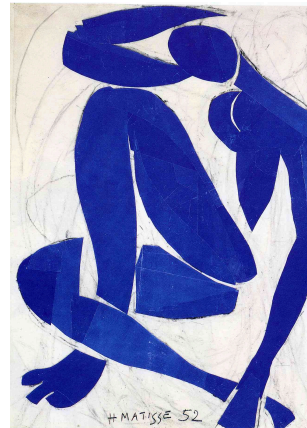


## Appointment with Death 1938

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

In *Cards on the Table*, first published in 1936, Ariadne Oliver, the detective story writer, says: 'I've written thirty-two books by now – and of course they're all exactly the same really'. Most creative artists repeat themselves, often again and again, working through a theme or an idea in slightly different ways. Repetition with small changes, slight adaptations, is at the heart of the creative process. Matisse provides a good example in the visual arts. The difference between the creative artist and the 'harmless drudge' is that the creative artist continues to explore. The repetitions do not stagnate. Originality may emerge from a sequence of small changes, or through a large change – a genuinely new idea. The large new idea, however, will need to be explored before its true value is known. And so, the creative artist will repeat, making use of this new idea again and again.



We argued that in *Cards on the Table* Christie was exploring a new idea – an idea that had been simmering in her mind since her first books – the idea that a whodunnit could be written to be solved on the basis of psychological clues alone. We argued that Christie's experiment with such purely psychological clues was something of a noble failure. We might have been inclined, had we been in Christie's position, to give up on the idea, but Christie was made of a different metal. *Appointment with Death* again explores the possibilities afforded by psychological clues. The novel is, however, not a single but a double repetition. It not only continues the exploration of the possibilities within the whodunnit genre of psychological clues, it also repeats the general set-up of *Dumb Witness*, first published in 1937. In both novels the victim is a domineering woman who exerts excessive power over her family. In both novels there are some outside the family who might have a motive for murder. In a harsh mood, one might say that *Appointment with Death*, and *Dumb Witness* each provides a different (and somewhat arbitrary) solution to the same puzzle. But Christie is not Ariadne Oliver. The 23 detective novels that she has written by 1938 are not 'all exactly the same

really'. Many of her novels are highly original. But, as with most creative artists, Christie does repeat: there are themes with variations.

In *Appointment with Death* Poirot has an ally in his psychological interests: Dr Gerard. Dr Gerard is a French psychiatrist whose fame seems extraordinarily extensive. Even the rather crude and socially ambitious Lady Westholme seems to have heard of him. Sarah King, the young doctor barely out of medical school, is well acquainted with his radical ideas about schizophrenia – whatever they may be. As a foil to both Poirot and Gerard, Christie has created Colonel Carbury, a senior British soldier who is responsible for deciding whether Mrs Boynton died of natural causes or whether it is a case of murder. He is a kind of local coroner in what was then the



British protectorate of Transjordan (now mostly in Jordan). Colonel Carbury is the no-nonsense military Englishman who speaks in rather clipped tones – a type that Christie is fond of portraying. Carbury asks Poirot to investigate and help him decide whether Mrs Boynton's death is suspicious. Carbury has no time for the airy-fairy business of psychoanalysis or psychiatry. Dr Gerard's line of business, Carbury says, is: 'Loony bins'. He goes on to say: 'Passion for a charwoman at the age of four makes you insist you're the Archbishop of

Canterbury when you're thirty-eight. Can't see why and never have, but these chaps explain it very convincingly'. When Carbury asks how Poirot is going to find out who killed Mrs Boynton, if indeed it were murder, Poirot replies: 'By methodological sifting of the evidence, by a process of reasoning'. 'Suits me' says Carbury. Poirot continues: 'And by a study of the psychological possibilities'. Carbury is less happy with that. 'Suits Dr Gerard, I expect.' He goes on: 'after you have sifted the evidence ... and paddled in psychology – hey presto! – you think you can produce the rabbit out of the hat?'

As a result of Carbury's scepticism about psychology Poirot insists that psychological evidence can be convincing to a rational person. At the beginning of the long denouement, which stretches over three and a half chapters, or almost 20% of the novel, Poirot says: 'My arguments are mainly psychological'. Carbury responds with a sigh: 'I was afraid they might be.' 'But they will convince you' Poirot reassures him. 'Oh, yes, they will convince you'.

Poirot starts his analysis with the statement that his arguments are mainly psychological. A few pages later he finishes the first part of his analysis with the words: 'That is the psychology! Let us now examine the facts.' So what use has he made of the psychology in those few pages? The answer is, very little. Most of those pages cover what Poirot would call facts. The only psychological point is that Raymond Boynton, one of the victim's step-children, was in a 'condition of great nervous excitement' around the time of the murder. This psychological insight plays no part in unravelling the mystery.

In the following 30 pages Poirot considers most of the suspects one by one, in classical manner but, unlike in the classic trope, he shows, just as he did in *Dumb Witness* that almost any of the suspects could have committed the murder. Perhaps this is the point that Christie wanted to make: that it was not possible to solve the murder by relying on the facts. And so, at the beginning of Part II, chapter 18, Poirot says: 'We have taken the facts ...we have heard the evidence. There remains – the psychology.' He goes on to say: '.. the most important psychological evidence concerns .. the psychology of Mrs Boynton [i.e. the victim] herself ..' We see here that Christie is experimenting with different ways of making use of psychological



Petra

clues. In *Cards on the Table* Christie explored the possibilities of psychological profiling of the murderer: can one deduce the murderer's psychology, and hence identify the murderer, from the nature of the crime? In *Appointment with Death* she attempts to use the psychology of the victim as the key to solving the puzzle.

The most important aspect of Mrs Boynton's psychology is that she wants to control members of her family and prevent them from enjoying themselves. Yet, on that fateful afternoon, she had positively encouraged her family to go on a pleasant walk without her. There must be a psychological explanation. In order to understand this Poirot is helped by Sarah King's assessment of Mrs Boynton. Sarah, in a burst of anger and insight, sees Mrs Boynton as ineffectual. 'To be born with such a lust for power ... and to achieve only a petty domestic tyranny' Sarah thinks to herself. She then goes up to Mrs Boynton and says: 'You like to make yourself out a kind of ogre, but really, you know, you're just pathetic and rather ludicrous.' Poirot concludes that the reason why Mrs Boynton uncharacteristically encouraged her family to enjoy themselves and leave her alone was because in response to Sarah's taunt, she has found an opportunity to harm and control someone outside her family. This 'someone' would then have a motive for murder.

In addition to this interest in the psychology of the victim Poirot also makes negative use of psychological profiling of the murderer, as he did also in *Dumb Witness*. He endorses Dr Gerard's claim that Ginevra Boynton could not have been the murderer because, had she murdered, she would have murdered in a flamboyant way, 'never this cool, calm logic'. He bases this flimsy argument on Ginevra's psychological condition.

Is the psychological approach to clues in *Appointment with Death* any more successful than it has been in the two earlier novels? The psychological profiling, as before, is unconvincing. Ginevra cannot be dismissed as the murderer on grounds of psychology: first, she may have been playing a part (indeed she goes on to have a

successful career as an actor); and second, even were she not playing a part, it would still have been psychologically possible for her to have committed murder in the way in which Mrs Boynton was killed. As for the psychology of Mrs Boynton, this can play no significant part in any reader's solving of the puzzle. Mrs Boynton's uncharacteristic behaviour in encouraging her family to leave her and enjoy themselves needs explanation, of course. The apparently true explanation – that she wanted to be alone that afternoon to threaten, and enjoy power over, one of the other people staying near Petra – provides only the weakest support for a solution that would have to be arrived at on different evidence. Furthermore, given the information available to the reader, a much more likely explanation is that she wants to talk with her daughter, Ginevra, without the rest of her family being present. For, although she encouraged most of her family to leave her for the afternoon, she forbids Ginevra to leave. Ginevra almost rebels but finally gives in to her mother's will. The best solution to the whodunnit is that Ginevra murdered her mother. She had motive and opportunity, and there are positive clues (that turn out to be misdirections). The syringe used for the murder was taken from Dr Gerard's tent, and replaced. Dr Gerard says that whilst in his tent delirious with an attack of malaria, he dreamt of Ginevra. Ginevra lets slip that she heard Dr Gerard speak her name whilst he was asleep. Did Ginevra visit his tent while he was delirious in order to replace the syringe?

There are many other reasonable solutions – that is solutions for which there is motive, opportunity and some clues. Carol Boynton suggests that the syringe mark on Mrs Boynton's dead body is the mark of a pin. When asked by Poirot to swear on her salvation that she did not kill her step-mother she answers slightly evasively: 'I swear .. I never harmed her'. Why did she not say she never killed her? Perhaps in her view, given her step-mother's condition and character, killing was not harming. Furthermore Carol is seen throwing a syringe into a stream. The case against her brother, Raymond, is almost as strong. His falling for Sarah King provides him with a particularly strong motive to kill his step-mother. He leaves Sarah, on the fateful afternoon, to go back to the camp saying that there is something that he has to do to prove to himself that he is not a coward. And although it is apparently Carol who is seen throwing a syringe into a stream we learn that Raymond and Carol look so similar that they might be twins. Nadine Boynton, wife of Lennox Boynton and a trained nurse who mixes Mrs Boynton's digoxin drops, could well have been the murderer. And so it goes on. An acceptable case could be made for practically every suspect.

So, what clues are there to the true identity of the murderer? Only one. Mrs Boynton says, apparently to Sarah King, that she never forgets – 'not an action, not a name, not a face'. As Poirot much later points out, this response is not a relevant answer to what Sarah has just been saying to her. Furthermore while Mrs Boynton speaks these words, her 'basilisk eyes looked, not at Sarah, but oddly over her shoulder'. Much later we learn that Lady Westholme had probably been within earshot. It turns out that Mrs Boynton, who had been a prison warder, has recognised Lady Westholme as having once been a prisoner, and is about to use this knowledge to gain power over her. Lady Westholme is having none of it, and murders her. A

possible solution, but no better than many other possible solutions. One can't help but feel that it is all rather arbitrary.

So where does this leave the psychological clue? Despite Poirot's rhetoric it is the 'factual' clues that are the key to his solution. Christie has written three novels in quick succession exploring psychological clues within the whodunnit genre. In all three it is not the psychological, but the factual, clues that do the work. Will she continue with the experiment or will she conclude that psychological clues cannot work satisfactorily in a whodunnit?

One of the most interesting discussions in *Appointment with Death* concerns Poirot's views about whether those who murder wicked people should be punished. Sarah King, seeing the crippling effect of Mrs Boynton's power over her family, muses: 'Civilization is all wrong ... But for civilization there wouldn't be a Mrs Boynton. In savage tribes they'd probably have killed and eaten her years ago.' This issue is taken up more seriously by Nadine Boynton. Nadine asks Poirot to stop his investigation into Mrs Boynton's death and accept that it was due to natural causes. She explicitly refers to the case from *Murder on the Orient Express* in which Poirot lets the murderer off principally because the victim was such an evil man. Nadine argues that Mrs Boynton was also evil. 'The moral character of the victim has nothing to do with it' Poirot states, directly contradicting the view he took in *Orient Express*. Why should Poirot not extend the same leniency to any murderer of Mrs Boynton that he showed in the case of the *Orient Express*? 'That case was – different' Poirot says, but he refuses to explain why. 'I will not condone murder! That is the final word of Hercule Poirot.'

Poirot, it seems, may be extremely logical in his approach to solving murder mysteries, but he appears dogmatic and incapable of sustaining rational argument when the issue turns to matters of ethics.

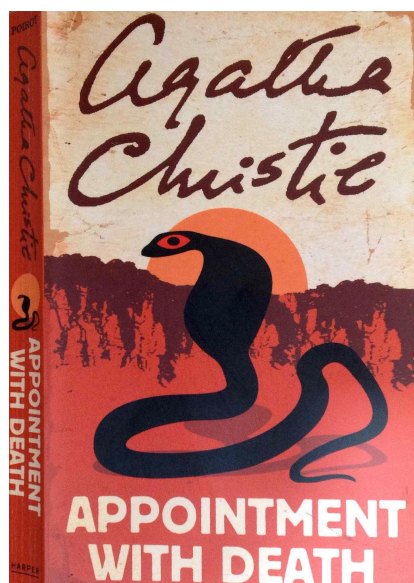


Photo credits

<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/henri-matisse/blue-nude-iv-1952>

<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/henri-matisse/blue-nude>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transjordan>

Petra: <http://www.topvisitplaces.com/the-ancient-world-petra/>

[TH]