



Linguae &

Rivista di lingue e culture moderne

1
2006

Sherlock Holmes e il giallo inglese

a cura di J.M. Ivo Klaver

J. M. Ivo Klaver Introduzione	7
Stephen Knight Watson's Wound and the Speckled Band: Imperial Threats and English Crimes in Conan Doyle	11
Roberta Mullini "How much I have loved that part of the World": Agatha Christie and the Orient	25
Mario Faraone "When you have excluded the impossible": Sherlock Holmes e il pensiero orientale, tra investigazioni, deduzioni e illuminazioni	35
Francis O'Gorman Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes, and the Victorian Media	53
Maurizio Ascari "Dealers in poison": il mito dell'avvelenatore nell'Ottocento inglese	61
Recensioni	77



ISSN 1724-8698

Published in *Led on Line* - Electronic Archive by
LED - Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto - Milano

<http://www.ledonline.it/linguae/>

Marzo 2007

Il copyright dei testi pubblicati in *Linguae &* appartiene ai singoli autori. I lettori devono osservare per i testi di questo archivio elettronico gli stessi criteri di correttezza che vanno osservati per qualsiasi testo pubblicato. I testi possono essere letti on line e scaricati per uso personale. Ogni citazione deve menzionare l'autore e la fonte. I testi non possono essere pubblicati a fini commerciali (né in forma elettronica né a stampa), editati o altrimenti modificati, senza l'autorizzazione dell'Autore e della Direzione della Rivista.

Direttore

Roberta Mullini

Comitato di Redazione

Alessandra Calanchi
Ruggero Druetta
Ivo Klaver
Antonella Negri

Comitato scientifico

Lo staff della Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere
dell'Università degli Studi di Urbino "Carlo Bo"

E-mail

linguae@uniurb.it

“How much I have loved that part of the world”: Agatha Christie and the Orient

r.mullini@uniurb.it

In the first novels written by Agatha Christie, the means to murder people was – in many cases – poison. In a way, Christie took advantage of her experience as a VAD (a member of the Voluntary Aid Department) during the First World War, when she served as an apothecary dispenser, that is, a person in everyday touch with drugs and medicines of any type, and well conversant with their different effects on human beings. The location of early novels, as well as that of the majority of her writings, is Great Britain and, inside that, a mansion or a detached residence, independently from the detective figure featuring in the stories (either Poirot or Miss Marple, or Mr Quin or Tommy and Tuppence). Later in her career as a writer of detective novels, once again her personal biography furnished her with details for her work: themes, places, names of at least four novels written in the 1930s draw on her life, starting from simple things such as a travel with the Orient Express (*Murder on the Orient Express*, 1934), up to her first visits in Mesopotamia (*Murder in Mesopotamia*, 1936; *Death on the Nile*, 1937; *Appointment with Death*, 1938). She went to Iraq for the first time at the end of the 1920s and returned there – or to other parts of the Middle East – many times as a special assistant of her second husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan. Then, after World War II, she devoted a novel to modern Iraq (*They Came to Baghdad*, 1951), where digs and excavations are only part of the panorama, while in the foreground there are fictional contemporary events such as a political summit to be held in Baghdad between the representatives of USA and USSR, and an intricate espionage case with no room for Christie’s ‘usual’ detectives.

It is not a case, then, that her publisher has recently collected the three novels *Murder in Mesopotamia*, *Death on the Nile*, and *Appointment with Death* – where Poirot is the protagonist – in a single volume entitled *Poirot in the Orient*

(2001)¹, whereas *They Came to Baghdad* is left on its own, and so is *Murder on the Orient Express*².

In the collected novels Poirot happens to be a tourist on the Nile, or simply to be in the Middle East for private affairs of his own when called upon to solve a case in Mesopotamia among archaeologists, or in Jordan among tourists, respectively. In all of them, famous archaeological locations are mentioned and briefly described: the Egyptian temples at Assuan and Abu Simbel in *Death on the Nile*, the buildings of Petra in *Appointment with Death*, and Assyrian ruins and digs in *Murder in Mesopotamia*. Only this last one deals properly with the life of an archaeological expedition. One could say that the Orient, in the other two novels, is seen mainly as a tourists' place, where English people (because nearly all the characters are English) go for its climate and for its artistic treasures. As in most other cases, in these novels one does not find long and rich descriptions: one must remember that Christie, even if not always complying with the rules (i.e. in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* where the apparent 'detective' is the murderer), actually wrote according to the tenets of the London Detection Club (founded in 1928). Rule n. 16 as written by S.S. Van Dine prescribes that

A detective novel should contain no long descriptive passages, no literary dallying with side-issues, no subtly worked-out character analyses, no "atmospheric" preoccupations. Such matters have no vital place in a record of crime and deduction. (Van Dine 1961:191-2)

But I think that it is not only because the detection novel's rules of the 1920s forbid long descriptions that Agatha Christie did not fall into the picturesque and Orientalist discourse which such Egyptian ruins and Mesopotamian places might have suggested. Even if she was fundamentally a Victorian and Edwardian author writing between the two World Wars, her life experience helped her change her mind about the Empire, or – at least – so it seems from her books.

Agatha Christie lived in Egypt for three months when a girl, after her fa-

¹ This edition also includes full-page black and white reproductions of the original covers at the beginning of each novel and miniature colour reproductions of the same on the jacket: these pictures would be worthwhile analysing because of the image of the Orient they offer.

² I think for two very different reasons. As already mentioned, Poirot is not even a character of the former, whereas he does feature in the latter, but in contemporary readers' memory this novel is so strictly linked up to the 1974 film directed by Sidney Lumet with Albert Finney as Poirot, that it – from a marketing standpoint – sells more if published separately. Furthermore, there is nothing particular touching the Orient as such in it, apart from the fascination which this very exclusive train meant to its passengers and, especially, to those who connected the train to adventures and travels in the East (therefore I'm not going to deal with this novel in the present article).

ther’s death, before the First World War but at that time, in her own words, “The wonders of antiquity were the last thing I cared to see” (1993:175), because she was interested only in the social British life going on in Cairo, Egypt being then a colony of the British Empire. And she, as mentioned, was later in Iraq many times to give a hand in her second husband’s scientific expeditions. One first question about her decision to locate some of her novels in the Middle East might concern, therefore, exactly the writer’s point of view about the Orient. Was it just a piece of the Empire to be looked down on and taken for granted as such from an imperialistic standpoint? Or did the Orient, once Agatha Christie experienced it in her own travels after her first visit when she went alone for a break after her divorce, become something different?

Her novels, actually, reveal – I think – her position on this point, especially through both some characters’ biases which are ironically commented upon, and the choice of nouns, adjectives and verbs describing the various situations. Among the elements that mark these aspects of Christie’s novels, I will focus on names and habits, situations and sounds, keeping in mind that, as the narrator of *Murder in Mesopotamia* states at the beginning of the novel, “I think I’d better make it clear right away that there isn’t going to be any local colour in this story” (*Murder*, ch. 7:36), that is, exoticism is rarely brought in and descriptions are very scant.

NAMES AND HABITS

Miss Amy Leatheran, a nurse, is charged with writing the story of the events in *Murder in Mesopotamia*, because “she is not biased by having any previous connection with the University of Pittstown Expedition to Iraq” (i.e. with the events preceding the narration; p. 5). Soon after, though, the reader encounters a fragment of a letter Amy is writing to a friend of hers about her staying in Baghdad, where all her deeper biases are made clear:

I must say it’s been nice to see a bit of the world – though England for me every time, thank you. The *dirt* and the *mess* in Baghdad you wouldn’t believe – and not romantic at all as you’d think from the *Arabian Nights*! Of course it’s pretty just on the river, but the town itself is just awful – and no proper shops at all. Major Kelsey took me through the bazaars, and of course there’s no denying they’re *quaint* – but just a lot of rubbish and hammering away at copper pans till they make your head ache – and not what I’d like to use myself unless I was sure about the cleaning. (*Murder*:7)

The novel was published in 1936, after Christie had gone for some years to the northern region of Iraq. The action is located at Tell Yarimjah, an archaeological

site between the Great and the Little Zab, two rivers in the north, not far from the ruins of Niniveh. The most frequently mentioned town names are Hassanieh, Kirkuk and Mosul.

Through the narrative the reader discovers that what is said at the beginning about Amy's not being involved in the events of the past is true, but Christie makes a point of charging her narrator with another sort of bias: Amy is always presented as strongly biased on the British side. The italics in the passage reveal the nationalistic view of the character and the clash between her expectations and reality. Amy – like most English people of those times – has always thought of Baghdad as the city of Sheherazade, different certainly from the western world, but “romantic”. The brutal reality of an underdeveloped country strikes the sensibility of this ‘English innocent abroad’ who judges the East according to western standards. Amy, I would argue, has a received idea of the Orient, and this – in our contemporary terms – is imperialistic and ‘Orientalist’ (according to Edward Said's definition of the term, 1991). She often insists, along the novel, on the ‘dirt’ of the Arab world, on the imperfect English spoken by some natives, but – and here comes the new side of Christie's corrected perception of the East – most of her prejudices also apply to Poirot as a foreigner (i.e. non English), thus showing the comic side of her insular and anglocentric point of view. An example is given at Amy's first encounter with Hercule Poirot:

I don't know what I'd imagined – something rather like Sherlock Holmes – long and lean with a keen, clever face. Of course, I knew he was a foreigner, but I hadn't expected him to be *quite* as foreign as he was, if you know what I mean. (*Murder:67*)

Any time Amy's comments upon Iraqi reality are too strongly negative, therefore, Christie introduces another character who modifies these views in the reader's eyes. For example, when talking about the Arab workmen at the dig, Amy joins together her judgements on their general appearance, their singing, and their behaviour calling them with the very negative noun “scarecrows”, only to be soon contradicted by Dr Leidner's (the chief archaeologist's) words:

It was the workmen that made me laugh. You never saw such a lot of scarecrows – all in long petticoats and rags, and their head tied up as though they had toothache. And every now and then [...], they began to sing – at least I suppose it was meant to be singing – a queer sort of monotonous chant that went on and on over and over again. I noticed that most of their eyes were terrible – all covered with discharge, and one or two looked half blind. I was just thinking what a miserable lot they were when Dr Leidner said, ‘Rather a fine-looking lot of men, aren't they?’ (*Murder:38*)

Later on in the novel, Amy describes an Iraqi as “Very dark [...] A dirty dark-yellow colour.” But immediately comes the reaction of another character, Dr

Reilly's, who has been living in Iraq for a long time: "I saw Dr Reilly bite his lips and smile". (p. 73). Christie seems to juxtapose the two different points of view to disenchant her readers about the Orientalist received idea of the Middle East, till the end of the novel when the narrator finishes her story by saying:

I've never been out East again. It's funny – sometimes I wish I could. I think of the noise the water-wheel made and the women washing, and that queer haughty look that camels give you – and I get quite a homesick feeling. After all, perhaps, dirt isn't really so unhealthy as one is brought up to believe! (*Murder*:187)

And by concluding with an Arab invocation: "In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate" (p. 188).

I wouldn't say that Christie arrives here at a deep intercultural understanding, at a complete acceptance of the diversity of the cultural and religious Other (for example the natives rarely receive names, since they are just a necessary presence but not so deeply involved in the story and are called only 'the workmen' or 'the house-boys'³). Nevertheless there are some hints that the feeling she passes to her novel tends to overcome the romantic idea of the Orient and to change it into a more realistic and modern picture where there are pipelines, where Iraq has its own police, even if the British authority is still very strong. (As a historical footnote, one must remember that UK received the mandate on Iraq in 1920, and that only in 1932 the country reached its formal independence, even if the real authority was the British ambassador.)

IRAQ: A LAND OF INTERNATIONAL INTRIGUE

During the 1930s it became progressively impossible, for internal political reasons, to carry on excavations in Iraq and "everyone went to Syria" (Christie 1993:482). Then the Second World War came, and it was only after it that professor Mallowan returned to Iraq with his wife. This is the reason why – perhaps – the other oriental novels written in the late 1930s are not located in that country, but in Egypt and in Jordan. The couple was to go back to Iraq in the late 1940s, and from 1950 they lived in the mud-brick expedition house at Nimrud where Agatha started her autobiography (1993:9). For some time afterwards they also had a house in Baghdad ("an old Turkish house on the west

³ Mary Louise Pratt (1985:120) observes that "The people to be othered are homogenised into a collective 'they', which is distilled even further into an iconic 'he' (the standardised adult male specimen). This abstracted 'he'/'they' is the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense, which characterises anything 'he' is or does, not as a particular historical event but as an instance of a pregiven custom or trait".

bank of the Tigris [...] cool and delightful”, 1993:546-7). In post-war Iraq she located *They Came to Baghdad* (1951), a novel the author dedicated “To all my friends” in that city, where the protagonist is young Victoria Jones.

To us, in the early 2000s, the title of the novel and the places mentioned there may sound quaintly prophetic and disturbing: Basrah, Kirkuk, Kerbela, Mosul (besides Baghdad itself of course) are all names tragically known because of the present Iraqi war and the still ongoing troubles. In the early 1950s, all this was part of a map of a country emerging from turbid alliances during the Second World War, and always a territory where international political influences were strongly exercised in order to control oil production and trade. (To as early a time as 1917, in his fictionalised autobiography *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Siegfried Sassoon assigns his perception that the Great War was prolonged because “our [Britain’s] Aims were essentially acquisitive, what we were fighting for was the Mesopotamian Oil Wells.”; Sassoon 1969:214)

In the novel Iraq is an independent country where a summit is going to take place between USA and USSR, in 1950 (cf. *Baghdad*:29). The mention of a real date is totally unexpected in an Agatha Christie novel, but so is – on the whole – this novel itself. Actually *They Came to Baghdad* is not a detective novel, but a spy story, strictly connected to the real world’s affairs and strangely anticipating Ian Fleming’s narratives focussed on the SPECTRE organisation (Fleming’s first novel – *Casino Royale* – was published in 1953, but one has to wait till *Thunderball* published in 1961 in order to find the “Special Executive for Counterintelligence, Terrorism, Revenge and Extortion”). In Christie’s novel an international fanatic organisation is trying to dismantle the recent state of peace obtained after the end of the war. The tenets of the organisation seem based on sort of Nazi principles, but what is interesting is that scientists, technicians, gold and precious stones disappear into nowhere and the secret services, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, are consequently deeply alarmed.

Another feature of this novel concerns the protagonist: Victoria Jones is not an elderly lady like Miss Marple, but a London girl, a young typist who flies to Baghdad when an unexpected job appears, and ends up working for the British intelligence, and having a lot of ‘romantic’ and ‘melodramatic’ experiences, as the novel calls them with self-irony (cf. *Baghdad*:201). Not only, then, does this novel anticipate Ian Fleming’s James Bond series, but it also contains a forerunner of Cordelia Gray, P.D. James’s adventurous young female detective in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972).

Straight from the first pages one gets a very different idea of the Arab world from what appeared, for example, in *Death on the Nile*. In the latter novel, Arab children selling goods to tourists are described in the following way:

They [the group of tourists] came out from the shade of the gardens on to a dusty stretch of road bordered by the river. Five watchful bead-sellers, two vendors of postcards, three sellers of plaster scarabs, a couple of donkey boys and some detached but hopeful infantile riff-raff closed upon them. [...] Hercule Poirot made vague gestures to rid himself of this human cluster of flies. (*Death*:17-18)

The strongly westernised point of view is evident, and there is nothing to hedge it anyhow. The character – and the writer, possibly, but readers must remember that Agatha Christie did not like her detective, and that, as a consequence, she might have ended him with this spiteful remark – judges this humanity as a nuisance, as disturbers belonging to an inferior social class. They are called ‘human’, it’s true, but – disparagingly – a ‘cluster of flies’.

Quite different, however, is the crowd of young and colourful sellers in *They Came to Baghdad*:

There was the persistent honking of motor horns, the cries of vendors of various wares. There were hot disputes between small groups of people who seemed ready to murder each other but were really fast friends; men, boys and children were selling every type of tree, sweetmeats, oranges and bananas, bath towels, combs, razor blades and other assorted merchandise carried rapidly through the streets on trays. (*Baghdad*:8)

The people in the passage are examined in a more friendly way than in the previous novel, their goods are not despised, and their way of talking together is somehow explained. Later in the novel Victoria Jones, once in Baghdad, experiences the town in similarly positive terms: “Slowly a kind of fascination came over her, the fascination of assorted merchandise coming from all over the world to meet the strange and varied wants of a mixed population” (p. 137).

In her *Autobiography* Christie explains the Arab loud way of speaking as she understood it:

My husband Max [...] discovered that any remark uttered in an ordinary tone of voice was unheard – not so much through deafness as a belief that anyone talking like that was talking to himself, and that any man who really wished to make a remark would take the trouble to make it in a loud enough voice for you to hear. (Christie 1993:386)

Cultural otherness seems to be better understood in this novel than in the others. An example of this phenomenon is the frequency with which Arab women are mentioned (not very often, though), together with the remark – when “the little London typist” decides to disguise herself as a native for safety – that “A virtuously veiled Arab woman, however ragged and poor, had, she knew, all possible immunity. It would be the height of bad manners

for any man to address her” (*Baghdad*:253).

Also the urge to bring English culture to the Other in his/her own language appears in the novel, where a character explains that “Shakespeare’s and Milton’s works [are] translated into Arabic and Kurdish and Persian and Armenian” (*Baghdad*:30). In *Appointment with Death*, on the contrary, English culture has penetrated the local one without the mediation of translation, through “Mission education” as the Arab guide leading the group of tourists to visit Petra says when he recites an English poem in English (*Death*:532).

For this episode once again Agatha Christie drew on her life in order to build up a credible picture in her novels: in her *Autobiography* she tells of an evening in Kerbela during her second visit to the country in 1930 when an Iraqi policeman “suddenly broke his silence. ‘Hail to thee, bright spirit!’ he said. ‘Bird thou never wert.’”. Christie’s surprise at hearing Shelley’s “Ode to a Skylark” recited in English by an Arab is rendered with “I looked at him startled” (Christie 1993:408). In *Appointment with Death* she also confirms to her readers the colonial cultural politics of Great Britain in the Middle East (and elsewhere): before the Second World War it aimed at educating the natives in the culture of the Empire and used English for the purpose, i.e. the winner’s language⁴. In the post-war 1951 novel, though, English works are adapted to the receiver and they are translated, it is not the other way round: the British Empire has nearly disappeared and the system of international mandates is also crumbling. Iraq is totally independent, and so is Israel.

Of course, what I’ve been discussing so far does not pretend to build up a picture of Dame Agatha Christie (she was named a Dame in 1971) as a heroine of internationalism fighting (writing) against colonial and imperialist power. As I have mentioned at the beginning, she felt the powerful legacy of Victorian British culture all her life long. Nevertheless, it is not totally true that her work was unaffected by history and by what was going on around her. Poirot and Miss Marple do not change: they are already old at their literary birth. But Agatha Christie was able to adapt her views to the changing world, and even to create a Victoria Jones – an aristocratic name with a ‘democratic’ and popular surname – as the protagonist of *They Came to Baghdad*, a novel that shows the author in a (for her) different and experimental enterprise. That is, Agatha Christie adjusting her writing to time, updating her points of view about the Orient, composing a novel out of her direct experience. Because, as she wrote, “How much I have loved that part of the world. I love it still and always shall” (Christie 1993:548).

⁴ Cf. Saglia 2002:62-3 for a similar attitude in the nineteenth century.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Christie, Agatha, (1936), *Murder in Mesopotamia*, in Christie 2001, 1: 188.
Christie Agatha, (1937), *Death on the Nile*, in Christie 2001, 189: 417
Christie, Agatha, (1938), *Appointment with Death*, in Christie 2001, 419: 578.
Christie, Agatha, 1993 (1977), *An Autobiography*, London, Harper Collins.
Christie, Agatha, 2001, *Poirot in the Orient*, London, Harper Collins.
Christie, Agatha, 2003 (1951), *They Came to Bagdad*, London, Harper Collins.
Pratt, M.L., 1985, "Scratches on the Face of the Earth", *Critical Inquiry*, 12, n. 1, Autumn 1985, 119-43.
Saglia, D., 2002, *I discorsi dell'esotico. L'oriente nel romanticismo britannico 1780-1830*, Napoli, Liguori.
Said, E., 1991 (1978), *Orientalism*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.
Sassoon, Siegfried, 1969 (1930), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, n. p., Collier Books.
Van Dine, S.S., 1961 (1928), "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories", in H. Haycraft, ed., *The Art of the Mystery Story*, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1961 (1946), 189-93.