

The Anxiety of Influence: Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie

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Abstract

The detective stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie are well known throughout the world. Their stories have been translated into many languages. Both the authors have shown their skills in the presentation of characters and plot constructions, but we see a great similarity between these two eminent authors because Agatha Christie's creative activity has been influenced a lot by the detective stories of Arthur Conan Doyle.

Keywords: Similarity, Influence, Detective Fiction, Character, Plot, Structure, Style.

Introduction

The stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, two great names in the world of detective fiction, are famous for their characters, interesting plots and story-telling methods. Their celebrated creations are obviously Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, two world famous private detectives. Though these two authors differ from each other, there are many similarities between them. Both the authors' main characters and important recurring characters in their stories are in many ways similar. The plot and structure of the stories are also similar in many aspects. Agatha Christie has followed the trend set by Arthur Conan Doyle. She follows Doyle's style of the presentation of major and minor characters, idea of the plot construction and structure of story and story-telling method.

Objective of The Study

We know that there are some common features between Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. They have cultivated many common crops in the field of crime fiction. This article would show how Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has influenced Agatha Christie and how the creative charm of Agatha Christie has been curved by this influence.

Main Article

In his *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Harold Bloom points out that poets are hindered in their creativity by the ambiguous relationship with precursor poets. He thinks that a poet is inspired to write his poem by reading the poems of his predecessors. In order to ensure their place in this field, the new poets try to write like their predecessors. Only few poets can create original works or prefer their own creativity though there is a continuous pressure of the influence of the predecessors. Harold Bloom asserts, "Every poet begins (however 'unconsciously') by rebelling more strongly against the fear of death than all other men and women do." (1)

Human beings love to learn through imitation. When we try to do something, we try to follow our predecessors. Just as a student wants to follow his teacher and wants to be like his ideal teacher. When we start writing something, we follow our favorite author— his style of writing, structure of his writing, his vocabulary, his tone of sentences etc. But here is the problem. We can find in our writing the same voice, the same thought, the same structure of the writing of our favourite author. This type of influence of the previous author on the new author is, Harold Bloom says, anxiety of influence. We have also seen that Homer influenced Virgil, Virgil influenced Milton, Milton influenced Wordsworth and Wordsworth influenced many new poets later. Bloom has advised that in order to become a unique writer, one has to overcome this type of influence and overcome the framework of previous writer. One has to find out the originality for his writing. Because of the influences of the predecessors, it becomes very hard for a new poet to show his originality. New writers must



Avishek Saha
Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
Dinhata College,
Dinhata, Cooch Behar,
West Bengal, India

write in such a way that nobody can recognize the influence of the previous writers.

We know that when the stories of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot were written, science and technology did not develop a lot. So it was really very difficult for Holmes and Poirot to investigate the cases. Now science and technology have improved a great deal and at the same time the rules and process of investigation have also changed. Criminal laws have also been changed a lot. But still we have not lost our interest in Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. Advancement of science and technology could not affect the worldwide fame of these celebrated authors, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. Sir Doyle had started writing almost three decades before Christie started. Agatha Christie has her own idea and unique style, but still we can find many similarities between these two.

Sir Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle was born on May 22, 1859 in Edinburgh. He got Master of Surgery degree from the University of Edinburgh in 1881 and opened a clinic but he had no patients. Then Sir Doyle partially modelled his character Sherlock Holmes on his former university teacher Joseph Bell though Edgar Allan Poe's character C. Auguste Dupin influenced him greatly. Conan Doyle once said, "Each [of Poe's detective stories] is a root from which a whole literature has developed... Where was the detective story until Poe breathed the breath of life into it?"⁽²⁾ Robert Louis Stevenson recognized a great similarity between Joseph Bell and Sherlock Holmes: "My compliments on your very ingenious and very interesting adventures of Sherlock Holmes. ... Can this be my old friend Joe Bell?"⁽³⁾ Later Doyle's Sherlock Holmes made him a worldwide famous writer. From the day of his first appearance in 1887 to this day, Sherlock Holmes is very impressive to his readers.

Dame Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie was born on 15 September, 1890 in Torquay, Devon. This renowned English writer is known for her sixty-six detective novels and fourteen short story collections. She introduced one of the world famous detectives, Hercule Poirot in her first published book, *The Mysterious Affairs at Styles* in 1920. Besides Poirot, she created many detective characters. Miss Jane Marple is another detective character that has made Agatha famous throughout the world along with Poirot. Even after her death, Sophie Hannah continued the Poirot stories in her books— *The Monogram Murders*, *Closed Casket*, and *The Mystery of Three Quarters*. For her notable contributions to literature, in 1971, Agatha was made a Dame of the British Empire, one of the highest honours of Britain.

In the stories of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, the main characters and the recurrent characters are similar in many ways because their roles and purposes are very identical, though they sometimes differ from each other in their personalities. When Sherlock Holmes appeared first in 1887 in *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes was described as a private detective over six feet tall, very lean, with piercing grey eyes, black hair and a thin hawk-like nose. Later Sir Doyle gives us much information about

Holmes and lets us know of his personal life and habits. He is a good runner and very strong. He would enjoy his leisure by playing the violin. Holmes is very cool-headed and has a very strong personality.

The character of Hercule Poirot has appeared in thirty-three novels and sixty-five short stories. Poirot's name was derived from two other fictional detectives of the time— Marie Belloc Lowndes' Hercule Popeau and Frank Howel Evans' Monsieur Poirot, a retired Belgian police officer living in London.⁽⁴⁾ A more obvious influence on the early Poirot stories is that of Arthur Conan Doyle. Christie once confessed that she was writing in the Sherlock Holmes. Both Holmes and Poirot are not interested in women romantically. Holmes uses his intelligence and physical strength to solve cases. Poirot mainly depends on his little grey cells. Both Poirot and Holmes have their own reliable friends. They always prove themselves as superior to the Scotland Yard inspectors and both are very conceited persons. Sherlock Holmes represents the emblematic Victorian detective and Poirot stands for the private detective of the era.

John H. Watson is Sherlock Holmes's trustworthy companion. Watson received medical degree from the University of London in 1878, and was an assistant surgeon in the British Army. We see that Watson and Holmes share a rented flat in 221 B Baker Street and very quickly Watson gets involved in Holmes's cases. Holmes and Watson develop a strong relationship. They become complementary to each other. Watson performs the role of an efficient narrator in Sir Doyle's stories.

In Agatha Christie's stories, Arthur Hastings is an old friend of Poirot. Later Hastings becomes Poirot's good companion and helps him with cases in stories. Hastings often helps Poirot in various physical duties. Actually, Arthur Hastings has been introduced by Christie in accordance with the model of Sherlock Holmes's associate, Doctor Watson. Both often narrate in the first person and they served in the army. Both John H. Watson and Arthur Hastings are very aware of women's beauty and charm but they handle it differently. Watson and Hastings have a great similarity in their physical appearances. They "have a lot in common, and it may be believed that Agatha Christie based Hasting character by using Watson as an inspiration".⁽⁵⁾ Both of them are very good and honest friends of Holmes and Poirot. Arthur Hastings was "the Doctor Watson to Poirot" (6).

Mrs Hudson is the landlady of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson at 221 B Baker Street. She prepares meals for Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, does laundry, sends notes, telegrams and letters, shows clients in, etc. She treats Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson as her sons. She is really worried about Holmes's health. We see on other hand, Miss Felicity Lemon, Poirot's secretary is a young, ugly woman with excellent sense of fashion. As a secretary she helps Poirot in various ways, such as— answering the phone, handling finances and bills, booking train tickets, filling old cases etc. Indeed, both Mrs. Hudson and Miss Felicity Lemon play an important role in the lives of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. Both of

them care deeply about Holmes and Poirot despite their flaws.

Arthur Conan Doyle's Inspector G. Lestrade is an inspector for the Scotland Yards. Lestrade's relationship with Holmes is best described as that of a rivalry and admiration. Holmes likes to laughs at Lestrade when he misinterprets something at a case. He often assists him in many cases. On the other side, Inspector James Japp, in Agatha Christie's stories, is the most well-known one. He is a detective inspector for the Scotland Yards. He is described as a little, sharp, dark and ferret-faced man. We know that Agatha Christie's Inspector Japp is inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle's Inspector Lestrade. The qualities and descriptions of Arthur Conan Doyle's Inspector Lestrade and Agatha Christie's Inspector Japp are very identical. Both Lestrade and Japp are prideful, but Lestrade seems more conceited. They both appreciate the detective skills of Holmes and Poirot and become friendly with them.

In the stories of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, the plot constructions are very often same but in some ways different. Both the authors start their stories with a problem then they proceed to solve the problem and end with satisfactory solution of the said problem. Both Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie enjoy the worldwide fame, and Conan Doyle is undoubtedly the better crime fictionist of the two. Holmes is more famous than Poirot. He stands at the zenith of crime fiction glory. Agatha Christie will also be remembered for her crime fictions forever. She has a great skill of weaving mystery fiction. Christie had really herself drawn upon Sherlock Holmes' fictions in her earlier versions. She is nowhere near Arthur Conan Doyle, the great master of crime fiction, but the adventures of Poirot are no less agreeable and stand today as one of the finest works in the crime and detective fiction genre.

Sherlock Holmes is the central character in Arthur Conan Doyle's stories and Poirot, on the other hand, is the central character in Agatha Christie's stories. The role and purpose of Poirot in the stories of Agatha Christie are very similar to the role and purpose of Sherlock Holmes. Just as Dr. Watson is the partner of Holmes and accompanies him on his detective cases, Hastings is the partner of Hercule Poirot. Both Dr. Watson and Hastings serve almost the same purpose in their stories. Mrs. Hudson and Miss Lemon do not appear much in their stories. But just as Mrs. Hudson plays a big part in the main character's life, similarly Miss Lemon plays a vital role in Hercule Poirot's life. Lestrade is the inspector in Arthur Conan Doyle's stories. Agatha Christie has created also inspector Japp in his detective stories to do the same function as done by Lestrade.

So the characters in the stories of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie are in many ways similar. But Arthur Conan Doyle once thought that the stories of Sherlock Holmes overshadowed his more

important works and decided to kill the character off. The reaction of the public surprised Doyle very much and he returned Holmes once again. Agatha Christie, on the other hand, really enjoyed her great character, Hercule Poirot and sometimes we see her to replace some of her characters with new ones. But it is undeniable that her favourite characters were Hercule Poirot, Arthur Hastings, Miss Hudson and Inspector James Japp. However, all the characters in the stories of these two eminent writers are vivid and the plots are well constructed that create a continuous suspense in our minds. They both have used the same basic structure. One of the beauties of Christie's works is that usually all the facts and clues are staring at reader's face from the beginning. Hannah said, "At the start of each novel, she shows us an apparently impossible situation and we go mad wondering 'How can this be happening?' Then, slowly, she reveals how the impossible is not only possible but the only thing that could have happened." (7) We see that so many scientific inventions took place in the time of Christie and so she got the facilities of all of them but Doyle did not get these facilities.

Conclusion

The pleasant characters, and mysterious and entertaining plots of the stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie make their stories popular abidingly. But in many ways, Agatha Christie follows Doyle's style of the presentation of major and minor characters, idea of the plot construction and structure of story and the story telling method. Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* shows how the poets are hindered in their creative process by the ambiguous relationship they necessarily maintained with precursor poets. But every art form—music, painting, architecture and literature reflects the process of influence. Here we have seen that Doyle has curved the creative charm of Agatha Christie.

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