

Death Comes As the End

[Warning: plot spoilers to this novel and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*]



Statue of Memi and Sabu, Old Kingdom, Dynasty 4, ca. 2575–2465 B.C.
The Metropolitan Museum Of Art Collection, NY, USA

Yet again Christie does something completely new. She wrote an historical murder mystery in 2000 BC Egypt on a farm near Thebes. The idea was clearly to show that human nature has not changed in 4000 years. Although we now have telephones, cars and automated farming, the essential human psychology is identical to our ancestors from the Middle East. The same passions and jealousies still rule our lives and are the motives for crimes, like murder.

Christie had a great knowledge and interest for archaeology. As a young girl she was a debutante in Cairo in 1910, staying for three months at the Gezira Palace Hotel. It was cheaper for her cash-strapped mother than doing the season of 50 Balls, in London. So as a teenager, Miss Agatha Miller had seen the Pyramids. Later, as a successful author, after her divorce from Archie Christie, she enjoyed visiting archaeological digs in Mesopotamia, which is where she met her second husband, Max Mallowan {see *Murder in Mesopotamia* trivia}. It was Max's friend, the Egyptologist, Stephen Glanville {see Trivia} who persuaded her to try this historical idea, and encouraged her throughout.

Christie tried too hard to put in loads of detail about Egypt in 2000 BC , so there are patches of over-careful writing in this book, which make it a less rollicking read than most. It is too scholarly about the customs, food, language, types of clothing and writing on papyrus. These details get in the way of the action. Usually, Christie sets her books exactly contemporaneously, which makes them an interesting longitudinal study of English Society from 1920s-1970s, since she wrote for half a century. Christie casually mentioned country houses, butlers, ladies maids and teas on the lawn without bothering to describe the exact servant roles or the courses of food consumed, because everyone reading her books would simply *know*.

It is rather ironic that there was constant general criticism of Christie's genre at the time, was that it was 'too low brow'. In comparison, Dorothy L Sayers, an Oxford Fellow at Somerville, wrote 'high brow' detective novels: Lord Peter Whimsey litters every sentence with Classical quotes. Yet when Christie pens a careful 'high brow' recreation of ancient Thebes, it somehow doesn't work.

The plot is rather straightforward. Imhotep, a man well past the prime of life with three grown up married children, upsets the family dynamics by deciding to take a nubile concubine, Nofret. Imhotep's own wife died many years previously. Nofret irritates everyone except Imhotep by wielding her power. The family, who all live under one roof, unite against her. A clever young scribe, Kameni, from Imhotep's other estate discovers complex fraud and comes in person to ask Imhotep to sort it out. Imhotep leaves for his other estate, inexplicably leaving *both* Kameni and Nofret behind, in the family house, where she is loathed. Surely Kameni should have accompanied his master to the other estate to explain the evidence of fraud? In the four months Imhotep is away, Nofret manages to goad Kait, Imhotep's daughter-in-law, into hitting her. Nofret informs Imhotep, via the scribe [Kameni] who writes a letter. Imhotep is so angry with his daughter-in-Law for hitting his concubine, he sends a letter threatening to disinherit his sons and their families. Nofret is in love with Kameni. Did they plan all this together, to get the old man's estate, and then live happily ever after, after Imhotep's death, having successfully disinherited his sons? This is never discussed in the book, but is a plot of another Christie. The twist comes when it is *Nofret's* body that is discovered.

Ancient, blind Esa, Imhotep's mother, is suspicious of Kameni: 'You have a purpose in remaining here.' This part of the plot is never explained. One can speculate that Kameni and Nofret planned this together, and then Kameni fell in love with Renisenb, and broke off his relationship with Nofret?

There are very few real clues to the murderer: Renisenb met Satipy coming back from the Tomb: Satipy said she went to find her husband, Yahmose 'but there was no one there'. Satipy was in a state of shock having discovered Nofret's body. Renisenb touched Nofret's 'cold, stiff cheek': this tells the reader that Nofret died earlier, as rigor mortis had already set in, so it could not have been Satipy that had just killed her. Rigor mortis sets in 2-6 hours after death. It is faster when ambient temperatures are higher, like summer in Egypt, but forensic pathology was unknown to the ancient Egyptians, although I suspect their expert embalmers knew much, and

were highly skilled. I had imagined an embalmer might come into the story to be the detective, but there is no detective at all. Again this is a Christie first: a murder mystery without any amateur or professional detective. Christie completely relies on the *reader* to solve this riddle of the sands.

Yahmose had an alibi with his brother, Hori, and visa versa, looking at irrigation canals 'for an hour'. No one thinks to ask what everyone was doing earlier in the day. There was no methodical cross-questioning from detectives with 'little grey cells'. Anyone except Renisenb, Satipy or housebound Esa could have pushed Nofret off the cliff path, or she may have tripped, or been frightened by a cobra and jumped. It may not have been murder at all.

The easiest way to solve the mystery is to know of Christie's passion for Shakespeare. Christie also wrote *Curtain* at about this time, based on another Shakespeare play, although *Curtain* did not get published until 1975, the year before Christie's death. *Death comes as the End* can be seen as the Macbeth-remake. Yahmose and Satipy, are in the exact position of ancient Theban MacBeths; a young, ambitious, ruthless couple. Imagine Macbeth set in ancient Egypt, and then everything falls into place.

Lady Macbeth first puts the idea of murdering the Scottish King into Macbeth's head to further his ambition. When Macbeth refuses to do it, she upbraids him with 'And live a coward in thine own esteem'? When the family in *Death comes as the End* find out that their father plans to disinherit them, it is Satipy who encourages the brothers to kill Nofret with 'a knife in the heart'. Satipy, in a very lady Macbeth speech, roundly upbraids Yahmose, her husband, and Sobek, her brother-in-law: 'What have you got in your veins..Milk? Yahmose, I know, is not a man!...I swear by Ra, I am a better man than either of you.

Yahmose refused to murder Nofret, just as Macbeth does, initially.

In Act 1 scene V, Lady Macbeth says 'make thick my blood, Stop up th'access and passage to remorse....Come to my woman's breasts And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers'.

In Macbeth, after the murder of King Duncan, Lady Macbeth says:

'These deeds must not be thought
After these ways; so, it will make us mad.'

However Lady Macbeth clearly ruminates upon it, since Act V scene 1 has the famous sleepwalking scene. A doctor has been called in to watch this 'great perturbation of nature', with Lady Macbeth performing the action of 'washing her hands' and saying 'Here's the smell of the blood still'. The doctor says:
'infected minds

To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.'

After the death of Nofret, Satipy goes to pieces: 'definitely was different..a nervous, shrinking gait'.

Yahmose specifically asks Renisenb if Satipy has confided anything to her:

'And she has said nothing to you – you are sure?'

They then discuss whether the other sister in Law or grandmother or Henet might know what ails Satipy. Yahmose asked Renisenb to glean and report back, acting the part of a concerned husband. He tried to seed the idea that Satipy was going odd 'Before Nofret's death', although Renisenb in her naïve, honest way replied 'I did not notice it until afterwards.' Renisenb never asks herself *why* Yahmose, her brother, might want to get everyone to believe Satipy was in a state of severe terror *before* Nofret's death, not afterwards. Just like Lady Macbeth, Satipy has 'been calling out in {her} sleep-' : 'What did I say?' Satipy's 'eyes ...dilated with terror'. She was terrified that she would disclose Yahmose's dark and terrible secret, consciously or unconsciously.

By Act V scene 5, Lady Macbeth is dead although you never know how: one suspects she has committed suicide. Renisenb and Hori, both happen to see Satipy 'stiffen in her tracks...as Yahmose sprang towards her, she screamed...and plunged forward off the edge, headlong to the rocks below....' It is exactly at the same spot on the cliff path, where Nofret fell to her death. Yahmose says Satipy was looking terrified at the revenging spirit of Nofret on the path, in the empty air, and so chose to plunge to her death. In fact, Yahmose was about to push her off, although he says he leapt to try to save her.

The idea of Nofret's revenging spirit killing Satipy is rather reminiscent of Banquo's ghost appearing at the banquet scene to Macbeth, who had just commanded Banquo's murder before the supper. Macbeth says 'never shake thy gory locks at me' to the spirit of Banquo, sitting in the empty chair at the feast.

The third clue that it must be Yahmose, is the poisoning of the wine, drunk by both the brothers: Yahmose and Sobek. Yahmose survives, Sobek dies. It is a truth universally acknowledged that if a character almost dies in an Agatha Christie, but does not, they are the murderer, trying to redirect suspicion away from themselves [see *Peril at End House*, *Seven Dials Mystery*]. The shepherd boy, Yahmose's devoted servant, gives evidence that he saw Nofret's spirit, from an accurate description of her jewellery and dress, 'standing over the wine jar'. This augments the family's suspicion that Nofret's spirit is revenging herself upon them all. However, the poor herd boy, himself, is dead by morning, so avoiding further crosses questioning about the details of his story from the intelligent Esa, who might have got the truth out of him.

Like Macbeth {Act 3.iv}, Yahmose is already in blood 'stepped in so far that should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go o'er', and so kills Ipy by drowning him, and Henet by suffocation in the linen cupboard, since he suspects they both know the truth.

The most vivid character in the book is ancient Egypt, whom Christie does bring to life in every sense of colour, sights, touch, fragrances and sounds. The farm is described: a 'porch with its gaily coloured columns... the big central chamber, with its coloured frieze of lotus and poppies' to the back of the house and the women's quarters. The food they eat: 'A smell of roasting ducks', or 'a smell of leeks and garlic

and various spices', 'baking batches of triangular loaves in the kitchen'. The garden the six grandchildren play in has 'oleanders and jasmines and shaded by sycamore fig trees'. The crops grown and the farming calendar, starting each year with the inundation of the Nile, bringing fertile mud back to the fields, then winter when the wheat is sown, and summer as it grows to harvest. "Bushels of spelt and barley...the crop was paid for in oil..." The methods of transport: 'the barge with its great square sail coming fast up the river... then the loud salutations that etiquette demanded'. Their possessions: round-topped travelling trunks, 'Her best pleated linen gown'. The common customs: 'He had poured the libations, burnt the incense and offered the customary offerings of food and drink'. 'Death is the chief source of wealth here in Egypt. Death bought the jewels you wear, Nofret. Death feeds you and clothes you.'

The other interesting aspect of this novel is the discussions about men and women and their different roles in life. There are radical ideas about independently thinking women, as seen through Renisenb's eyes. In a farm in Thebes in 2000 BC the women had their quarters at the back of the house, and their job was to oversee the household slaves, and care for their own children. Renisenb is back in the family home, after 8 years of a happy marriage that has ended because her husband has died. She has a 4year old daughter. It is easy to see the parallel with Christie's own life. Agatha Miller and Archie Christie were married in 1914, but spend most of the four war years apart. In 1926 Archie Christie told Agatha he wanted a divorce, when their daughter was 6 yrs old. Mrs. Christie was alone with her little girl. Renisenb 'felt stifled... encircled by this persistent and clamorous femininity. Women – Noisy, vociferous women! A houseful of women- never quiet, never peaceful- always talking, exclaiming, saying things – not doing them!'... this clacking of tongues, this busy, incessant fussiness.

Renisenb shook her head violently 'I am a person as well as a woman' she thought. Christie stamped her own personality on her life: ensuring her prolific output as an author, as well as being a 'single mother'.

[SH]