

Ordeal by Innocence

1958

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

Christie was, I think, feeling tired of the whodunnit genre when she wrote *Ordeal by Innocence*. At first sight this novel appears to be a further iteration – another turn of the kaleidoscope - of the plot that involves reconsidering a case that seems already settled (see *Sad Cypress* and *Five Little Pigs*). As a whodunnit, however, this novel is not in the same class as the outstanding *Five Little Pigs*. Two central ideas form the plot: first that the person originally found guilty turns out to be guilty, and second that the person who actually does the killing is being manipulated, psychologically, to do so. Both these ideas have been used by Christie in previous writings and to much greater effect. Although the clues to the solution are there, they are not satisfying, and any of the main suspects could have been the murderer. So is *Ordeal by Innocence* simply Christie off the boil? I think not. It is, rather, that in writing this book her focus was not on the puzzle.

Christie's central interest in *Ordeal by Innocence* is *psychological*. Paradoxically, in so many of her novels, her principal detective, Poirot, talks of the importance of *psychology* but in fact solves the mysteries, in the main, using physical clues. In *Ordeal*, the main focus really is on psychology, and related moral concerns. The whodunnit puzzle simply provides the narrative structure for exploring the psychology. In the standard whodunnit, the typical Agatha Christie, there is a group of suspects, and the story revolves around the question of who, from amongst the suspects, is the murderer. The only role for those suspects who turn out to be innocent is that they might have been the killer. But the story of *Ordeal by Innocence* is the unfolding of the effects that coming under suspicion for murder has on human relationships.

All the suspects are members of one household. The dominant mother, Mrs Argyle, was murdered two years before the novel opens. The other members of the household are: Mrs Argyle's academic husband, Leo Argyle; their adopted daughter Mary, now married to Philip Durant; and four further children, none genetically related to each other, who have also been brought up by Mrs Argyle, although never officially adopted. They are all now grown up. Their names are: Hester, Michael (known as Micky), Jack (known as Jacko), and Christina (known as Tina). In addition there is Kirsten Lindstrom, a nurse by background who helped Mrs Argyle in bringing up the children, and Gwenda Vaughan who is Leo Argyle's secretary.

Shortly after Mrs Argyle's murder Jack was arrested, prosecuted, found guilty, sentenced to life imprisonment, and has since died in prison from pneumonia. All seems settled until Arthur Calgary, who had been out of the country for most of the two years since the murder, returns, and provides Jack with a cast-iron alibi. Driven by a passion for justice, Calgary takes the steps necessary to ensure that Jack will receive a posthumous royal pardon, and, as the novel opens, he is about to take the ferry across the river to the Argyle's house to give them the good news.

This plot raises the question of why Christie chose to centre the story around a murder reconsidered rather than, like the majority of whodunnits, around a murder being

investigated for the first time. In both cases the innocent suffer the ordeal of being under suspicion. In the case of a murder reconsidered the innocent can ask: 'why raise this again, causing us unfair suffering?' particularly when the previously convicted person has died, whereas in the case of a murder being investigated for the first time, although the innocent may suffer, the only way to stop this suffering is to find the real culprit. Christie may have chosen a murder reconsidered because she wanted the suffering of the innocent to take precedence over the solving of the murder. Another way of looking at this plot is to see it, contrary to what I suggested above, as another turn of the kaleidoscope of a plot around a case reconsidered: in other words that Christie became interested in the plight of the innocent suspects when thinking about how to further develop the plot of *Five Little Pigs*.

Another question that the setting of this novel raises is why Christie chose to write about a family of children brought up together but genetically unrelated. The answer may be that she wanted the opportunity to comment on the question of nature versus nurture. Mrs Argyle was a woman with a mission. She wanted to take children from homes where they were not loved and bring them up in comfort and with care. But she was very controlling, and, according to the two local family doctors, she overdid the beneficence. Dr MacMaster quotes with approval the idea (that he attributes to the Chinese): 'beneficence is to be accounted a sin rather than a virtue'. He goes on to give his account of the behaviour of mother cats. For a week or so after the birth of the kittens, he tells us, the mother is 'passionately protective'. But then she starts to resume her own life. She is still protective but no longer obsessed by her kittens. This is 'the normal pattern of female life'. Dr MacMaster then applies this story of cats to Mrs Argyle. He says: 'Well, with Mrs Argyle the maternal instinct was very strong, but the physical satisfaction of bearing a child ... never came. And so her maternal obsession never really slackened ... everything was the children ... The thing she didn't give them and that they needed, was a little plain, honest-to-goodness neglect.'

This is not the only reference to cats in the novel. In many of her novels, Christie likens one of the female characters to a cat. Almost always these characters are not sympathetic. For Christie, it seems generally to be the case that dogs are good and cats are bad. In *Ordeal by Innocence*, however, Tina, who is gentle, thoughtful and kind, is on many occasions likened to a cat, partly because she is 'a quiet, soft little creature' and partly because she is 'sleek' and 'elegant': 'Very dark, soft-voiced, big dark eyes and a rather sinuous grace of movement'.

In the parable of the mother cat, Dr MacMaster is acknowledging that upbringing – nurture – matters, even if in a rather negative way, and Leo Argyle muses to himself that environment 'could do a great deal' in the bringing up of children. In the main, however, it is the power of genetics that is emphasised throughout the book. The family solicitor, Mr Marshall, says, about the Argyle children: 'If environment counts for anything they should have gone far. They certainly had every advantage'. But, he implies, they did not go far. Leo Argyle thinks to himself: 'Within them [the Argyle children] ran none of the blood of [Mrs Argyle's] hard-working and thrifty forebears'. And Philip Durant thinks of Jack as 'One of those 'adopted children' with a bad heredity who so often go wrong'.

Genetics not only affects character but also relationships. Leo Argyle says to Philip Durant: 'It was an article of faith with [Mrs Argyle] that the blood tie didn't matter. But the blood tie *does* matter, you know. There is usually something in one's own children, some kink of temperament, some way of feeling that you recognize and can understand without having to put into words. You haven't got that tie with children you adopt.' Dr MacMaster had said something similar to Arthur Calgary: 'Only they weren't hers and Leo Argyle's own children. They had entirely different instincts, feelings, aptitudes and demands'. It is not only that the 'blood tie' is necessary in order for parents to understand their children, according to the characters in this novel, but it also affects parental love. When Superintendent Huish and his superior, the local Chief Constable, Major Finney, are discussing who the murderer might be, they consider Leo Argyle. Although Huish thinks Leo Argyle could have committed murder he says that he can't see Leo Argyle framing his son, Jack. Finney replies: 'It wasn't his own son, remember'.

The role of genetics in the formation of character and relationships is a significant issue in the novel but it is not the central theme.

At the start of the novel Arthur Calgary, who is keen to obtain the posthumous royal pardon for Jack believes that the only moral issue is justice. Since it has become clear that Jack was wrongly found guilty of murder, his innocence should be made public and he should be pardoned. But the family solicitor, Mr Marshall, says to Calgary: 'One has to look all around a subject There's the family to consider'. And then when Calgary visits the members of the family and tells them that he can provide the alibi for Jack none seems pleased. As he is about to leave he talks to Hester Argyle who asks: 'Oh, why ever did you come?' He says: 'I don't understand you. Don't you want your brother's name cleared? Don't you want him to have justice?' She replies: 'It's not Jacko who matters. It's *us!* ... It's not the guilty who matter. It's the innocent ... Don't you see what you have done to us all?' Gradually, Calgary realises that now all the Argyle household are wondering who did kill Mrs Argyle. He again visits Mr Marshall and admits: 'I thought that I was *ending* something .. but instead of *ending* something I was *starting* something'. A little later Calgary says: 'To go on year after year not knowing, looking at one another, perhaps the suspicion affecting one's relationships with people. Destroying love, destroying trust. .. It means .. that it is the innocent who are going to suffer .. what I have done has *not* served the cause of justice. It has not brought conviction to the guilty, it has not delivered the innocent from the shadow of guilt.'

The question of whether it is wise to investigate a possible case of murder years after all seems settled was raised in *Sleeping Murder* – written over a decade before *Ordeal by Innocence* (although not published until after Christie's death). In that novel, Miss Marple warns a different Gwenda - Gwenda Reed - against investigating the disappearance of her stepmother. This warning turns out to be justified when an innocent person is murdered as a direct result of Gwenda's investigation. Calgary's actions also lead to a further murder. In *Sleeping Murder* truth and justice weigh on the side of Gwenda's investigating the past, but the possibility of bad consequences weighs on the side of leaving well alone. In *Ordeal*, however, the argument is made that, from the point of view of justice alone it may be right to leave things as they are on the grounds that it is unjust for the innocent to become, and possibly remain, suspects for murder: to suffer 'ordeal by innocence'.

The effects of this ordeal rapidly take shape. Leo, the widower of Mrs Argyle is in love with his secretary, Gwenda – a love reciprocated. They had been planning to marry soon. But now that has become doubly problematic. First, they wish to keep their liaison secret as it would provide a motive for either of them to have killed Mrs Argyle. More importantly Leo is not certain that Gwenda did not commit the murder, and Gwenda knows that he is not certain. Hester is expecting to marry the local doctor, Donald. Donald believes it likely that Hester murdered her mother. He does not blame her. He wants to marry her even if she did murder her mother, but he feels he has to know. He all but asks Hester to confess. But Hester, when she realises that he is not certain that she is innocent, falls out of love for him, and contemplates committing suicide. Tina thinks that Micky may be the murderer, thus undermining their close relationship. Kirsten is worried and frightened. Since she is not actually one of the family, although is close to them all, she is concerned that the family might, out of convenience, try to pin the murder on her. Only Phillip, the husband of Mary seems not to be negatively affected by the situation. Although he wonders whether his wife is the murderer he finds the situation both amusing and stimulating. He sets about trying to solve the murder, and ends up by being killed.

The ordeal by innocence leads to a loss of trust and Christie seems to be saying that without trust close relationships are impossible. Gradually the message of the book expands and becomes darker. Hester says: 'one doesn't know what anyone feels, does one, really? I mean, what goes on behind their faces, behind their nice everyday words? ...It's frightening..' And Tina says: 'Sometimes .. I think one does not know anybody'. The uncertainty about what others are really like began, for the Argyle family, when Calgary's alibi made them all suspects for murder, but near the end of the novel this uncertainty takes on a life of its own leading to radical scepticism about the motives, desires and beliefs of others and undermining the ability to form close relationships.

There is a further step that could be taken: to be sceptical not only of knowing other people but also of knowing ourselves. For do we know how we would act in various situations that have not (yet) been realised? Christie does not explicitly raise this question but it seems likely that the person who turns out to have killed Mrs Argyle would never have thought themselves capable of such an act.

Christie, in the end, holds back from endorsing the radical scepticism that permeates the novel. The romantic in her leads her to avoid too bleak a conclusion. Calgary tells Hester that he is sure that she is innocent. On the novel's last page he says to her:

'You'll marry your young doctor. ..' Hester replies: 'Marry *Don*? .. Of course I'm not going to marry *Don*.' 'But you love him.' 'No, I don't think I do, really ... I just thought I did. But he didn't believe in me. He didn't *know* I was innocent. He ought to have known.' She looked at Calgary, 'You knew! I think I'd like to marry you.'

Christie seems to be saying that it is possible, despite everything we have seen in *Ordeal by Innocence*, for two people to build a relationship based on mutual trust. Such an ending, however, is a conjuring trick. Christie has pulled a white rabbit out of the black hat.

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