in question. This location could be a manor (*Ordeal by Innocence*), an island (*And Then There Were None*) or a moving train (*Murder on the Orient Express*). The detective and their confidants go to great lengths to outline how no other suspects could be considered. As the clues unravel, early assumptions are proven to be false. Obvious suspects are either killed off or proven to be unmistakably innocent. This model is an extension of the “locked-room” mystery, of which Christie wrote a rare example of with *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936). The game between the text and the reader is that the solution *is possible* to be solved before the detective outlines how it was all done in the final pages. Agatha Christie was famous for having her two detectives, Poirot and Miss Marple, reveal the solution in the denouement with the concerned parties present. Palmer writes, however, that while the reader has the chance to solve the mystery, “(a) the author weights all the chances in the detective’s favour; and (b) the narrator, whether first person or third, may be unreliable” (1991, 131). While many clues are foregrounded in the plot, fundamental components to the cause-and-effect nature of the crime are buried throughout the narrative only to be drawn attention to by the awe-inspiring detective. There were rules for writers working within the Detection Club, a social and dining society founded in 1930 by a group of authors who wrote Golden Age mysteries. Agatha Christie notably broke many of these rules, perhaps most famously with *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) (Makinen 2010, 417). These were established by Ronald Knox, a Catholic priest, theologian, author and radio broadcaster who was a member of the club, and they dictated that stories must have as their primary interest the “unravelling of a mystery; a mystery whose elements are clearly presented to the reader at an early stage in the proceedings, and whose nature is such as to arouse curiosity, a curiosity which is gratified at the end” (1929, 9).

Stereotypes are used in the puzzle formula in unexpected ways to fool the reader (Munt 1994, 8). In *Queering Agatha Christie*, Bernthal argues that by using recognisable stereotypes, “Christie both fools the reader as to ‘whodunit’ and undermines the certainty and reality of normativity” (2016, 265). This results in oppressive systems and structures being questioned, such as Poirot’s subversion of the law in *Murder on the Orient Express*. This is a far cry from those that view her “stereotyped characters and picturesque middle-class settings” as creating a “literary landscape that was unlikely to shock or surprise—a reassuringly conservative world view” (Symons, qtd in Bernthal 2016, 1). The carnivalesque upheaval of relations in *Ordeal by Innocence*, for instance, is one such example. These narratives are often about subverting normality. The charming whodunit was constructed largely through the BBC adaptations, such as Joan Hickson’s Miss Marple in the 1980s, a “nostalgic articulation of Englishness” that was perfect for Thatcher’s Britain (Mortimer 2021, para. 2). Accordingly, the relationship between the Christie puzzle and ideology has always been in flux.

The central interest lies in the interrogation of clichéd suspects. This frames these stories as being game-like, a contest between the author and the reader. Later adaptations often adhere to this emphasis on the puzzle but update Christie to contemporary mores. As Bernthal concludes in his monograph, “[a]s Christie remains in the public eye, her seriousness as a writer and her relevance to contemporary audiences is being continually reasserted, while her institutional status is becoming less static and stereotyped than it has in recent decades” (2016, 267).

Phelps’ adaptations are a fascinating example of her work being “less static and stereotyped.” This darkening of Christie, however, reduces the centrality of the puzzle in the adapted narrative in order for a deeper exploration of the detective’s psyche. The ending of *The Witness for the Prosecution*, for instance, is more melodramatic than Christie’s hurried conclusion as it explores the impact of trauma on the main players. This extended conclusion shifts the focus of the whole miniseries to be primarily about protagonist John Mayhew’s psyche, as he deals with post-traumatic stress and guilt from war, rather than the source text’s focus on Romaine’s hoodwinking performance. In a tender early moment between Mayhew and Leo, where Mayhew becomes less stand-offish with the accused, Leo shares his despair in life after returning from the war. “We thought we’d get more,” Leo says despondently, of his belief that they would return heroes. “We are what happens when you butcher the young,” the lovers say in a final confrontation as they label Mayhew as equally as monstrous as them.



This leads Mayhew to have a fight with his wife as he forces himself on her, only for her to reveal that she never forgave him for their son not returning from battle. Typically, once the puzzle itself is solved, Christie concludes her stories quickly. Characters hastily profess their love for each other in closing paragraphs or in brief epilogues. This shift in focus to characters' psychological development is a consistent theme in Phelps' work and, I argue, a motif in the Gothicisation of Christie's novels. This dichotomy between rationality and irrationality, the order of the puzzle and the disorder of the detective's psyche, are indicative of the detective narrative and the Gothic being heavily intertwined (Spooner 2010).

While the central puzzle in *The Pale Horse* (1961) remains largely unchanged, Easterbrook's true intentions are the focus. In the book, a middleman makes a bet with the client who want someone murdered. That client then visits the witches who, in turn, pass this information onto Osborne, who murders the victims with thallium poison. In the adapted text, Osborne seeks out the clients and uses spies to find out the names of the victims when they meet the witches. In this version, the witches don't knowingly contribute to the murders. The series concludes with Easterbrook entering his house to the discovery of his wife's body, as he always does in his nightmares. Here, he reads the newspaper detailing his untimely death. As stated above, this ambiguous conclusion suggests that the witches have committed him to an eternity of torment in purgatory. The solution to this complex puzzle is glossed over quickly in the final confrontation with Osborne, leaving many viewers confused over the puzzle's details (Griffiths 2020; Keene 2020; Longridge 2020; Mellor 2020). The real crescendo here is Easterbrook's guilt over Delphine's murder and Hermia's realisation of his violent misogyny. It's Easterbrook's unravelling psyche that is the emphasis of this adaptation.

The changed ending in *Ordeal* results in several clues present in the book being removed or altered. Christie's version sees Kirsten, the maid, revealed as the killer, in a lover's pact with the victim's son, Jack, while the killer in Phelps' version is Leo Argyle, the victim's husband, who commits the murder so he can be with his young secretary, Gwenda. Jack has now become Kirsten's illegitimate son conceived through Mr Argyle raping her when she first started working at the household. The ending in the book is very quick with the denouement lacking the drawn-out finesse of a Marple or Poirot story. Shortly afterwards, Kirsten stumbles out of the house with the Argyle surviving family members remaining behind. Phelps' miniseries concludes once the surviving Argyle children visit Calgary in a psychiatric hospital and it is revealed that Kirsten is keeping the killer locked up in the

bomb shelter. The actual crime is solved while an entire sixteen minutes remains of the episode. This is considerably longer than more traditional adaptations of Christie's work.

Likewise, since *The ABC Murders* is primarily about Poirot rather than the puzzle, the ragtag "legion" of investigators is removed from the source text. The book sees Poirot assemble key supporting figures who are connected to each murder. Alice Ascher's niece, Mary Drower; Betty Barnard's fiancé and sister, Donald Fraser and Megan Barnard; and Carmichael Clarke's brother and secretary, Franklin Clarke and Thora Grey. These legion members become active in the deliberation process, which is in fact a ruse by Poirot to further investigate them. With the legion subplot removed, these characters become mere suspects. The crime scenes all have some relevance to Poirot, whose experience in World War I is key to the series' thematic development, where it is revealed he was in fact a priest, rather than a Belgian police detective. Phelps uses the 1930s setting to explore the parallels between the British Union of Fascists and a contemporary post-Brexit Britain, positing that the rising fascist fear of the outsider resides in both climates. This distrust of outsiders is evident in the book (see 38–39, 48, 64, 68). This atmosphere, however, does not relate to the central puzzle. This xenophobia is paramount to developing Poirot's character. The central mystery is engulfed by this character development; the suspects and victims are just catalysts to explore Poirot's isolation and trauma.

This importance of the puzzle, or lack thereof, places an emphasis on the role of the narration in Christie adaptations. Viewing Christie, the viewer must piece together the broader story of the crime, be it during a feature-length film or across multiple episodes. Drawing on the difference between *fabula* (story) and *syuzhet* (plot) from Russian formalism, Bordwell defines film narration as "the process whereby the film's *syuzhet* and style interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator's construction of the *fabula*" (1985, 53). From the sequence of events provided in the plot, the viewer must mentally paint the picture of the story, ideally before the detective beats them to it. Clues are integral to this. This slow reveal of the story is what creates suspense for the viewer. While the long-form format of seriality allows for complexity, which is fundamentally a redefinition of "episodic forms under the influence of serial narration" (Mittell 2015, 18), the embracing of these conventions, I argue, can downplay these clues and displace the centrality of the puzzle. This embellishment of mood is directly connected to the characterisation of the detectives rather than the piecing together of the puzzles.