

After the funeral

1953

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

As he plans the denouement Poirot reflects: 'it is natural to me to be right – it is a habit I have!' A little later he says that a piece of evidence may not in fact exist:

'I have only deduced its existence from various scraps of conversation. I may,' said Poirot in a completely unconvinced tone, 'be wrong'.

Inspector Morton suggests that it is rare for Poirot to be wrong and Poirot agrees but admits that it has happened. Morton replies:

'I must say I'm glad to hear it! To be always right must be sometimes monotonous.'
'I do not find it so,' Poirot assured him.

Poirot's intellectual arrogance may be justified, but not his moral confidence. Shortly before the conversation quoted above Morton rightly suggests that Poirot bears some responsibility for the attack on Helen Abernethie, an attack that might well have resulted in her death. Poirot had brought all the suspects together knowing that one was a killer and that Helen had seen something odd, something that she could not quite remember, something that might identify the killer. Morton makes Poirot's responsibility clear: it is as a result of gathering the suspects, he suggests, that Helen Abernethie was attacked. But Poirot will have none of it. In a breathtaking denial of his own culpability he suggests that Helen Abernethie herself is to blame because she had had the temerity to want to tell her lawyer what she remembered rather than telling it to Poirot.

This is not the first time in Christie's *oeuvre* that Poirot has borne some responsibility for causing, or failing to prevent, an attack, nor will it be the last time, but it is the first time that he is challenged. Unfortunately Inspector Morton has little more than a walk-on part and appears in no other novel. He deserves a larger role: he is one of the few characters in Christie who can stand up to Poirot.

In a significant conversation almost half way through the novel, the art dealer, Mr Guthrie, is discussing paintings. He tells Susan, the niece of the victim, that 'only the other day, a small Cuyp was knocked down for a few pounds at a farmhouse sale'. This is the key to the plot of the novel, and, I suspect, the point from which Christie started to weave her story: a painting, bought for a few pounds, considered worthless by almost everyone, but in fact valuable. Suppose, Christie might have thought, the owner of the painting does not know its worth, but a friend does. Suppose further that the friend would inherit the painting on the owner's death. The friend would have a motive for murder that could be hidden from the reader.

To write a whodunnit using such a plot would require the author to create a number of suspects who do have a clear motive for killing the victim. A lesser writer than Christie might

have made the victim rich. The plot, in bare outline, could have been: a rich person – Person A - writes a will leaving her money to persons B, C etc. She leaves her apparently worthless collection of pictures, or some part of it, to a friend – Person X. X kills A for the painting that, unknown to everyone but her, is valuable. But X is not a suspect because everyone thinks that she gains very little from A's death. It is persons B, C etc. who are the suspects. As a whodunnit plot this is promising. The solution is hidden from the reader because the motive is hidden. Means and opportunity can be straightforward.

Part of Christie's brilliance is that she develops this idea much further and in so doing writes a richer novel. In Christie's novel, the killer does indeed stand to inherit a valuable painting – a Vermeer, no less – a painting that everyone else believes to be valueless. The victim (person A), however, is not sufficiently rich to provide a motive for anyone else to murder her. Christie adds a further layer to the plot. She creates a character - Richard Abernethie - who *is* rich and whose death *will* benefit the various main suspects (B, C etc.). Richard Abernethie dies, in fact, from natural causes. In Christie's plot, person X (the murderer) attends the funeral of Mr Abernethie disguised as person A (the owner of the Vermeer). At the gathering at Enderby Hall, after the funeral, she suggests that Richard Abernethie was murdered, and by implication that she could identify the killer. So when, on the next day, person A is found dead it looks as though she must have been killed by the murderer of Richard Abernethie. And so the suspects are those who would benefit from Richard Abernethie's death. This is a variation on a plot device that Christie has used before: that the main murder – the one that provides the principal motive – is made to look as though it is a secondary murder – one that is carried out in order to protect the identity of the killer. Christie's plot enables her to misdirect the reader who will look for the murderer amongst the beneficiaries of Richard Abernethie's death. It also gives two focal points for clues: the impersonation *and* the hidden value of the painting.

As so often, Christie walks, with consummate skill, that fine line between an obvious, and an arbitrary, solution. And she uses a refreshing variety of clues. These are carefully ordered and paced so as either to pass the reader by, or to tease him by advertising their importance whilst withholding their significance. Consider the impersonation. Miss Gilchrist is the lady companion to Richard Abernethie's sister, Cora Lansquenet. Miss Gilchrist has drugged Cora so that she is heavily sedated, and, disguised as Cora, attends the funeral. We learn in the first chapter that none of those gathered after the funeral has known Cora well. None has seen her for many years. The faithful old servant, Lanscombe, would hardly have known her now – she has grown so stout. Later, Poirot questions Helen, Cora's sister-in-law, as to how well each member of the family had known Cora. The reader is again told that none has known her well, but the significance of this is concealed by a classic Christie misdirection. Poirot seems interested not in the point that none knew her well but in finding out who knew her best. Elsewhere we learn that Miss Gilchrist has 'an indeterminate face'. The family solicitor, Mr Entwistle, says to Poirot that he might have passed Cora in the street without recognising her. He then goes on to describe what was familiar about her. It was her hairstyle and her behaviour that he recognised, or thought he did. The way she peered through her fringe 'like a rather shy animal', her abrupt way of talking, 'and a way of putting her head on one side and then coming out with something quite outrageous'. Christie is telling us, but without drawing attention to the point, that what seemed familiar about the impersonated Cora were aspects all of which could be imitated by an imposter.

In chapter 3 we are given a clue that would not be available to Poirot, nor to any other character within the novel, but is available to the reader. Miss Gilchrist has just impersonated Cora Abernethie at the gathering after the funeral. Christie writes a scene with Miss Gilchrist returning home in the train, dreaming of a bright future. Christie wants us to know that she is describing the ruminations of the person who, at the funeral, was thought to have been Cora. She refers to her in convoluted terms, such as 'a lady in wispy mourning and festoons of jet' and then identifies her as the woman who, at the gathering, had suggested that Richard Abernethie had been murdered. Christie cannot use her actual name (Miss Gilchrist) because that would immediately give away the plot and solution. That Christie does not refer to her as Cora, as would be natural, is a significant clue that in fact she is not Cora. Since this scene is not necessary to the plot I believe Christie wrote it in order for it to provide a clue to the impersonation. This is what might be called a *style* clue: the clue is in the author's phrasing and not in a fact within the story.

The teasing clue is that Helen Abernethie noticed something at the gathering that she cannot quite remember and that was in some way wrong. Gradually Christie gives us the information and ideas necessary to work out what that something was. We are told again and again that Cora had a habit of tilting her head to one side. She did so at the gathering after the funeral of Richard Abernethie just at the moment when she said 'But he was murdered, wasn't he?'. When Poirot questions Helen about what she noticed, and why she can't remember what it was, he suggests that perhaps something more important put it out of her head. Helen agrees: 'it was the mention of murder, I suppose'. Poirot suggests: 'It was, perhaps, the reaction of some particular person to the word "murder"?' Helen replies that she does not remember looking at anyone in particular. 'We were all staring at Cora'. Later Helen remembers what was wrong but she is hit on the head before she can tell Mr Entwhistle, or the reader. Before she is knocked out she does say that it was something about one of the people who were there at the gathering and that it came to her when she was looking in the mirror.

Ten pages earlier we are given what might be called a clue by analogy. There is a discussion, apparently of no importance, about how we see ourselves in mirrors. George says: 'nobody ever sees themselves – as they appear to other people. They always see themselves in a glass – that is – as a reversed image'. The younger generation play around, looking at themselves in the mirror. Only Helen, we are told, 'remained silent and abstracted'.

A reader who considers that what Helen saw was that the Cora at the gathering tilted her head to the wrong side, and that it was therefore not Cora, but an imposter, will be almost certain that this is indeed correct. But it is not at all easy for the reader to notice the clues, nor to draw from them the right conclusion.

Christie goes on to give us one utterly solid clue both to the impersonation and to the identity of the imposter. Miss Gilchrist says that the wax flowers 'look so right' on the malachite table. But the flowers had not been on the malachite table since Miss Gilchrist came, apparently for the first time, to Enderby Hall. Indeed the flowers had not been on display at all. They were, however, on the table at the gathering. Poirot, who 'observed as a cat may observe the twitterings and comings and goings of a flock of birds' notices Miss

Gilchrist's faux pas. Later he says that 'It is a profound belief of mine that if you can induce a person to talk to you for long enough, on any subject whatsoever, sooner or later they will give themselves away. Miss Gilchrist did.' Christie takes some care to try and ensure that the reader misses this solid clue. She is mistress of the stylistic misdirection. Seasoned Christie readers will know that when a character witters on in a stream of apparently trivial remarks it is likely that somewhere in the verbiage there is an important clue. But even for seasoned readers it is easy to miss the crucial point. Miss Gilchrist's mistake comes at the end of a series of fluffy remarks. Immediately after her statement about the wax flowers on the malachite table, Christie writes: 'But nobody was paying any attention to Miss Gilchrist's well-meant trivialities'. And then the atmosphere of light conversation rapidly changes as the relatives of Richard Abernethie argue over who is to get what from his house.

If Miss Gilchrist had been at the gathering, impersonating Cora, she must almost certainly be the murderer. But the problem of motive remains. Miss Gilchrist, it seems, has nothing to gain from Cora's death. Again Christie gives a variety of clues, of different categories, clues that what Miss Gilchrist does inherit – a painting that is perhaps of sentimental value, but otherwise apparently worthless – is in fact worth a great deal. We learn that Cora buys paintings cheaply at local sales in the hope of picking up a bargain. She also herself paints pictures of seaside resorts that are not very good and rather like picture postcards. We are given the background information that a Cuyp had recently been bought cheaply at a farmhouse sale. Miss Gilchrist's eyes, we are told, rested with particular fondness on a painting, apparently by Cora, of Polflexan harbour. Miss Gilchrist insists that Cora did not copy postcards but painted from life, and yet we learn that the painting of Polflexan harbour must have been from a postcard because it shows a pier that was destroyed before the picture was painted. When, just after the murder, the family solicitor, Mr Entwistle, visits the cottage where Miss Gilchrist lived with Cora there is a strong smell of oil paint. We learn that Miss Gilchrist's father was a painter and Miss Gilchrist herself can paint, and Miss Gilchrist makes it clear that she would like just one painting of Cora's 'as a souvenir'. None of these clues is substantial in itself but if the reader hits on the idea that one of the pictures is valuable, and has been painted over (by a picture of Polflexan harbour), and that Miss Gilchrist will come to own it, then the reader will be almost certain that she has hit on a motive for why Miss Gilchrist should benefit from Cora's death.

Unlike many of Christie's villains who murder for money, Miss Gilchrist is not a greedy person. She has one intense desire: to break free from being a lady's companion – little better than being a servant – and to own and run a teashop. Christie's psychological point is that murder can be committed for relatively little in terms of money if that money enables a person to do something that they passionately want to do. Mr Entwistle makes a related point early in the novel when he says that: 'The value of money is always relative. It is the need that counts.'

There is one further clue to the identity of the murderer that I suspect Christie did not intend. All the main characters are referred to by both their first names and their surnames, except for Miss Gilchrist who is always simply *Miss Gilchrist*. This may be Christie reflecting the class snobberies of the time. A person so little above a servant would not be dignified by a first name. But I wonder whether instead it is a reflection of the different relationship that the author has with her murderer from that she has with the other suspects. The murderer

has been thought about from the beginning: her character, the clueing, the scenes in which she appears, all being carefully plotted. The other suspects are a secondary issue to be thought about and managed after the central plot has been developed, and requiring much less consideration. This is not the only Christie novel in which the murderer is referred to in a different manner from the other characters.

There are weaknesses in the plot, of course. Although Christie goes to some lengths to make it plausible that none of Cora's family are aware of the impersonation at the gathering, I remain sceptical. Christie never mentions how little a person's voice and vocal articulation change over a life-time. Even if we accept that Miss Gilchrist's impersonation is not noticed it seems extremely unlikely that no one recognises in Miss Gilchrist, when she comes back to Enderby Hall, the person who at the gathering they thought was Cora. There are only a few days between these two events. Oddly, this possibility is never considered by Christie.

As a young woman during the First World War Christie worked in a pharmacy. She uses her knowledge of drugs to good effect in many of her novels. In this novel it is necessary for Miss Gilchrist to sedate Cora on the day of the funeral in order to prevent her from going to the gathering. But she must not kill her until later. At the denouement Poirot says to Miss Gilchrist: 'Easy to administer a sedative to her [i.e. to Cora] in her early cup of tea that will keep her unconscious for the whole day of the funeral whilst you yourself are playing her part at Enderby'. On this occasion I disagree with Poirot, and with Christie. It is not at all easy to find a dose that sedates reliably for so long without risking death, even with modern benzodiazepines, let alone with barbiturates and the other drugs available in the early 1950s.

In one very small way Christie, in her own voice, lies to the reader. Although in the main text she is impeccable in never saying that it was Cora Abernethie who was at the gathering, in the Abernethie family tree that faces the start of chapter 1, Christie states that those 'designated in **bold** were present at the funeral of Richard Abernethie'. Cora is designated in bold. A trivial point but, although the family tree is useful to the reader – I referred to it several times to remind me of who was who – there is little added value in specifically identifying those present at the gathering. It would have been easy for Christie to have avoided this small lie.

At the end of the novel Miss Gilchrist is found Guilty. After the verdict she becomes more grandiose in her ambitions, planning to run a *chain* of tea-shops. More significantly she does not realise that she is imprisoned and believes that she is about to open a new establishment in Cromer to be called *The Lilac Bush*. Entwhistle tells Poirot that he wouldn't be surprised if she is transferred from prison to a secure psychiatric hospital (Broadmoor). This leads to a discussion about the degree of responsibility that killers, who also suffer mental disorder, have for their act of killing – a theme to which Christie often returns. Poirot, who so conveniently denied any responsibility for the attack on Helen Abernethie despite knowing that he was bringing a killer and a witness together in the same house, is happy to agree with Entwhistle's assessment of Miss Gilchrist: 'Sane as you and I when she planned that murder. Carried it out in cold blood'. Poirot will not be supporting any plea for diminished responsibility.

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