

## Hercule Poirot's Christmas 1938

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

This is a novel about blood. Christie emphasises the point in her note to James Watts, her sister's husband, that serves in place of a dedication. 'You complained that my murders were getting too refined – anaemic, in fact. You yearned for a “good violent murder with lots of blood”.' The murder does indeed involve a great deal of blood, not only the victim's but also animal blood that is prevented from clotting by the addition sodium citrate. *Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?* Lydia Lee asks (quoting Lady Macbeth) when she sees the murdered body of her father-in-law. But Christie does not write *Nordic Noir*. Violence does not attract her. The puzzle is everything. Blood, in this literal sense, is a kind of misdirection and also a clue. This novel is indeed about blood but in the sense of *our own flesh and blood*. *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* is a whodunnit about genetic relatedness. Poirot even makes use of Mendelian inheritance to deduce that one of the characters is not who she claims to be.

In *Cards on the Table* Christie explored the idea that a *whodunnit* can be solved using psychological clues. In that book her interest was in the psychology of the murderer – what has since become known as psychological profiling. In *Appointment with Death* she changed tack and focused on the psychology of the victim. She continues this theme in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*. Poirot says: 'I think that the whole importance of this case lies ... in the character of the dead man' And again: 'We must come back to the character of Simeon Lee [the victim]'. The character of Simeon Lee, however, is directly relevant in only one respect: the motive for his murder lies in the promiscuity of his behaviour when he was a young man. Of more importance is the indirect effect of his psychological characteristics: the way that they are passed on to his children.

The idea of genetic inheritance provides one major set of clues that can lead to the correct identification of the murderer. Christie uses three types of inherited characteristic: physical appearance; behavioural mannerisms; and personality. Of these, mannerisms play the most important role in solving the puzzle.

The plot is as follows. The victim, Simeon Lee, an unpleasant widower, has three legitimate sons and one legitimate daughter (who has died before the novel opens but who herself has a daughter). All of his legitimate sons have reasons to murder their father. It is also made clear that the promiscuous Simeon Lee almost certainly fathered several illegitimate children although none is known to the family. The Christmas party in Simeon's house includes his three legitimate sons and his two daughters-in-law, a young Spanish woman who claims to be Simeon's deceased daughter's daughter, and a man, Stephen Farr, claiming to be the son of Simeon's former work partner from South Africa.

Of Simeon's three legitimate sons it is Harry who is most like his father both in appearance and character. In appearance Poirot notes Harry's 'high-bridged nose, the arrogant poise of the head, the line of the jaw; and he realized that though Harry was a big man and his father had been a man of merely middle height, yet there had been a good deal of resemblance between them.' Poirot summarises the elements of Simeon Lee's character as pride, patience, and revenge. Again and again we are told of Simeon's ability to take revenge even after many years – the Lees never forget. It is the mannerisms, however, that are of most significance for the reader. 'Harry threw back his head and laughed. It was a rich stentorian laugh.' 'Harry threw up his head. He drew his finger along the line of his jaw. It was a gesture that was habitual with him. It expressed beligerence.' On several other occasions he throws back his head and laughs or draws his finger along his jawbone. Of Simeon Lee we are told: 'He was leaning back in his chair. His chin was raised and with one finger he was stroking his jaw reflectively'. It is important for Christie's plot, and in particular for her clues, that these similarities in the mannerisms of father and son are not learned but are the result of their genetic relationship.

Christie now uses the effects of genetic relatedness to set her clues. Tressilian, the faithful family butler, finds Harry Lee and Stephen Farr confusingly similar as does the Chief Constable, Colonel Johnson. Poirot also at first thinks that Harry, when he sees him in the distance, is Stephen Farr. When Lydia first meets Stephen 'Her eyes took in the stranger's appearance. His bronzed face and blue eyes and the easy backward tilt of his head.' We see him laughing 'throwing back his head' and when he is being questioned by the police and Poirot, he leaned back in his chair 'His forefinger caressed his jaw.' Christie is giving us the evidence that Stephen Farr is not the son of Simeon's old work partner but is the son of Simeon himself – we can identify his father from his genetically inherited mannerisms. The realisation that Stephen is not who he seems is enough to make a reader suspicious that he may be the murderer. The motive perhaps has its origin in the days when Simeon and old Mr Farr were partners in South Africa. But although Stephen is not the murderer he plays an important part in the plot. In the first place he provides the main twist just before the denouement. It looks as though Poirot is going to identify him as the murderer – but then Poirot pulls a different rabbit out of the hat. More importantly Stephen serves to distract the reader from seeing the correct solution. Poirot hints that the murderer may be both a stranger and a member of the family. Pilar ostensibly fits this description. 'Too obvious' might be the response from Christie aficionados. The reader who has noted the clues about genetic relatedness may, perhaps somewhat smugly, think that he has 'beaten' Christie in realising that Stephen is the murderer. But Christie has created Stephen precisely to trap the reader in this way. Stephen is indeed an illegitimate son of Simeon Lee's but he is not the murderer.

When we first meet Sugden – the local police superintendent – we are told that he is 'a large handsome man'. We also learn that he has a fine moustache which causes Poirot to feel jealous, but also serves to mask his facial similarity to Simeon Lee. The key clues however concern his mannerisms. On three occasions he strokes his jaw, or draws his finger along his jawbone, and on one occasion he throws back his head

and laughs. On that occasion Poirot is with him. Sugden says to Poirot: 'What's the matter, Mr Poirot? Seen a ghost?' to which Poirot replies 'I am not sure that I have not done *just exactly that*.' This is the moment when Poirot realises that Sugden is an illegitimate son of Simeon Lee, and a reader who has noticed the significance of Sugden's mannerisms will know what Poirot has realised. This does not necessarily mean that Sugden is the murderer but if he is not why would Christie have planted these subtle, yet definite, clues to his paternity?

The clues to the fact that Sugden is a (genetic) son of Simeon Lee are at least as clear as those suggesting that Stephen Farr is his son. But, I suspect, more readers will tumble to the truth about Stephen than will tumble to the truth about Sugden. Christie has a conjuror's ability to manipulate the reader's gaze. In the first place Sugden is the local police superintendent. Most readers will assume, without paying the assumption much attention, that a police officer could not be the murderer – and indeed this is the first of Christie's novels in which such is the case. Second, Sugden was not in the house when the murder apparently took place. But again Christie has been rather clever. The very evidence that at first sight appears to rule Sugden out, will, if analysed more carefully, point directly at him.

The whole set-up of the murder is highly theatrical: the crashing furniture; the eerie scream. Christie, again with her conjuror's intuition, distracts the reader from the truth. Poirot suggests that the murderer might have been a woman whose physical weakness could account for a struggle that resulted in upturned tables and chairs. But if Simeon Lee could defend himself to that extent the actual outcome of the supposed struggle seems unlikely. Of greater significance is the fact that the door to Simeon Lee's room was found locked, with the key on the inside and no possible exit for the murderer except through that locked door. This is a rather brilliant example of a Christie clue coupled with a distraction. The reader, like Colonel Johnson, is likely to think: 'locked room murder' – how was the murder committed? How did the murderer escape? But this is no locked room mystery. The mechanism for locking the door is soon explained: thin-nosed pliers used to turn the barrel of the key through the key-hole from the outside. The key question is not *how* but *why* did the murderer lock the door? As Poirot points out at the end of the novel, locking the door only wastes valuable time to get away. Indeed had the murderer locked the door from the outside just after the sound of the crashing furniture and the scream he would probably have been caught red-handed.

The reader who has the intellectual tenacity to follow this reasoning will start to wonder whether the actual time of the murder was earlier than has been supposed. Are all these theatrical elements just that: a deliberate staging of a murder after it has happened? A detail that provides support for this is that one of the sash windows in Simeon Lee's room is always kept just a little open. Why would Christie put in this odd detail if it does not play a role in the plot?

Once the possibility is entertained that the murder was committed before the rumpus and the scream then an obvious question, that is never asked, is who was the last person to see Simeon alive? The answer is Sugden. And Sugden is on the

spot immediately after the murder has been discovered obviating any necessity to call in other police.

An astute reader who puts together the genetic clues with the oddities surrounding the staging of the murder can be fairly sure of having reached the correct solution: the novel passes the cryptic crossword clue test - all the fruit machine cherries line up.

I don't think however that overall the novel is as good as some that are less well clued. For a start the motive is unconvincing. Simeon Lee fathered Sugden by a woman who was not his wife. Lee then gave Sugden's mother a good sum of money which enabled her to marry a man who presumably became Sugden's (social) father. Simeon wronged Sugden's mother by failing to marry her, and perhaps by seducing her. But these wrongs to his mother do not provide sufficient grounds for murder. Simeon wronged Sugden, perhaps, by abandoning him to be brought up by another father. But had Simeon behaved in a more gentleman-like manner, had he not slept with Sugden's mother, Sugden would never have existed – so one could say that Simeon's bad behaviour did Sugden a great deal of good by creating him. Philosophical issues aside there seems insufficient psychological basis to provide a motive for murder.

The mechanism of the murder is also somewhat contrived. I can see that the plot may have originated from the idea of a balloon that 'screams' – the Dying Pig - but the whole set-up becomes overly complex. More importantly there are significant plot weaknesses. Foremost is the problem of Sugden's phone call to Simeon Lee. It is crucial that the call is believed to have been initiated by Simeon although it was, in fact, made by Sugden. But when Sugden phoned he would have been answered either by Horbury or Tresselyian, or at the very least they would have heard the ring. And this would have been fatal for Sugden's story. There are other unexplained issues: how would Sugden have known that Simeon kept diamonds in his safe? Why did no one in the house go to Simeon's room as soon as the noise of the furniture crashing about the room was heard? How could Sugden have known that it would be very unlikely for anyone to try and open Simeon Lee's door between 8pm and 9.15pm? And although Pilar found the end of the balloon used to mimic the dying man's scream, where was the rest of the balloon?

Christie, as we have seen again and again, likes to provide a little romance in her crime novels. This is often rather sweet but in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* I found it less endearing. There is a brief reference to the Spanish Civil War when Stephen Farr asks Pilar which side she is on. In the ensuing discussion Pilar says that she finds bombs exciting and that the death of her driver was a 'nuisance'. One senses that her callousness shocks Stephen Farr, as indeed it should. It certainly makes her an unattractive romantic heroine. Harry is attracted to Pilar. 'It is a pity one cannot marry one's niece' Harry says to her. Stephen has no such qualms, for, although no one else knows that he is a Lee until near the end of the book, Stephen knows it and must believe he is Pilar's uncle throughout the time he is incestuously flirting with her. All ends happily, however, for although Stephen is a Lee, it turns out that Pilar is

not. At the end Pilar can say confidently to Lydia: "I am going to marry Stephen and we are going to South Africa". For the first time since they arrived at Gorston Hall, both know that they are not of the same flesh and blood.

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