

# *The Narrative Construction of Agatha Christie's Detective Novels*

--Take *Murder on the Orient Express* as an example

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**Abstract:** Agatha Christie is a world-renowned detective novelist. The reason why she has gained such a high reputation is not only her ingenious description of the plot and unexpected ending, but also her bold and innovative narrative techniques. The narrative construction of detective stories is more complex than the general narrative text, but in terms of its internal structure, it only uses a series of means in the narrative perspective, narrative time and narrative subject, creating a strange effect. *Murder on the Orient Express* adopts a novel and unique structure, pays attention to detail description, and the plot is closely linked, so it can be studied to a certain extent.

## 1. Introduction

Narratology originated in the 1960s. Once it was put forward, many scholars continued to study the theoretical basis of narration and perfect the theoretical system of narratology. Different from traditional literary criticism, narratology no longer focuses on the moral and social functions of the novel, but on the internal characteristics of the novel and the angle of observation, clarifying the relationship and composition of the plots of the story. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, the biggest role of narrative is to create a separation from the original state of the event. This is especially true for the narrative of detective novels. Narrative only offers a statement about events, rather than describing the reality.

Agatha Christie succeeded in grasping the limits and methods of this division, resulting in the coexistence of suspense and speculation, lies and truth, and maximizing the separation of the distance between the narrative receiver and the narrator. Its unique narrative construction can be well reflected through the masterpiece *Murder on the Orient Express*. The novel revolves around a murder on the luxury train "Orient Express". It tells the story of the detective Poirot, who finally identified the murderer of Cassetti among the twelve suspects on the murderous train. From the perspective of narratology, this article analyzes the novel's narrative perspective, narrative time and narrative subject, and analyzes its unique narrative structure, aim to learn more about the author's style and add a new explanatory perspective to detective novels.

## 2. Narrative Perspective

Narrative perspective, also known as narrative focus, refers to the angle of observation and description of the plot of the story when narrating. Different narrative perspectives, that is, different perspectives to observe the development of the story, will produce completely different narrative effects. Numerous detective novels create mystery and ups and downs by creating multiple layers of narratives. Agatha Christie cleverly selected the focus point and range of the narrator's perspective, and achieved the effect of defamiliarization by perspective and focus.

In this novel, the narrator is the controller of the perspective and has the infinite advantage of the full perspective, but always selectively displays the storyline from a specific observation perspective. From the perspective of the stylistic effect, this helps to hide specific information. In the opening chapter of the novel, the narrator uses his perspective to present the Orient Express in front of the readers against the background of a bitterly cold winter. The reader immediately thinks that this is the place where the murder is about to happen. After quietly creating an atmosphere of suspense, the narrator changes his perspective, pretending to be a bystander, and describes with interest a lieutenant to see off a stranger in a polite manner. Although the narrator is well aware of the various characters and events in the story, he is left blank at this time. After the stranger arouses the reader's curiosity, the narrator reveals his identity. It turns out that this person is the famous detective Poirot. The great detective appearing as a stranger not only makes the narrative lively and humorous, but also creates a short-term suspense. The narrator's gathering range is basically within the judgment range of Inspector Hercule Poirot. In fact, the effect achieved is to narrow the distance between the narrative receiver and the narrator Poirot. Although the story is narrated in the third person, the event is seen through Poirot's eyes.

In the later important scenes in the novel, readers still learn from the omniscient perspective, such as scenes of murders. On the night of the murder, the narrator deliberately obscures his omniscient perspective, avoids the murder scene, and instead projects the focus on the Detective Poirot, leading the reader to scrutinize his instinctive reaction to terrifying sound and confusing scenes on the night of the murder. First, Poirot is awakened by "a loud groan", and then by "the bang of a heavy object falling", and there was dead silence around him. This scene renders a kind of tense and confusing suspense. After successfully setting the suspense tone for the murder case, the narrator deliberately refrains from narrating, and never mentions the mysterious groans and pops that night. From the omniscient perspective, the narrator deliberately chooses the observation angle to depict the murder scene, hides his omniscient vision, filters out the links of the crime story, and always keeps the background information and inner world of the 12 passengers during the narration. Deliberate omissions creates narrative gaps in key information, enhances narrative motivation and tension in the plot, and actively mobilizes readers' emotions and passion for reading, which not only effectively enhance the suspense of the detective story, but also bury the foreshadowing at the most suspenseful ending, leading readers to "continue to trace and think curiously" [1].

### 3. Narrative Time

Narrative time is divided into story time and narration time. Story time refers to the actual time when the event occurred, and narration time refers to the time when the event was narrated, which is usually measured by the length of the text or the time required to read it. In the narration, the story has its own time of occurrence, which occurs, develops and changes according to the arrangement of the author. In the real life, time is irreversible, and people can not control it, nor can they change it. But in the story world, the narrator can modify the time in this article and combine the story time with the narration time to reflect the narrative's violation and resistance to real-time. How the narrator rearranges time is a very important issue in narratology. The rearrangement of time makes it the narrative time in the novel is the basis of narrative existence. The important

function of narration is to change one kind of time into another. The narrator can change the one-way irreversible time in reality into the multi-dimensional reversible time in the narrative.

In general, the story time of this novel is greater than the narration time. In terms of the level of time, the surface narrative of the clockwise narrative conceals the disparity of multi-level narrative. First of all, for the narrator, the whole novel is a complete post-event narrative. "He will think of this scene in the future." [2] The prenarrative sentence at the beginning of the novel pushes the entire narrative process to a flashback. When the narrator borrows Poirot as the manifest narrator, until the murder occurs, the direction of the narrative time axis is consistent with the direction of the narrative time axis. After that, the process of solving the case is a process of constant recall. During this period, the direction of the narrative time axis is opposite to the direction of the narrative time axis. It is not difficult to find that when the directions of the two time axes are the same, the narrative content has higher reliability. On the contrary, when the directions of the two time axes are inconsistent, the narrative content is mostly unreliable.

From the perspective of plot structure, this novel is inlaid. The story is run through by a time axis, and the truth is located at a certain point in the time axis. Relevant information about this point is scattered in all levels of the narrative time. "In a murder mystery, one of the standard methods is to provide a lot of distracting things" [3]. These distracting things are placed at different narrative time points by the narrator, and the sequence is disrupted, which is even more confusing for the narrative receiver. A basic principle of detective novel writing is "show, not explain" [4]. At this point, Agatha Christie made full use of her talents to set up on a misplaced timeline. After all kinds of obstacles, it is finally formed that only when the narrator, characters, and ideal readers are unified, can the context of the narrative time be sorted out, which becomes the key link to obtain the point truth.

From the perspective of dialogue, the novel uses a large number of direct quotations, resulting in the narration time being equal to the story time, and enhancing the authenticity of the novel. It not only makes the character dialogue more dramatic, and guides readers to directly explore the meaning of the characters' words. The narrator can easily conceal some clues related to the case through the mouth of the characters, resulting in a blank part of the information, filling the story with tension, and constantly stimulating the readers' interest in reading. On the other hand, it also prolongs the narrative speed, delays the process of obtaining the truth and also provides enough time for the narrative receiver to think.

Any kind of narrative form can choose to adopt a timely linear narrative mode, only detective novels can not. As a detective novel, whether complicated or simple, it must reveal the truth of the story at the end, which determines that there must be overlap and inversion in the narrative time. In a sense, narrative time is the basic way to process stories into narratives or plots.

#### 4. Narrative Subject

In narratology, the three parts of the narrative character, the narrator, and the implicit referent author are collectively called the narrative subject. Narrative characters generally refer to creators of literary, artistic, and scientific works, who engage in literary and artistic creation activities through their own independent ideas, using their own skills and methods. The narrator is the person who tells the story. He exists in various forms, sometimes it may appear as a character in the story, and sometimes it is hidden in the text. The implicit referent author is proposed by American literary theorist Wayne Booth. The implicit referent author intentionally or unintentionally injects his own ideology, values and aesthetic taste into the work, which is reflected in the final form of the narrative text. The voice of the narrative subject exercises full control over the narrative method. In the process of narration, the consciousness and concepts of the three parts may be consistent or

inconsistent. This involves the issue of narrative reliability. The so-called reliable narrative refers to the credibility of the concepts expressed between the subjects of the narration and the unification of the underlying consciousness.

In this novel, taking the description Poirot as an example, the narrator described it as follows, "The man's collar was firm and wrapped around his ears, and his entire face showed only a pale red nose and two curly beards." What is shown before us is a funny image of a foreign little old man, which has nothing to do with, or even contrary to, the image of Inspector Poirot praised by the implicit referent author. The problem of unreliability of the narrative arises, and the concepts of the three parts of the narrative are not unified. The author deliberately designed this way to use irony to create an unreliable narrative, and to use his appearance to contrast Poirot's shrewdness and skill, intentionally creating a contradiction and forming an effect of defamiliarization. But in essence, the implicit referent authors' ideas are what the author wants to express. The narrator knows far more than what he narrates.

During the detection process, the narrator also skillfully uses Poirot's observation, perception and consciousness to examine other passengers in the sleeper compartment, so as to create all kinds of hints, doubts and suspects to confuse the reader's sight. Detectives convinced by readers as the focuser to carefully examine other characters not only effectively influence the reader's judgment of the character, but also help build the drama of the story, and maintain the suspense.

Detective novels generally involve many characters. Only by categorizing them by function and interpreting the characters as symbols, can they show their position and role in the novel. In this blocky analysis, the seemingly complicated and elusive plot of detective novels is replaced by symbolic characters and becomes concise. For the narrative receiver, the inner structure lines of the novel in the signifier sense become clear. At the same time, only by unifying the three narrative subjects can we better understand the profound meaning of the narrative text.

## 5. Conclusion

Agatha Christie's narrative construction often surpasses the readers' imagination and breaks through the readers' thinking. As far as this novel is concerned, it is absolutely difficult for readers to infer that the murder case involved passengers of different classes and nationalities in the entire carriage, and 12 seemingly unrelated individuals conspired to kill a real evil criminal. However, the humane detective Poirot was sympathetic to their behavior, but after stripping away all the truth, he proposed another reasonable explanation, exonerated them from crime, and generated joyful shock.

Among various types works of narrative, the inner structure lines of detective novels are the most difficult to sort out and analyze. The story is actually very simple, and its complexity depends entirely on the narrative style chosen by the narrator. To clarify the transformation of narrative perspective and the dislocation of narrative time, the voice of the narrative subject is extremely important. In this process, the inner structural line deliberately distorted by the narrator will gradually be flattened, and the distance between the narrative receiver and the narrator will also be shortened. In essence, while analyzing and reading a detective novel from the formal analysis, the meaning and value of the detective novel is gradually eliminated at the level of meaning.

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