

# The Changing Status of the Detectives in the Novels of Agatha Christie and Keigo Higashino: From Rational Authority to Human Exploration

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## Abstract

Detective fiction is a genre characterized by mystery, reasoning, and intrigue that has captivated readers for centuries. However, the mystery here does not rely on theology but is rooted in logic. Malmgren (1997), in *Bloody Murder*, defines detective fiction as a hybrid genre encompassing elements of detective crime, psychological analysis, suspense, and police procedural stories. It ensures that the detective's resolution of the crime presented to them does not depend on “divine revelations, feminine intuition, nonsensical ramblings, trickery, coincidence, or acts of God.”

**Keywords:** evolution, historical and cultural background, method, structure

## 1. Introduction

Among the many detective fiction authors, Agatha Christie and Keigo Higashino are iconic representatives of their respective eras, symbolizing the redefinition of the detective's role in literature. Christie, hailed as the "Queen of Crime" and a leading figure of the Golden Age of detective fiction, established her legacy as a master of the genre. Similarly, Higashino has solidified his dominance in contemporary detective and mystery writing, offering a distinctly modern perspective. Both authors have left an indelible mark on the genre, with their works reflecting the significant transformation of the detective archetype under the influence of historical, cultural, and social factors.

## 2. Evolution of Detective Fiction: From Classic to Modern

The roots of detective fiction trace back to the 19th century, with Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) widely regarded as the first modern detective story. Allan Poe introduced the archetype of the brilliant detective, represented by C. Auguste Dupin, who solves mysteries through logical reasoning and acute observation. This template influenced subsequent writers, including Arthur Conan Doyle, whose creation, Sherlock Holmes, remains one of the most iconic figures in the genre.

By the early 20th century, detective fiction had evolved into a structured and highly popular form of entertainment. The Golden Age of detective fiction, roughly between 1920 and 1940, emphasized the puzzle-solving mysteries, with authors like Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Ngaio Marsh at the forefront.

In contrast, modern detective fiction, represented by writers like Higashino, reflects a shift in focus. Saito (2020), in *Detective Fiction and the Rise of the Japanese Novel, 1880–1930*, discusses the emergence of detective fiction in Japan during the late 19th century. Influenced by Western detective fiction—particularly the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, and other Western writers—Japanese authors adapted this genre to fit their own cultural and social contexts. Early Japanese detective fiction was heavily inspired by Western models but gradually developed its unique characteristics. These included the integration of Japanese cultural elements, such as an emphasis on honor, societal expectations, and the role of the detective as a morally upright figure.

While maintaining the core elements of mystery and deduction, it incorporates psychological depth, social commentary, and emotional complexity. Higashino's novels, such as *Malice* (1996), *The Devotion of Suspect X* (2005), and *The Crimes That Bind* (2013), explore themes like moral ambiguity, family dynamics, and the darker aspects of human nature. His detective, Kyoichiro Kaga, is not only a solver of crimes but also a mediator of human relationships and a mirror to societal issues.

### 3. Historical and Cultural Contexts

#### 3.1 Agatha Christie's Golden Age

Most of Christie's detective novels were written between the two World Wars, a period of significant social change. The aftermath of World War I brought about widespread disillusionment with traditional institutions, including disappointment in the police and government. Symons (1992), in *Bloody Murder*, noted that, on a societal level, crime fiction during the half-century following 1890 offered readers a comforting world in which those who attempted to disrupt the established order were always discovered and punished. Against this backdrop, the detective, as an almost perfect figure in the story, was imagined by readers as a beacon of hope and rationality in a turbulent society.

Poirot, in Christie's works, became an idealized character capable of restoring order and justice, thanks to his meticulous methods and unwavering confidence in logic. Christie's stories also reflect the cultural and social values of early 20th-century Britain. Class distinctions, gender roles, and xenophobia subtly influence her narratives, even as these themes are challenged by her characters. Poirot, as a Belgian refugee, is often underestimated because of his foreign origins, yet he consistently outshines his British counterparts. This juxtaposition highlights the prejudices of the time and underscores Poirot's universal appeal through his intellect and moral integrity.

#### 3.2 Keigo Higashino's Modern Japan

Higashino's works, written in a rapidly modernizing and urbanizing Japan, address a different set of societal concerns. Postwar stability gave way to new challenges, including increasing individualism, social isolation, and complex family dynamics. Higashino's novels delve into these issues, using crime as a lens to explore human behavior and societal flaws.

Kyocho Kaga, Higashino's detective, embodies the modern ethos of collaboration and empathy. Unlike Poirot, who often works independently, Kaga interacts closely with colleagues, suspects, and victims. His investigations often uncover not just the culprit but also the underlying social issues that contribute to crime. This approach reflects a shift from the pursuit of objective truth to an exploration of moral and emotional complexities.

### 4. Methodology

This study adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, combining literary analysis with historical and cultural contextualization. By examining selected novels from both authors, it identifies patterns, contrasts, and thematic continuities. Secondary sources, including critical essays, historical analyses, and cultural studies, provide additional perspectives on the evolution of detective fiction.

### 5. The Detective Characters of Agatha Christie

#### 5.1 Characteristics of the Classic Detective

In the *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), Hercule Poirot is a brilliant detective with excellent research skills. The novel's setting is a country-house and begins with the death of Mrs Ferrars, a widow, which appears to be suicide by an overdose of Veronal but later is discovered to have been a murder. The point of view of the story is Dr James Sheppard, the family doctor, who has returned from the deathbed of the widow. Dr Sheppard and his sister, Caroline, where he lives, paint the relationship between the deceased and Roger Ackroyd, a rich widower.

In many of Agatha Christie's novels, almost every suspect possesses an equal motive for the crime. Put differently, not only does every character involved in the case appear suspicious, but even seemingly irrelevant figures, such as the records of the case, could potentially be the culprit. Christie skillfully uses various hints to lead readers in circles, to the point where the ultimate culprit might seem almost randomly chosen. While such an arrangement risks making the ending appear contrived, it undeniably aligns with Christie's philosophy: everyone has a capacity for guilt, or more pointedly, anyone could be the criminal.

#### 5.2 Symbol of Rationality and Logic

Hercule Poirot is portrayed as a symbol of rationality and logic in Agatha Christie's works. He is not a supernatural person but an ordinary human who uses logic to solve the mysteries of murder. This is in agreement with the argument that classical detective novels have a narrative that is developed logically and consistently where the protagonist uncovers the truth by critical analysis of the facts (Huliak 2023, 18). Akfiçici looks at *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and argues that Christie's writing creates a mystery that needs logic to solve. It requires the detective to carry out a rational and scientific investigation in order to successfully clear up the mess, catch the culprit and restore order (Akfiçici 2015, 2). This was the classic detective fiction formula where often all the characters have motives for the crime and each of them must be investigated by the detective and the detective

will gather carefully placed clues until enough evidence is collected to identify the culprit (p.2). Poirot gathers clues while suspecting everyone close to Ackroyd as they were found with motives for his murder.

### 5.3 Chapter Conclusion

Agatha Christie, celebrated as the "Queen of Detective Fiction," played a pivotal role in shaping the Golden Age of detective fiction. As a Golden Age writer, Agatha Christie has shown that she created a detective who was brilliant enough to solve the puzzles created. In these books, Christie murder puzzles and hides the identity of the culprit from her audience. Furthermore, in a clue-puzzle genre portrays the detective as a perfect person whose role is to find out who the culprit is. The detective should be able to understand the motives of people and focus on detail to logically unravel the cases to restore social order broken by the crimes.

This chapter explores the function and characteristics of Christie's most famous detective, Hercule Poirot, as depicted in three iconic novels: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), and *Death on the Nile* (1937).

## 6. The Detective Characters of Keigo Higashino

### 6.1 Characteristics of the Modern Detective

Just as in the classical detective fiction, the modern detective Kyochiro Kaga is a very clever detective with remarkable powers of observation, as well as the skill and ability in drawing people out and earning their trust. He goes for clues and motives for crime to understand rather than solve the mystery. For example, in *Malice*, Kaga shows intelligence and the urgency to understand the motive for the murder. He sees through the lies vividly and does not give up until he has discovered the entire truth. *Malice* is about the death of a popular writer Kuniyuki Hidaka who was about to move to Canada from Japan with his spouse, Rie, the following day and was working on a novel in his locked house. It is his wife and Osamu Nonoguchi that finds the body of the writer. Nonoguchi is an author of children's books and a best friend of Hidaka. Nonoguchi is the prime suspect but is also the narrator of the first story as Formica (2013, p367) would note. Kaga also tells his narrative which is contradictory to Nonoguchi's. As such, it has some elements of the Golden Age because it is a detective fiction novel. A detective novel contains a crime reported early in the story.

He is also a person of emotions who is described as being humane and empathetic. This also helps him to be an effective collaborator as he appears friendly. Being an emotional detective who is emotionally involved, Kaga is able to inquire from many people and making them confide in him. He also has his own personal dilemmas as displayed in *The Crimes That Bind*. In this novel, he connects the murder of the woman who has just been strangled to his mother's death several years back. As such, it shows some of his struggles in life. He is not that objective detective in classical novels that maintains an independent stance. Instead, he is that detective who can relate events he is investigating to his own. This humanises the detective and moves him away from the rational detective.

### 6.2 Reflection of Social Issues

The humane character of the detective enables him to offer reflection on social and personal issues. In *Malice*, the work Kaga was to find out why Hidaka was killed rather than who did it. Just like Hercule Poirot, Kaga sought to find the truth. However, he adopts a methodical approach that is compassionate. Keigo Higashino transforms his narratives from a simple classic whodunit to the modern whodunit which includes exploring the whys of the crime. In so doing, the detective ends up revealing the culprit and community dynamics. He seeks to gain more insight into the life of the murder victim and those around him. This is how does his work in other novels as well. For example, he digs into the past of Hidaka and that is when he finds clues to his murder. Similarly, Kaga builds up a picture of the murdered woman's past and the events of the last days of her life in *Newcomer*. It can also be argued that connecting the murder of a woman in *The Crimes That Bind* is a reflection of what has happened in the life of Kaga. Therefore, these novels promote the reflection of societal issues.

Unlike in the classical detective fiction, Keigo's detective fiction goes beyond revealing the name of the culprit. This is especially seen in *Malice* where the name of the murderer is mentioned at the middle of the book. In a classical detective story, when the name is revealed, everyone including the reader is satisfied and would stop reading (Koliassa 2019, 104-105). In such detective stories, the reader is also a detective who is given a challenge to tell who the culprit is before the detective in the story can reveal him or her (p.105). However, Keigo does not keep the reader guessing who but challenges the reader to find the reasons for the murder as Kaga investigates. Similarly, in *Newcomer*, the detective is looking for something more than the murderer. Kaga supports the people to resolve their personal and social issues. As such, Keigo seems to write psychological thrillers which are full of feelings and human traits (Koliassa 2019, 108). *Malice* is full of emotions just *The Newcomer* is where Kaga is

emotionally attached to the case. This makes it possible for the detective to not just focus on social order but a reflection of social and personal issues both with the characters as well as the readers.

### 6.3 Chapter Conclusion

The chapter examines structure to delve into the "why" and "how" of crimes. By humanizing the detective genre and incorporating themes of collaboration and emotional connections, Higashino's works provide a compelling reflection on contemporary society while maintaining the intricate plots of classic detective fiction.

## 7. Exploring the Reasons for Changes in Detective Characters

### 7.1 Influence of Cultural Differences

According to Haia Shpayer-Makov (2011, 6), the detective is not just a real figure but also a cultural construct. This means that Christie and Higashino's detectives have a cultural appeal. For example, during the Golden Age, the detective was a figure who would bring order out of chaos and ensure there is peace of mind by solving the crime, catching the criminal and avenging the victim (Krawczyk-Zywko 2017, 5-6). Cultural factors relate to the shared beliefs of a community towards class, gender, and race, themes that are prevalent in detective fiction (Sharma 2021, 158). Therefore, the cultural differences between England (Christie's origin) and Japan (Higashino's origin) may play a role in how these authors depict their detectives.

#### A. British culture and Agatha Christie's Work

The twentieth-century England was largely divided into classes and class played a significant role in society. Social hierarchy was seen as a basis for morality and values with low class viewed as more susceptible to criminality (McCaw 2014, 12). Christie seems to challenge these cultural beliefs through her detective Poirot. Asked by Flora to investigate the murder of Ackroyd, a wealthy man, Poirot unravels what shocks many people including the readers. The narrator of the story Dr Sheppard is the least person to suspect of the murder because of the social status he has in society. He is a respectable person but through the intelligence of Poirot, his manipulations and coverups of the truth are realized. When it is revealed that such a person respected in the neighbourhood is the wicked and evil that disturbs order, Dr Sheppard is too ashamed to stand it and takes his life. In this way, Christie deconstructs this mythical image of society founded on a consensual morality or value judgment (McCaw 2014, 12). A genius, rational and authoritative detective with superb deductive reasoning and without bias to unravel such a mystery.

#### B. Japanese Culture and Keigo Higashino's Work

Keigo Higashino combines Japanese and Western cultures in his novels. However, unlike Christie whose settings are mostly outside England from the three novels analysed, Higashino mainly focuses on Tokyo. His books reflect life in Tokyo as he gives a glimpse of the city. In *Newcomer*, Kaga is a newcomer in Nihonbashi district but people welcome him very well. This shows the culture of the Japanese. The book depicts a people who are generally polite and unlike Christie's class society where social hierarchy is evident, Japanese setting is a classless society. However, modern Japanese society is characterised by cultural anxiety brought about by the rapid cultural change due to westernization (Silver 2008, 36). Japanese popular culture carries awareness of and anxiety about violence (Capo 2018). Keigo uses a brilliant detective who gets emotionally involved to reveal the anxieties they have and sympathises with them. This helps him to bring some aspects of reality into detective fiction genre.

The culture of Japanese also values sensitivity, care and attention to detail which influence the character of Kaga. Japanese culture is characterised by collectivism which stresses group oneness and consensus, often resulting in indirect and subtle communication (Shen et al. 2024, 60). This promotes the practice of Kikubari (attentiveness) and Mekubari (watchfulness) which value sensitivity, attention to detail and caring for others (Astartia 2021, 223). Keigo creates a detective that is sensitive and looks into detail including those that are regarded insignificant by others. Kaga has the ability to read between the lines and understand nonverbal communication. He is also very observant to be able to understand his colleagues and the members of the community. His approach is sensitive reflecting the Japanese culture.

### 7.2 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter explores the evolution of the detective character from the Golden Age of detective fiction, as represented by Agatha Christie, to the modern detective fiction of Keigo Higashino. Through the works of both authors, the chapter identifies a significant shift from the rational, heroic detective of the early 20th century to the more humanized, empathetic detective of the modern era. This change reflects broader historical, cultural, and social transformations in the two authors' respective societies. There is a shift from a logical detective who objectively investigates crimes without emotional involvement in the Golden Age to a humanized detective in

modern mystery. Historical and cultural factors have played a role in this shift. For example, being an interwar period, people in the Golden Age wanted to escape chaos and uncertainty hence the need for an objective detective that would restore

social order. On the other hand, the modern mystery occurs at a time when the world had stabilized but was struggling with other issues such as bullying, family issues, class and gender issues. Therefore, a detective that sympathises with people was needed. Kaga was this detective. Poirot, the Belgian detective, neutralized the xenophobia feelings in the Britain drawing the reader away from those issues while Kaga, a local detective, understood the culture of the Japanese people and collaboratively worked with them to uncover truths.

## 8. Conclusion

Detective fiction, with its compelling narratives and intricate puzzles, serves as a mirror, has long attracted a large number of readers while reflecting the cultural, historical, and social conditions of its time. This study explores the evolution of the detective's identity across different cultures through the works of Agatha Christie and Keigo Higashino, who represent two distinct eras of detective fiction. From Hercule Poirot's logical and methodical brilliance during the Golden Age to Kyochiro Kaga's empathetic and collaborative approach in modern detective narratives, the genre has undergone significant transformations.

Agatha Christie's works, epitomized by novels like *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, and *Death on the Nile*, encapsulate the ethos of the interwar period. Against the prehistory of societal upheaval, the detective emerged as a navigation light of rationality and order.

This evolution highlights the genre's adaptability to changing cultural and societal expectations, showcasing its relevance across time and geography.

The comparison between Christie and Higashino underscores the profound influence of historical and cultural contexts on detective fiction. Christie's era demanded a detective who could provide reassurance in a chaotic world, while Higashino's modern narratives resonate with a society grappling with nuanced moral dilemmas and interpersonal conflicts. The detectives' methods and characteristics reflect these shifts, illustrating how the genre has adapted to address evolving societal needs.

In conclusion, the enduring appeal of detective fiction lies in its ability to adapt to the times while retaining its core essence—a quest for truth and justice. Agatha Christie and Keigo Higashino, through their distinct approaches, have expanded the boundaries of the genre, enriching its narrative possibilities and cultural significance. Their works remind us that the detective, as a cultural archetype, remains a powerful symbol of hope, intellect, and humanity in the face of life's mysteries.

This exploration contributes to a deeper understanding of the genre's evolution and its role as a reflection of societal transformations. As detective fiction continues to evolve, it will undoubtedly embrace new forms and narratives, further enriching its legacy as a mirror of human experience and cultural change.

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