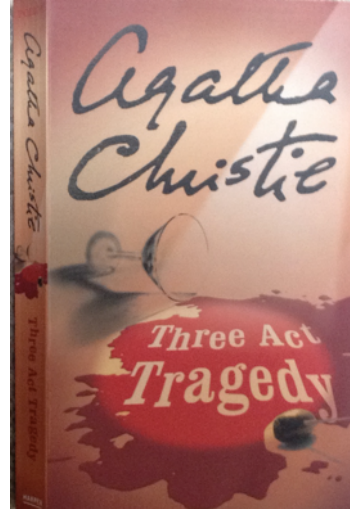


Three Act Tragedy 1935

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

Three Act Tragedy is, in its structure, the most theatrical of Christie's novels. It is explicitly divided into three acts and the theme of drama runs through the novel. Two of the characters are actors and one a playwright. The first death happens as though on stage, the main characters gathered together in one room, the death witnessed by everyone.



This theatrical structure of the novel is neither arbitrary nor whimsical. Christie is an artist of the whodunnit. The structure of the novel and the solution to the mystery form a unity. The novel is theatrical because the murders have been devised and carried out by a charismatic actor. We are told, in the very first chapter, that Sir Charles Cartwright: 'is always acting. He can't help it - it is second nature to him. Charles doesn't go out of a room - he "makes an exit".'

It would be possible to solve *Three Act Tragedy* simply by being sensitive to Christie's artistic concerns. Structure and plot go hand in hand. Sir Charles is in the tradition of the great actor-managers: he is the central character and the director of the novel. Although formally written in the third person, we are so often inside the consciousness of Sir Charles that he is almost the 'I' character, and Hercule Poirot is reduced to being a rather minor figure until towards the end when, at last, he takes control.

Solving *Three Act Tragedy*, however, does not require recourse to the novel's form. Christie is fair in setting clues, although with many misdirections. One of the best plot devices for a whodunnit is when there is one way of seeing the whole problem - the most obvious way - that is completely wrong, and that in order to solve the mystery the problem needs to be seen in quite a different way. In other words the reader needs to make what might be called a paradigm shift in order to solve the mystery. *Three Act Tragedy* is an excellent example of this approach.

There are three murders in *Three Act Tragedy*. The last, that of Mrs De Rushbridger, is unnecessary. It plays a small role in the overall plot, and serves only to extend the novel by a couple of chapters. Of the other two we are led to see the first, that of The Reverend Stephen Babbington, as the principal murder, and the second, that of the doctor Sir Bartholomew Strange, as being secondary: necessitated because Sir Bartholomew knew the identity of the murderer of Babbington. The correct way to understand the two murders, however, is to see the second as the principal murder and the first as a dress rehearsal.

Christie misleads the reader with great skill. In the 'second act' Sir Charles is discussing the two murders with his friend Satterthwaite and with Miss Lytton Gore, a young woman known by her nickname of Egg. Sir Charles is taking the role of detective and doing it very well. The logic of his analysis is convincing - he could be Poirot.

'Do we, or do we not, believe that the same person killed Babbington and Bartholomew Strange?'

'Yes,' said Egg.

....

'Do we believe that Bartholomew Strange was killed in order to prevent his revealing the facts of the first murder, or his suspicion about it?'

'Yes,' said Egg and Mr Satterthwaite again

...

'Then it is the first murder we must investigate, not the second.'

The characters, and the reader, then set off on the wild goose chase of trying to find a motive for the murder of Babbington.



**The Exotic Gardens in Monte Carlo which opened in 1933, the year this novel was set.
Mr Satterthwaite meets Sir Charles in gardens in Monte Carlo just after learning of the death of Sir
Bartholomew Strange**

[<http://www.visitmonaco.com/en/Places-to-visit/Gardens/The-Exotic-Gardens-and-the-Observation-Cave>]

There is a second major misdirection that Christie skilfully employs in the same chapter. Regardless of motive, if the same person committed both murders then it must have been someone present on both the occasions on which murder was committed. Egg takes the lead in writing the list of the seven relevant people, a list that includes herself and her mother, but does not include Sir Charles. Poirot gives this list his stamp of authority a few chapters later: '.... as Sir Charles has already said, the guilt must lie on a person who was present on both occasions - one of the

seven on your list.'

Thus the reader is set to be alert to finding a motive for why one of the seven people on the list might have a reason to murder Babbington.

The easiest and most likely way in which a reader will correctly identify the murderer is through realising that Sir Charles was indeed present on the occasion of the second murder: he was the butler who mysteriously came into Sir Bartholomew's employ and who mysteriously disappeared shortly after the murder. Christie, fair as usual, gives several clues that Sir Charles and the butler are one and the same person.

The best clues, as we have suggested elsewhere, have that quality of a good cryptic crossword clue: there is no easy path from clue to deduction, but if one hits on the correct solution then the clue falls into place and strongly confirms the solution.

In *Three Act Tragedy* there are several clues of this type. Five clues fall into place once one seriously considers that Sir Charles might be the butler:

1. The quite uncharacteristic and somewhat jokey exchange that several characters noticed between Sir Bartholomew and the butler on the evening of Sir Bartholomew's murder.
2. The way in which Sir Charles finds the butler's hidden blackmail letters from a clever deduction from an ink stain. Christie's writing of this episode is very carefully judged. She takes us along so that on first reading we think how clever of Sir Charles. If, however, we hit on the right solution this whole episode becomes a strongly confirming clue: the whole episode is like a staged take off of a Sherlock Holmes story.
3. The fact that the butler wore glasses when with the servants, pretending that light hurt his eyes.
4. The strange episode towards the end when Miss Wills, the playwright, apparently makes an unusual error and has a second look at Sir Charles' left wrist, and then smiles with satisfied malice.
5. For the nicotine poisoning of Sir Bartholomew to work he must not notice the unpleasant flavour of the poison. Only Sir Charles knows that Sir Bartholomew cannot taste and smell well as a result of a bad bout of 'flu.

None of these clues leads easily to the correct identification of the murderer but once the correct solution is seriously entertained each becomes supportive, and, taken together, almost certain proof.

So given how much evidence there is that Sir Charles is the murderer and how fair Christie has been to the reader in providing clues, how does Christie conceal the solution from the reader? The answer is by a mixture of stylistic effects, and a certain legerdemain.

Consider the second method first. There is an enormous clue that Sir Charles killed

Babington which Christie slips past the reader with great deftness. In the third act, Poirot is discussing the murder of Babington with Mr Satterthwaite. Poirot says:

.... it does not seem as though anybody could have poisoned Stephen Babington. Sir Charles, if he had wanted to, could have poisoned one of his guests, but not any particular guest. Temple (a maid) might possibly have slipped something into the last glass on the tray - but Mr Babington's was not the last glass.

The conclusion should be that only Sir Charles (and perhaps Temple) could have poisoned anyone at that initial cocktail party. But Christie has the reader so focussed on the idea that Babington must have been specifically intended as the victim, that we are unlikely to realise the major significance of what Poirot has just said. Only a reader who has made the 'paradigm shift', and who realises that poisoning 'one of his guests' is all that was intended, is likely to pick up this clue.

The most likely way for the reader to solve *Three Act Tragedy* is to realise that Sir Charles could have been the butler. If Sir Charles had been the butler then, even though the motives for both murders, and the mechanism for the first murder, remain obscure, the reader is likely to conclude that Sir Charles is the murderer.

Christie uses a number of methods to try and prevent the reader from thinking of this solution. First, there is the easy assumption that Sir Charles was in the South of France at the time of the second murder. Christie does not deceive the reader but she is careful not to write anything that might make the reader realise that the timing would allow Sir Charles to have been in England at the crucial time. At the end of *Act One* we learn that Sir Charles has gone to the South of France (to get over his love for Egg), and at the beginning of *Act Two* we find Satterthwaite in the South of France learning of the death of Sir Bartholomew Strange in the newspaper and immediately meeting Sir Charles who has apparently also just learned of the death.

Second, there is the way that Sir Charles is presented. He is sympathetically portrayed and is at the centre of the romantic interest of the novel. The reader is taken into his inner consciousness a great deal, so that, together with Satterthwaite he is almost the first person narrator of the novel; and he plays the part of the detective for much of the novel. Indeed, Poirot treats Sir Charles almost as a co-detective.



All three victims died from nicotine poisoning, the nicotine extracted from pesticide spray. Modern nicotine related pesticides are now thought to be killing bees worldwide.

[<http://news.agropages.com/Feature/FeatureDetail---710.htm>]

Finally there is the clever scene in which Poirot arranges for Sir Charles to fake his own death. In the *Third Act* Poirot arranges for Sir Charles to pretend to be poisoned and die in front of all the suspects. Poirot gives two reasons why he stages this drama. The first is to test whether the murderer could have swapped glasses to avoid the nicotine being found in the glass used by the victim. The second reason is a good example of Christie's misdirection. Poirot says that he wanted to watch the expression on one person's face when Sir Charles (apparently) falls dead. He tells Egg and Satterthwaite that he saw an expression of the utmost surprise on that person's face. Egg immediately asks: 'You mean ... that you know who the murderer is?'

Egg, and the reader, reasonably suppose that Poirot was looking at the face of the murderer and that the surprise confirms his suspicion because the murderer would know that he had not poisoned Sir Charles. Although we are not told who Poirot was watching, the one person it could not have been is Sir Charles. In fact Poirot is looking at Miss Wills' face because he thinks that Miss Wills has a good idea that Sir Charles is the murderer but he wants confirmation. Miss Wills' surprise at Sir Charles' apparent murder confirms for Poirot that Miss Wills does indeed suspect Sir Charles.

This is a somewhat convoluted way for Poirot to find out about Miss Wills' suspicions. It would have been more straightforward to talk with her in private. The whole scene has been written not for the sake of Poirot but for the sake of Christie. She puts it in to divert the reader's suspicion from Sir Charles. It is a masterly example of misdirection.

Christie, as we have seen, has given the reader many clues as to the identity of the murderer. One of the central problems for a whodunnit writer is how to steer the difficult course between making the solution too obvious and making it arbitrary or insufficiently clued. In this novel Christie has been scrupulously fair in providing many clues as to the identity of the murderer. For a reader naive to her writings, the stylistic ways in which she disguises the truth are likely to be effective. But for those who have read several of her novels those very ways may have the opposite effect. The experienced Christie reader may well think that the murderer is most likely to be someone not on the list of seven, or the fact that Sir Charles is playing detective and is a sympathetic character makes him more likely to be the murderer.



**Can there be a random victim
but a watertight motive?**

[<http://dicelikethunder.com/?p=123>]

It may be for this reason that Christie never gives a clue, until after the solution, of Sir Charles' motive for murdering his long-standing friend Sir Bartholomew Strange. For the reader, solving a whodunnit ideally requires giving an account of the murderer, the means, and the motive for each murder. There is no way that the reader can identify the motive for the murder of Sir Bartholomew. We have to accept the idea that there are so many possible reasons why a person might want to

murder a doctor that Sir Charles must have had a reason.

Why did Christie, uncharacteristically, give us no specific clue as to the motive? We suspect that she was worried that the solution overall would be too easy to detect. Had there been any motive for Sir Charles then the reader would be too likely to solve the whole puzzle. Her problem was how to hide the solution given that she had been so fair in her clues as to the identity of the murderer. To completely hide the motive for the second murder is a weakness in a plot that overall has been brilliantly constructed and clued.

Three Act Tragedy is the first tentative step that Christie takes in exploring the idea that a random murder can be committed from a watertight motive. She will take this idea further and with brilliant effect in a later novel. She ends *Three Act Tragedy*, however, on a comic note.

Mr Satttherthwaite looked cheerful.

Suddenly an idea struck him. His jaw fell.

'My goodness,' he cried, 'I've only just realised it. That rascal, with his poisoned cocktail! Anyone might have drunk it. It might have been me.'

'There is an even more terrible possibility that you have not considered,' said Poirot.

'Eh?'

'It might have been ME,' said Hercule Poirot.

[TH]