

## The Hollow 1946

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

*The Hollow* might be read as a novel about differing views of life's priorities.

The priority for Gerda Christow is her husband, John. She adores and admires him and she dedicates herself to being his home-maker. First and foremost she is his wife; second she is the mother of their children.

John Christow is a doctor with both a Harley Street and a hospital practice. There are four women in his life: his wife, Gerda; Henrietta Savenake, with whom he is having an affair; and Veronica Cray, whom he once almost married and who has suddenly come back into his life after 15 years absence. It is, however, the fourth woman who is the most important to him. She is Mrs Crabtree, a patient suffering from 'Ridgeway's Disease'. The priority in John's life is his work as a medical scientist and he is passionate about finding a cure for Ridgeway's disease. He thinks he is close to his goal. Mrs Crabtree has the will to live and the courage to be his guinea pig. He hopes that she will be the first patient to be cured of the disease.

Henrietta Savenake is the central character in the book. She is a sculptor and through her Christie explores the question of what is most important to an artist: her work or her closest relationships? John is the most important person for Henrietta. According to Poirot she 'had loved John Christow better than she loved herself.' But how deep are her feelings towards him? Early in the book John says to her: 'If I were dead, the first thing you'd do, with the tears streaming down your face, would be to start modelling some damned mourning woman or some figure of grief.' She is rather dismayed by this assessment. But after John is murdered she is put to the test. As she tries to feel the depth of grief that she would like to feel – her mind is drawn instead towards her art. The novel ends with her self-analysis:

"I belong not to myself, but to something outside me. I cannot grieve for my dead. Instead I must take my grief and make it into a figure of alabaster..."

Exhibit No. 58. 'Grief'. Alabaster. Miss Henrietta Savenake...

She said under her breath:

"John, forgive me, forgive me, for what I can't help doing."

For Henrietta, both her strength and her curse is that all experience is grist to the mill of her art. Christie was writing this novel during the Second World War when she was living in London. Her husband was in Egypt. Her daughter, a young mother. Her daughter's husband, Hubert Prichard, was in the British Army fighting in France. Just as Christie finished the novel Hubert was reported missing. News of his death came a couple of months later. Christie, through these difficult times, kept on writing her novels and plays.

Lady Angkatell is my favourite character. Poirot calls her '*Une originale*'. Under her charm and her mask of vague and elliptical speech is an intelligence as sharp

as Poirot's. Indeed she knows who the murderer is before he does. Poirot says to her:

'You yourself know the truth, then?'

Her eyes opened very wide.

'Oh, yes, I've known for a long time. I'd *like* to tell you. And then we could agree that – well, that it was all over and done with.'

She smiled at him.

'Is it a bargain, M. Poirot?'

It was quite an effort for Hercule Poirot to say:

'No, Madame, it is not a bargain.'

He wanted – he wanted, very badly, to let the whole thing drop, simply because

Lady Angkatell asked him to do so.

Lady Angkatell sat very still for a moment. Then she raised her eyebrows.

'I wonder,' she said. 'I wonder if you really know what you are doing.'

The priority for Lady Angkatell is to bring about the best outcomes. If pursuing truth or justice results overall in more harm she favours hiding the truth or side-stepping justice. To Inspector Grange she says that if Gerda is the murderer:

If you go and put her in prison and hang her, what on earth is going to happen to the children? .. It's bad enough for children to have a father who's been murdered – but it will make it infinitely worse for them to have their mother hanged for it. Sometimes I don't think you policemen *think* of these things.

For Poirot, as usual, the principal priority is the pursuit of truth. He will not give up his quest to discover the murderer despite Lady Angkatell's persuasively charming request that he does so. Just after the denouement Henrietta asks Poirot never to tell the Christow's 12-year old son, Terry, that his mother murdered his father. Poirot says to Henrietta:

To you it is unbearable that anyone should be hurt. But to some minds there is something more unbearable still – not to *know*. ...To the scientific mind, truth comes first. Truth, however bitter, can be accepted, and woven into a design for living.

Of the main characters we have one passionate about his medical scientific work, one for whom her art is most important, one who is driven by a pursuit for truth, one who acts to bring about what she hopes are the best consequences. It is only for Gerda that a human relationship, her love for her husband, is of most importance. And it is she who murders the very husband she adores. The lesson of this novel, it seems, is that it is better for the priority in life to be one's work, or truth, than to be driven by love. Even Lady Angkatell's morality, benign though it is in principle, would have resulted in the murderer remaining free to commit further murder.

But what about the plot, the clues, and the solution? *The Hollow* is barely a murder mystery at all. Although Poirot is a character his role as a detective is redundant. It is not surprising that Christie got rid of him when she re-wrote the novel as a play. Poirot is not even present when we learn the solution although he enters in time to prevent a second murder. This novel is a long way from a classic Christie whodunnit. There is no gathering of the suspects when the

detective reveals both the solution and his own brilliance. More importantly there are no decent clues, or at any rate too few to mention.

I think that Christie did have an idea for a rather original way of plotting and clueing the novel but, in contrast with many of her original ideas, she failed to bring it off, or even to make a serious attempt at developing it. Perhaps she lost interest in the idea or could not find a way of making it work. Perhaps the characters and their varying priorities in life took over. The clue to what I think was Christie's original idea is Poirot's account of how he started to solve the mystery:

I began to realize the truth as soon as I saw that the pattern was always designed not to implicate any one person but to implicate *everyone* – other than Gerda Christow. Every indication always pointed *away* from her.

Often in a whodunnit a murderer will try and plant clues to implicate someone else. The idea here, however, is not that the false clues lead *towards* someone but rather that they lead *away* from the actual murderer. Think of it like a radial set of roads leading away from a city. One particular road may link London and Edinburgh; a second London and Dover; a third London and Southampton; a fourth London and Bristol. If each of these 'roads' represents a clue, then after the first clue one might think *Edinburgh*. After the second, *Dover* etc. And as each clue leads to a different destination, to a different person, no solution is satisfactory. And then the sudden insight: what is common to all these clues is *London*. The murderer, or an accomplice, attempts to conceal the truth but does not wish to implicate any other person. This is done by setting a number of misleading clues no two of which implicate the same person but each seeming to exclude one particular person. Christie's idea, I think, was that in such a scenario an astute reader, but only an *astute* reader, would realise that the murderer must be that one particular person. The murderer's signature as it were is there in the pattern of the false trails.

The problem with such a plot is that the only value to the murderer in false clues is if they provide sufficient evidence to identify someone else as the murderer. If they fail to do this there is no point in them. For the reader such false clues are equally unsatisfactory. There are various vague clues pointing to specific people. Henrietta's characteristic doodle was drawn on the table in the pavilion by the swimming pool at a time when, she says, she was not there. Veronica's fox cape and the boxes of matches that she borrowed are also found in that pavilion. Lady Angkatell had a gun hidden in her basket of eggs but tried to hide that fact and can give no explanation of why she had the gun. Lady Angkatell reminds Henrietta to hide the holster of the gun used to kill John – suggesting (wrongly in fact) that Lady Angkatell thinks that Henrietta is the murderer. But these clues do not, as Poirot seems to suggest, lead away from one person, they are simply rather insubstantial clues each implicating a different person. Like so many unsatisfactory whodunnits there are as good reasons for suspecting one person as there are to suspect someone else. Although there is, as it were, a clue to *Edinburgh*, another clue to *Dover*, another to *Southampton* and another to *Bristol*, none of these are clues *away* from *London*. They are simply not clues *to London*, but then there are not clues to many other cities either.

There is only one clue that might lead the reader to the correct solution. On several occasions Poirot makes the point that when he arrived at the swimming pool immediately after the murder he thinks the whole has been staged and that the death is a fake. He arrived to see Gerda standing near the pool, gun in hand, and a dying man lying at her feet. It turns out that a different gun had been used to shoot the man. This scene struck him as like a stage set that had been planned to be seen. It did not look, Poirot thought, as though he had simply stumbled on the moment of a murder. If the scene had been staged then there is only one person who could have staged it, and that is Gerda herself. Although this line of reasoning might, in retrospect, be convincing, a reader who has followed this reasoning will have no sense of certainty. There are other explanations for what Poirot saw – other possible murderers.

All in all, as a whodunnit, this is unsatisfactory and one of Christie's least convincing.

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Christie's interests in writing this novel seem to have focussed more on the characters and their passions than on the puzzle and its solution. Poirot is significant only in that he represents, along with the Christow's 12-year old son Terry, a person whose passion is truth. But we do gain further insights into Poirot's moral world. When Gerda realises that Henrietta knows that she murdered her husband she puts poison in Henrietta's tea. Poirot, suspecting the poison, stops Henrietta from drinking the tea. He places her teacup back on the tray but not in its original position. Gerda comes back into the room and picks up what she thinks is her cup but is in fact the poisoned cup. Poirot does not stop her and she dies from the poison a short while later. Henrietta asks Poirot whether he meant Gerda to die. He denies that he did. "I did not *know* that there was anything in your teacup. I only knew that there *might* be. And when the cup was on the tray it was an even chance if she drank from that or the other – if you call it chance." This response is pure sophistry. Poirot could easily have prevented Gerda from drinking the poison. The fact that there was a 50% chance that she would have chosen the unpoisoned cup is scarcely relevant. I suppose that when he said: 'if you call it chance' he meant to imply that it might have been God's will. So his defence of his behaviour might be that he left it for God to decide whether Gerda should live or die. But in that case should he not have left it for God to decide whether Henrietta should die instead of intervening to save her? Poirot must take responsibility for failing to prevent Gerda's death when he could so easily have done so.

Immediately after the passage quoted above Poirot says: "I say myself that an end such as this is merciful. For her – and for two innocent children." Although he is careful not to say that this view – that Gerda's death was merciful – was the reason why he did not save her, it is a better reason than the one he gave. But again it is unconvincing. His view presupposes that if she were to face the process of the criminal justice system she would necessarily have been hanged and that that would have been a worse death. But this might not have been so.

Her defence lawyers might have successfully argued for some diminishing of her responsibility that would have saved her life. Even a relatively small chance of her not being hanged would render Poirot's failure to save her life morally problematic. In some novels Poirot enables the murderer to evade justice through committing suicide. But Gerda is not wanting to commit suicide – she kills herself accidentally. So perhaps the best defence for Poirot's inaction is that it is better for Gerda's children not to know that their mother murdered their father. This might have been Lucy Angkatell's view but it is completely inconsistent with Poirot's insistence that it is truth and not comfort that is of most importance.

We see once again that Poirot is not only willing to take the law into his own hands but also that despite his high intelligence his moral reasoning is poor and inconsistent. In this novel he takes it upon himself to decide that for Gerda her life's priority should be her death.

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