

The Mysterious Affair at Styles 1920

[N.B. This review contains **PLOT SPOILERS** for this novel, but not for other novels]

The Mysterious Affair at Styles: Agatha Christie's first published novel, and the start of our journey through Christie's crime novels, book by book. She wrote the novel during the First World War, but it languished with the publishers for two years before being accepted.

In this first novel Christie introduces her most famous character, Hercule Poirot. Many of Poirot's foibles and phrases, that Christie fans come to love, are already apparent. His 'little ideas'. The use of the 'little grey cells'. 'Papa Poirot' – the term he calls himself when he wants to encourage a confidence, usually from an attractive



young woman. His building houses from playing cards when thinking deeply. His obsessional straightening of ornaments, leading to an important clue; and the gathering of suspects for the dénouement. We learn of Poirot's egg-shaped head and that his eyes turn green, like a cat's, when he is excited. We also see Poirot the incurable romantic. 'The happiness of one man and woman is the greatest thing in all the world' says Poirot after a murder trial has repaired a conjugal rift.

The incomparable David Suchet
as Hercule Poirot

In one major respect, however, it is a very different Poirot in *Styles* from the later Poirot, and that is his behaviour as a detective. In *Styles* Poirot is a close relative of Sherlock Holmes, with Hastings his Dr Watson. We see Poirot extracting tiny pieces of torn material from near the scene of the murder, making deductions from a stain on the carpet, noting traces of brown mould and earth on the floor of the boudoir, sealing the contents of coffee cups for forensic examination and dusting a bottle of 'hydro-chloride of strychnine' to reveal fingerprints. We see him running headlong from the room and dashing out into the street. All this could be straight out of Conan Doyle, as could many of the stylistic flourishes such as the opening paragraph, and the incorporation in the text of maps of the house, and facsimiles of letters. The later Poirot, and the later Christie, are very different. Indeed in *The ABC Murders* published in 1936 Poirot ridicules Sherlock Holmes' methods and deductions – the very methods he himself uses in *Styles*. The later Poirot is not only more sedentary, more like Mycroft than Sherlock, but the way he solves crime is quite different, based not on finding physical clues but on what he often calls *psychology*. And this reflects the significant development in the ways in which Christie conceives her plots, clues and solutions.

During the First World War Christie studied and worked as a pharmacist and in *Styles* she uses this specialist knowledge. The starting point for the plot, I suspect, was the combining of two ideas. The first idea is that if potassium bromide (used widely at the time as a sedative) is added to a solution containing strychnine in soluble form, the strychnine precipitates as an insoluble bromide. The relevance of this is that small quantities of soluble strychnine were a component of tonics that were in wide use. These tonics were not generally dangerous because the concentration of strychnine was low and only small amounts of tonic were consumed at a time. Adding bromide to a bottle of such a tonic, however, would precipitate most of the strychnine which would then fall as a fine powder to the bottom of the bottle. It would then be possible for a person to consume almost all the strychnine at one go, and this could be fatal.

The second idea is a legal one. In English law at the time a person could not be tried for the same crime twice. If someone was tried and found *not* guilty then even if further evidence was found incriminating him he could not be prosecuted again.



Photo: H Armstrong Roberts/Corbis
[<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jan/17/sherlock-holmes-official-sequel-anthony-horowitz>]

From these two ideas – I am speculating – Christie derived the core of her plot. She put them together with the clever idea that the source of strychnine is misattributed. The murderer actually kills the victim by putting bromide in her tonic so that when she takes the last dose she consumes most of the strychnine. The murderer however sets things up so that the source of the strychnine is assumed to be some that was bought from the local chemist – at the time it was perfectly possible to buy strychnine for the purpose of killing a dog!

With these elements Christie constructs her plot. The murderer, with the help of an accomplice, makes himself the most likely suspect and tries as hard as he can to get himself arrested and tried for murder. He is planning to get off when the time comes because he will have an alibi proving it was not he who bought the strychnine. That plan is foiled by Poirot who finds out about the alibi and prevents the murderer from being brought to trial.

This plot is technically ingenious and it also enables Christie to misdirect the reader. From the start the murderer, Mr Inglethorpe, is the obvious suspect. A bit too obvious. The reader is suspicious. Then Poirot appears to almost prove that he is not the murderer. From then on the reader is led away from suspecting him. Poirot even says to Hastings: 'Of course, you realize that, now Mr Inglethorpe is out of it [i.e. no longer a suspect], the whole position is greatly changed.'

For the plot to work the murderer needs an accomplice to buy the strychnine that will provide the smokescreen. Christie uses several techniques to mislead the reader here. First the personality of Miss Howard, the accomplice: hearty, down-to-earth, rough but apparently with a heart of gold. Second her apparent lack of motive: she pretends to dislike the murderer when all the time they are working together with the intention eventually of marrying. Third she was away from the scene at the time of the murder. Fourth when Hastings suspects her Poirot counteracts Hastings' reasoning.



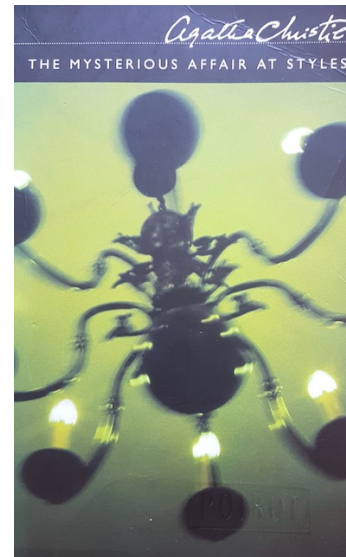
<http://www.chm.bris.ac.uk/motm/strychnine/strychnineh.html>

Christie's rigorous fairness to the reader is already evident in this first novel. Poirot tells Hastings that either John Cavendish, or Miss Howard, was lying at the inquest but not both. Hastings, being a personal friend of Cavendish, takes it for granted that Poirot means that it was Miss Howard who was lying. 'Do you really think so?' Hastings asks Poirot, and goes on to say, 'Miss Howard had always seemed to me so essentially honest.' Poirot then 'gave me a curious look, which I could not quite fathom. He seemed about to speak and then checked himself.' The reader thinks she can understand the meaning of Poirot's look and is likely to jump to the conclusion that Poirot means that the person lying is John Cavendish. And so the reader sets off on the wrong trail. The meaning of Poirot's look, however, is surprise that Hastings thinks that Miss Howard seems so honest, when she is not.

Already in *Styles* we see Christie's sophisticated use of misdirection and her ability to construct a clever and robust plot. As Christie developed her approach to the whodunnit, however, she moved away from the esoteric, from clever methods of murder, to focus on the overall solution. The puzzle in many of her later novels derives from the overall structure, motive and purpose of the murders, rather than depending on abstruse mechanisms.

There is a more profound way in which *Styles* differs from, and is inferior to, many of the later novels: the solution of *Styles*, from the reader's point of view, is essentially arbitrary. Having constructed a good and quite complex plot Christie makes sure that all the facts fit and in the last chapter she gives a clear and coherent account of the various goings on and puzzling behaviour of the characters. In order to try and ensure that the reader does not tumble to the correct solution she provides possible motives for why many of the characters might have committed the murder. The problem is that not only does the actual solution fit the facts but so also do various alternative solutions. Indeed in the last chapter Poirot says to Hastings that there was more evidence against one of the other suspects, Cynthia Murdoch, than against anyone else. And indeed one could make as good a case for the guilt of one, or both, of the Cavendish brothers or of John's wife, Mary.

This weakness is evident in the vast majority of whodunnits. Just as it is easier for a scientist to look for evidence to confirm her theory than to falsify it, so it is easier for the detective story writer to ensure that the 'correct' solution is coherent than that no alternative solution is also plausible. Christie, in later novels, manages, again and again, to create puzzles that are not obvious but that admit of only one convincing solution. But she does not do so in this first novel, which is why I do not consider *Styles* to be in the first rank of her novels.



A good read, even for those who want a well-clued and puzzling whodunnit, depends also on other factors. Already Christie shows herself to be a consummate writer. The plot moves forward at a fast pace. Dialogue is good, and many of the characters are interesting. There is some engaging romance. Above all there is a great deal of humour, much of it at the expense of the narrator, Hastings. Christie slyly winks at the reader behind Hastings' back. To catch the murderer, Poirot tells Hastings, they must be so intelligent that the murderer does not suspect them of being intelligent. Poirot then adds: 'There, *mon ami*, you will be of great assistance to me'. Hastings tells us: 'I was pleased with the compliment'.

In later novels Poirot teases Hastings about his susceptibility to women with auburn hair. Cynthia Murdoch is the first such woman we encounter. Hastings, on the spur of the moment, proposes to her. He is also rather taken with his friend's wife, Mary. 'They are two delightful women' Hastings tells Poirot sadly. Poirot replies 'And neither of them is for you? Never mind. Console yourself, my friend. We may hunt together again, who knows? And then ...'

Poirot holds out hope of another young woman for Hastings, and Christie half promises another Poirot adventure for us. But we will have to wait. Her next novel will introduce us to a different style, and to two new detectives: Tommy, and his Christie-like partner, Prudence, known as Tuppence. The novel? *The Secret Adversary*.

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