

Narrating Crime, Visualizing Justice: From Literature to Cinema in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*

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Abstract: Crime fiction has long served as a literary medium through which society examines the complexities of justice, morality, and criminal behaviour. Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* is one of the most influential works of detective fiction, as it presents a multifaceted narrative that challenges traditional notions of crime and punishment. The narrative revolves on the murder of Samuel Ratchett, who is progressively revealed to be the criminal responsible for the Armstrong kidnapping tragedy as the investigation progresses. The plot takes place on the luxury Orient Express. Christie moves beyond the traditional structure of detective fiction by introducing moral ambiguity and collective responsibility into the framework of crime. This paper examines how the novel narrates crime not merely as an act of individual deviance, but as a result of social injustice and emotional Trauma. The investigation conducted by the celebrated detective Hercule Poirot ultimately reveals that the murder was a collective act carried out by individuals connected to Armstrong family. Their actions emerge from a shared sense of injustice following the failure of legal institutions to punish the original perpetrator. The film *Murder on the Orient Express* has been the subject of numerous cinematic adaptations that visually reinterpret its central themes of crime and justice, as a result of its enduring popularity. These adaptations expand the ethical and emotional dimension of Christie's narrative by converting it into visual medium, these adaptations extend the ethical and emotional dimensions of the story, enabling audiences to engage more directly with the moral complexities surrounding criminal behaviour and retributive justice.

Keywords: *Crime Fiction, Criminal behaviour, justice, social injustice, Film Adaptation.*

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Introduction

Crime Fiction has historically functioned as a powerful literary medium for authors to examine issues of justice, morality, and societal structure. One of the most significant works in this genre is *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) by Agatha Christie. The novel presents a complex narrative in which the investigation of a murder become intertwined with broader ethical questions, dilemmas related to justice, accountability and moral evaluation. The narrative unfolds inside the confined space of the famous train journey across Europe, the story centres on the murder of Samuel Ratchett, eventually identified as Cassetti, the perpetrator of the tragic kidnapping and murder of Daisy Armstrong. In contrast to traditional detective fiction, where the resolution of the crime restores legal order, Christie complicates the interplay between crime and justice. Detective Hercule Poirot uncover that the murder of Ratchett was not the act of a single individual but a collective action carried out by passengers connected to the Armstrong family. The crime thus arises not only as an act of deviance but as a reaction to a perceived failure of legal institutions. As Poirot reflect during the investigation, the case present a troubling moral dilemma "There are two possible solution of this crime...both of them logical." (Christie 271). This statement highlights the central tension of the narrative the conflict between legal justice and moral

justice. The enduring popularity of *Murder on the Orient Express* has led to several cinematic adaptations, including the widely known film directed by Kenneth Branagh in 2017. Film adaptations transform Christie's investigation story into a visual medium that highlights spatial tension, performance, and emotional expression. The film visually reconstructs the ethical conflict that lies at the heart of the story. This paper examines how *Murder on the Orient Express* narrates crime as a product of social injustice and emotional Trauma and how film adaptations reinterpret these themes through visual storytelling. By analysing literary text and its cinematic representations, the study explores how the transition from narrative description to visual performance reshapes the audience's understanding of crime, justice, and collective responsibility.

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses sociological and adaptation theories to understand the intricate relationship between crime justice in *Murder on the Orient Express*. Initially Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory offers a helpful framework for unravelling the reason behind the group murder. According to strain theory, when opportunities or justice are not provided by legitimate social

structures, people may resort to criminal or reckless behaviour. The Armstrong family tragedy serves as a stark illustration of the legal systems imperfections in Christie's story. Those associated with Daisy Armstrong's family suffer from a profound sense of injustice and emotional distress as the criminal who killed her avoids punishment, leaving those connected to the family with a deep sense of injustice and emotional strain. The collective murder of Ratchett can be interpreted as a reaction to this psychological and social pressure.

The shift from novel to film can be analysed through adaptation theory, especially the contributions of Linda Hutcheon. Hutcheon contends that adaptations ought not to be perceived solely as replicas of original text but as reinterpretations that modify narratives in accordance with the conventions of a different medium. The transition from literary narration to cinematic representation in *Murder on the Orient Express* alters the audience's engagement with the mystery. The novel employs dialogue, testimony, and logical reasoning, through the film utilises visual composition, editing, and performance to express tension and ethical dilemmas. Collectively, these theoretical frameworks elucidate how Christie's narrative examines the connection between social injustice and criminal behaviour, while cinematic adaptations reinterpret the ethical intricacies of the story through visual storytelling.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions of detective fiction have long highlighted the genre's close connection to issues of justice, morality, and social order. Critics have noted that crime fiction not only entertains through mystery and suspense, but it also reflects broader cultural concerns about law, authority, and deviance. Agatha Christie's works were particularly influential in shaping modern detective fiction, and her novel *Murder on the Orient Express* is still one of the genre's most widely studied texts.

Tzvetan Todorov's structural analysis of detective fiction had a significant impact on early theoretical approaches to the genre. According to Todorov, detective fiction operates through a dual narrative structure that consists of two interconnected stories: the story of crime and the story of investigation. According to him, the reader learns about the crime only indirectly through the detective's reconstruction and interpretation. This narrative model is especially evident in *Murder on the Orient Express*, where the murder occurs before the story begins and the plot develops through Poirot's systematic interrogation of the passengers. The novel's structure specifically encourages readers to engage intellectually in the process of solving the mystery.

The studies of popular narrative forms by John G. Cawelti highlight how detective fiction follows recognizable narrative formulas while still allowing room for thematic innovation. Cawelti observes that mystery narratives often rely on familiar patterns such as the brilliant detective, the enclosed setting, and the gradual revelation of clues yet successful authors transform these conventions in creative ways. Christie's work exemplifies this balance between tradition and innovation. While *Murder on the Orient Express* initially appears to follow the standard detective formula, its conclusion disrupts the conventional expectation that justice will be delivered through legal institutions. Instead, the novel presents a morally ambiguous resolution in which the detective acknowledges the ethical complexity of the crime.

Critics have paid more attention to the social and cultural dimensions of crime fiction. In his historical analysis of the genre, Stephen Knight contends that detective stories frequently reflect the values and tensions of the societies in which they are produced. According to Knight, crime fiction frequently serves as a cultural space in which readers confront issues of authority, social inequality, and moral responsibility. From this standpoint, the murder in *Murder on the Orient Express* can be interpreted not as an isolated act of violence, but as a reaction to the earlier injustice of the Armstrong tragedy. As a result, the story highlights the limitations of legal institutions when dealing with severe emotional and social trauma.

Gender and social identity have also emerged as important research topics in the study of twentieth century crime fiction. Scholars like Gill Plain argue that detective stories frequently deal with issues of power, social hierarchy, and cultural norms. Plain's work exemplifies how crime fiction frequently reflects anxieties about gender roles and social order in contemporary societies. Christie's novel depicts a diverse group of passengers on the train who represent various nationalities, professions, and social positions. Their shared involvement in Ratchett's murder ultimately demonstrates how collective moral outrage can transcend individual differences when legal justice fails to address a serious crime.

In addition to literary criticism, adaptation studies provide an important perspective on Christie's work's ongoing relevance. Scholars like Linda Hutcheon have paid close attention to how literary texts are transformed into cinematic narratives. Hutcheon contends that adaptations should be viewed as creative reinterpretations shaped by the possibilities and limitations of a new medium, rather than mere reproductions of an original work. Film adaptations of *Murder on the Orient Express*, including Kenneth Branagh's well known adaptation, show how visual storytelling can reinterpret Christie's moral quandaries. The film version heightens the emotional atmosphere of the investigation while emphasising the ethical complexities of the performance.

Sociological perspectives on deviance and criminal behaviour also provide valuable insights into the motivations behind the characters actions. The sociological framework developed by Robert K. Merton suggests that individuals may resort to deviant behaviour when social institutions fail to provide legitimate means of achieving justice. Merton's theory of social strain helps illuminate the psychological and moral pressures experienced by the passengers connected to the Armstrong family. Their collective decision to murder Ratchett emerges from a shared sense of frustration and moral outrage following the legal system's inability to punish the original criminal.

Despite the extensive scholarship on detective fiction and Christie's work, relatively few studies have examined *Murder on the Orient Express* through a combined literary and cinematic perspective that connects social injustice, criminal behaviour, and adaptation. By bringing together insights from crime fiction studies, sociological theory, and adaptation criticism, this paper seeks to demonstrate how Christie's narrative continues to provoke reflection on the complex relationship between law, morality, and justice. The novel and its film adaptations reveal that the boundary between crime and justice is often unstable, shaped not only by legal institutions but also by human emotions, Ethical judgment, and collective memory.

Crime, Social Injustice, and Collective Justices in the Novel

Murder on the Orient Express revolves around a storyline that challenges the standard perception of crime and justice in detective fiction. The narrative delves into the moral and emotional underpinnings of the murder, rather than depicting it as a lone criminal act. It turns out that Casseti, the criminal behind Daisy Armstrong's kidnapping and murder, was actually the one who victimised Samuel Ratchett. The moral and emotional underpinning of the whole story is this prior crime. In light of this severe injustice, the murder on the train serves as more than just a mystery that needs solving. Christie carefully built the story so that the investigation by detective Hercule Poirot showed how morally complicated the case was. Since Poirot is talking to each passenger, the story slowly reveals hidden links between the travellers and the Armstrong family. That which at first seems like a collection of strangers turns into a network of people who are connected by their shared grief and moral outrage. By gradually revealing more, Christie changes the typical detective story into one about emotional trauma and group responsibility.

The Armstrong kidnapping tragedy represents the central moral conflict of the novel. Daisy Armstrong, a young child from a wealthy American family, is abducted and murdered by Casseti, whose crime shocks the public and devastates the Armstrong household. Although Casseti is eventually captured, he escapes legal punishment due to corruption and legal manipulation. This failure of the judicial system becomes the catalyst for the events that unfold aboard the Orient Express. In this sense, the murder of Ratchett can be interpreted as an act of retributive justice carried out by those who believe that the legal system has failed to protect the innocent. Christie emphasizes the emotional impact of the Armstrong tragedy through the personal connections of the passengers. Each participant in the murder has a direct or indirect relationship with the Armstrong family, whether as relatives, servants, friends, or protectors. Their involvement demonstrates how deeply the original crime affected multiple lives. The collective nature of the murder therefore reflects a shared desire to restore moral balance after the legal system proved incapable of delivering justice.

Coming to a decision at the end of the investigation was another example of the conflict between law and morality. Instead of putting the passengers directly in danger of being prosecuted, Poirot gives the police a different story, saying that the crime was actually done by someone from outside the train, who then escaped. An unusual change from the detective's usual role as a protector of the law is this act. By staying quiet, Poirot admits that the moral circumstances of the Armstrong tragedy make it harder to follow strict legal justice. According to sociology, the mass murder can also be seen as a sign of social stress. Individuals on board who are connected to the Armstrong family are deeply upset that Casseti has not been punished by the legal system. The psychological pressure this unresolved injustice put on them led them to create their own version of justice. Therefore, the crime becomes a symbolic act that the characters use to try to restore moral balance in a world where the legal system has failed. *Murder on the Orient Express* ultimately questions the usual lines between criminal behaviour and moral responsibility. Christie makes readers think about what justice really means by showing a murder that was done as a group in response to an earlier wrong. While the novel shows that crime can't always be understood through legal definitions alone, it also shows how emotions, moral beliefs, and

social situations can make it hard to tell the difference between right and wrong.

Visualizing Crime and Justice in Cinematic Adaptations

Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* has had a long-lasting impact, inspiring various film adaptations that reimagine the narrative through visual storytelling. Among these adaptations, Kenneth Branagh's film stands out for its use of cinematic methods to redefine the audience's relationship with the plot. While the novel is mostly based on dialogue, testimony, and deductive reasoning, the film emphasises visual imagery, acting, and spatial composition to communicate the narrative's emotional intensity. One of the most distinctive features of the cinematic adaptation is its use of the train as a visual environment that reflects the moral tension of the story. In the novel, the train functions as an enclosed narrative setting where the mystery unfolds through conversations and interrogations. In the film, the confined space of the Orient Express becomes a visually expressive environment. Camera movement through narrow corridors, carefully framed group scenes, and dramatic lighting create an atmosphere of suspense and psychological pressure. These cinematic techniques emphasize the sense that each passenger carries a hidden secret connected to the Armstrong tragedy. The film also uses performance and visual symbolism to enhance the emotional depth of the characters. Throughout the novel, readers learn about the passenger's connections to the Armstrong family through Poirot's interviews and logical conclusions. In the film version, this emotional history is conveyed through facial expressions, gestures, and visual flashbacks. As a result, the audience becomes more acutely aware of the passenger's collective sadness and rage. This graphic representation adds to the moral complexity of the story by urging viewers to sympathise with the protagonist's motivations while acknowledging the illegality of their acts.

Another important difference between the novel and the film lies in the portrayal of the detective Hercule Poirot. In Christie's novel, Poirot appears primarily as a figure of rational analysis who reconstructs the truth through careful reasoning. The cinematic adaptation, however, presents him as a more emotionally conflicted character. Branagh's portrayal highlights Poirot's internal struggle as he confronts the ethical dilemma of the case. This tension becomes particularly evident in the final confrontation scene, where Poirot realizes that the passengers acted together in response to the Armstrong tragedy. The camera focuses on his expressions of hesitation and moral uncertainty, emphasizing the difficulty of deciding whether legal justice should prevail over moral understanding. Poirot emphasizes the importance of uncovering truth when he observes that "the truth, however ugly in itself, is always curious and beautiful to seekers after it" (Christie). This reflection highlights the central concern of the narrative the search for truth behind the crime.

Cinematic narrative further heightens the symbolic significance of the communal murder. In the novel, the revelation that twelve people were involved in the crime has the framework of a jury giving a verdict. The film artistically enhances this meaning by structuring the climactic confession sequence to resemble a courtroom assembly. The passengers are arranged as a single group to visually highlight their joint responsibilities. The film emphasises through this arrangement that the murder reflects a collective response to a deep injustice, rather than just personal revenge. Adaptation so modifies Christie's narrative by visualising

its ethical questions. The film does not just repeat the events of the novel, but reinterprets them using cinematic language. Lighting, camera angles, and actor performances all help to shape the audience's perspective of the characters and their motive. These visual tactics enable viewers to connect more closely with the emotional and moral aspects of the crime. Despite their differences in narrative method, both the novel and its film adaptations eventually ask the same fundamental question: can a crime ever be morally justified when the legal system fails to protect the innocent? *Murder on the Orient Express* challenges audiences to consider the delicate balance between justice and retribution by telling the story through both literary narration and visual depiction. The transition from page to screen broadens Christie's interpretive options, demonstrating how crime narratives can grow across many artistic mediums.

Conclusion

This study has explored how *Murder on the Orient Express* complicates the conventional boundaries of crime and justice within detective fiction. Unlike many traditional mystery narratives that restore order through the identification and punishment of a single criminal, Christie's novel presents a morally ambiguous resolution in which crime emerges from a collective response to injustice. The murder of Samuel Ratchett later revealed to be the criminal responsible for the Armstrong tragedy therefore represents not simply an act of revenge but a reaction to the failure of legal institutions to protect the innocent. As Poirot remarks during his investigation, "the truth, however ugly in itself, is always curious and beautiful to seekers after it" (Christie 54), highlighting the narrative's central concern with uncovering hidden truths. Through the investigation conducted by Poirot, the narrative gradually reveals the shared connection between the passengers and the Armstrong family. The discovery that twelve individuals participated in the crime challenges the traditional assumption that criminal behaviour is purely individual. Poirot ultimately explains that there were "Twelve people... each one with a different blow" (Christie 268), a structure that symbolically resembles a jury delivering its verdict. This revelation blurs the boundary between justice and vengeance, suggesting that the act of murder functions as a collective response to moral outrage. Cinematic adaptations further expand the interpretive possibilities of the narrative. Film versions translate Christie's ethical dilemma into visual form and intensify the emotional tension surrounding the crime. At the

conclusion of the investigation, Poirot himself recognises the moral complexity of the situation and admits that the case presents "a very difficult decision to take" (Christie 272). This moment encapsulates the central ethical dilemma of the narrative: whether legal justice should prevail over moral understanding. *Murder on the Orient Express* remains a compelling exploration of the fragile boundary between justice and vengeance. By presenting a narrative in which legal institutions fail to punish a devastating crime, Christie invites readers and viewers to reconsider the relationship between crime, morality, and social responsibility. The enduring relevance of the story demonstrates how crime fiction can function not only as entertainment but also as a powerful reflection on the complexities of justice in modern society.

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