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# **On the Track, the Waves and the Shore: A Phenomenological Analysis of Human Isolation and Experience through Agatha Christie's Maritime Settings**

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## **Abstract:**

The Queen of mystery genre, Agatha Christie, was a prolific author known for her intricate plots and unforgettable characters, which include the iconic detective Hercule Poirot. This paper examines the maritime themes as reflected in Agatha Christie's plots *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Death on the Nile*, and *And Then There Were None*, focusing on how water forms such as snow, river, sea, island and the transitory spaces such as the train, cruise boat, and isolated island serve as critical settings that shape character experiences and relationships.

With a phenomenological approach, this paper analyses how maritime environments in Agatha Christie's works reflect the complexities of the human condition. By examining transitory spaces such as train, steamer ship and isolated island, the study reveals how these settings influence isolation, danger, and the impermanence of human connections. They serve as catalysts for characters to confront their pasts and moral challenges, transforming physical journeys into explorations of identity.

The analysis highlights how these claustrophobic environments shape character experiences and relationships, stripping away the facades, while also illustrating the themes of isolation and moral dilemmas. Ultimately, the paper argues that Christie's narratives not only depict physical journeys but also offer profound insights into human psychology, the complexities of existence and morality.

**Keywords: Maritime, Transitory spaces, Agatha Christie, Claustrophobic, Isolation, Human Experience.**

## **Introduction**

Agatha Christie, born Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller, grew up in the Victorian villa of Torquay, Devon. Surrounded by both seafront and countryside, Devon's seascapes, farmland, and moorland inspired many of her mystery stories (*Christie's Devon*). Educated at home by her mother, Christie began writing detective fiction while working as a nurse during World War I, drawing inspiration for her plots and knowledge of poisons from her nursing experience. Her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, introduced Hercule Poirot, her famous Belgian detective. In addition to her detective works, she also wrote romantic novels, such as *Absent in the Spring*, under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott (Britannica).

Christie's iconic detective Hercule Poirot appears in many of her works. In the novel *Murder on the Orient Express*, Poirot embarks on a journey aboard the renowned Taurus Express, travelling from Istanbul to Calais, during which Samuel Ratchett, a wealthy American, is found murdered in his compartment. Poirot's investigation reveals that Ratchett was actually a gangster named Casseti, responsible for the kidnapping and murder of a child years ago. As Poirot interrogates the passengers, he discovers that each of the passengers had a motive to kill the deceased Ratchett. After the investigation, Poirot revealed a surprising twist

that all the passengers were involved in the crime as a collective effort to avenge the child's death.

Christie's *Death on the Nile* also revolves around her detective Hercule Poirot in Egypt, who investigates the murder of a wealthy heiress, Linnet Doyle, who was shot dead aboard a Nile steamer ship. The crime is complicated by the presence of several people with potential motives, including Linnet's husband, her former best friend, and other jealous individuals. As Poirot investigates, he uncovers a tangled love triangle, financial disputes, and dark secrets that drive the motive for the murder. Poirot concludes the investigation with a bitter-shocking truth that Linnet's death was carefully organized to look like a random act. However, it was meticulously worked out beforehand by her husband Simon Doyle and her friend Jacqueline de Bellefort, driven by greed and betrayal.

Christie's *And Then There Were None* features ten strangers invited to an isolated Soldier Island, where they are accused of past crimes that were never brought to justice. One by one, the guests are killed in accordance with a nursery rhyme displayed in each of their rooms. As the deaths unfold, paranoia rises, and the remaining survivors desperately try to figure out the murderer among them. In the end, it is revealed that the murderer was one of the guests named Justice Wargrave who was all along and had cleverly staged the deaths to mimic the rhyme and also ensured that none could escape justice. This whodunit explores themes of guilt, retribution, and the human psyche under extreme pressure.

Phenomenology focuses on individuals' lived experiences, emotions, and perceptions as shaped by their interactions with their environments (*Phenomenology - an overview | sciencedirect topics*). This paper examines the maritime themes evident in Christie's works, particularly those in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1933), *Death on the Nile* (1937), and *And Then There Were None* (1939). This study also examines how water-related environments, such as snow covered train, cruise boat, and isolated island in Christie's works, serve as critical

settings that influence character experiences and relationships. Using a phenomenological approach, the analysis highlights the complexities of the human condition as portrayed through these claustrophobic settings, illustrating themes of isolation, memory, danger, paranoia and moral dilemmas.

## **Literature Review**

Agatha Christie's works have been studied extensively from multiple perspectives, including literature, psychology and sociology. Chris Ewers, in their article "Genre in transit: Agatha Christie, trains, and the Whodunit" (2016), mentioned that Agatha Christie, being one of the most widely read authors of the 20th century, has often been dismissed as "lowbrow" by academics, overshadowed by more "influential" yet less popular writers. Despite her massive readership, her works have historically been underrepresented in literary studies. However, recent efforts to expand the literary canon have sparked growing academic interest, though fan culture and the Christie industry continue to divert attention away from scholarly analysis.

Sarnelli, Debora Antonietta, in their article "Landscapes of Murder: Exploring Geographies of Crime in the Novels of Agatha Christie" (2019), discusses the spatial dimension of Agatha Christie's detective fiction. The study looks at rural England, urban settings, and the Middle East, with a focus on the country house and fictional villages. It also looks at the train as a non-place in transit narratives, highlighting the closed circle of suspects in these settings, making the murderer feel like 'one of us.'

Hamid Andishan, in their research article titled "Phenomenology of the Cultural Other" (2022), examined the idea of a 'phenomenology of the cultural other' from both phenomenological and cultural perspectives. Philosophers such as Husserl, Sartre, Hegel, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty are among those whose phenomenologies of the Other are critically examined. Three stages make up the research, each of which focuses on certain

relationships within philosophical traditions. Three categories are used to describe the phenomenological manifestations of the cultural other, cosmopolitan other, Orientalized other and dehumanised other.

Existing literary works have also been written about Christie's characters and their psychological depth; limited research has explored the phenomenological effects of transitory maritime environments as shaping agents of the human condition. Agatha Christie's use of transitory and maritime settings in *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Death on the Nile*, and *And Then There Were None* reveals a masterful engagement with themes of isolation, human experience, and the breakdown of social norms. By examining these works through a phenomenological lens, one could better understand how Christie transforms closed and transitory spaces into claustrophobic environments that reflect the complexities of human behaviour, interaction and existence.

### **Water as a Symbol**

The ocean solitudes are blest,

For there is purity.

The earth has guilt, the earth has care,

Unquiet are its graves;

But peaceful sleep is ever there,

Beneath the dark blue waves. (Hawthorne)

Nathaniel Hawthorne's ocean, as reflected in the poem "The Ocean" symbolizes purity and eternal rest, offering solace even in death. In contrast, Christie's oceanic and isolated settings,

such as ships, boats, and islands, are stages where peace is shattered by human deceit, turning serene waters into grounds of suspense and treachery.

In Agatha Christie's narratives, water serves as a significant symbol, reflecting deeper psychological and thematic ideas. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, snow, a form of water, becomes a symbol of entrapment. This reflects the characters' internal states as they confront their actions and the hidden truths behind them. The Taurus Express is halted by a snowdrift "between Vincovci and Brod," and the passengers are left uncertain of how long they will remain stranded: "The train has stopped. (They) have run into a snowdrift. Heaven knows how long (they) shall be (there)" (Christie, *Murder* 5). The snowdrift serves as a metaphor for the psychological confinement the characters experience as they face the repercussions of their past deeds.

In *Death on the Nile*, the Nile River is both a serene backdrop and a dangerous setting where threats lurk beneath the surface, reflecting the duality of human relationships. The river's calm beauty contrasts with the peril it conceals, mirroring the tension between appearances and hidden motives. As Jacqueline looks out over the Nile, where "the white-sailed boats glided up and down the river," (Christie, *Death* 61), her presence in Egypt disrupts the honeymoon of Simon and Linet Doyle, hinting at the impending danger and turmoil.

Similarly, in *And Then There Were None*, Soldier Island is not just a physical setting but a crucial element of the narrative. The island serves as a symbol of isolation and inevitability, amplifying the sense of doom that pervades the story. The island is described as "illuminated by the setting sun," with the characters' first glimpse of it as it "jutting up out of the sea to the south." (Christie, *And Then* 34). The island's inescapable presence plays a pivotal role in heightens the tension and sense of finality in the plot.

## Maritime Settings as Transitory Spaces

Transitory spaces are environments or areas that are temporarily occupied, that serve as points of passage or transition rather than permanent destinations. Examples of such spaces include transportation hubs like bus terminals, and vehicles such as trains, airplanes, and ships. By using such modes of transportation, Agatha Christie creates isolated settings that heighten the tension between personal history and the limitations of these spaces.

Agatha Christie seems to have been fascinated by means of transportation. In her fiction, people can be pushed out of trains (4.50 to Paddington), killed inside (The Mystery of the Blue Train, Murder on the Orient Express) or even die before the train arrives (The Man in the Brown Suit). They can also be killed on planes (Death in the Clouds) or boats (Death on the Nile). She used them as narrative devices to provide closed settings which she relished and exotic settings with the minimum of description. . . (Décuré)

She used these settings not only to create closed, isolated environments but also to craft exotic locations with minimal description, allowing the focus to remain on the characters and their interactions within these transitory spaces. Christie's choice of enclosed spaces is evident from the following lines:

The Mysterious Affair at Styles - Poirot's debut novel - and The Murder at the Vicarage - the first novel to feature the character of Miss Marple - reveal Agatha Christie's fascination towards rural villages and enclosed spaces that recall the structure of an English country house. . . (Sarnelli)

One of the most compelling features of Christie's use of maritime environments is their transitory nature. The spaces in her works include trains, boats, planes and isolated island which

are a place of travel or passage where characters are removed from their routine life. Such spaces are inherently claustrophobic, confined, and isolated, which creates a psychological tension that serves as the perfect stage for the exploration of the human psyche. These spaces force characters to face their past and authentic selves, which removes the social facades.

In *Murder on the Orient Express*, the luxurious train, Taurus Express, becomes a microcosm of society, with its confined space mirroring the inescapability of the characters' pasts. The passengers are trapped in a moving train with no exit to escape, and must face the consequences of their actions. This setting reflects a recurring theme in Christie's works, where confined spaces like trains and ships symbolise liminal spaces, forcing characters to confront their pasts.

In *Death on the Nile*, the confined steamer, Karnak, becomes a microcosm of emotional and psychological entrapment, emphasising the parallel between physical and psychological journeys. Characters, cut off from the outside world, are forced to confront unresolved tensions and secrets, mirroring the theme of confinement in Christie's other works, like *The Mystery of the Blue Train* and *The Man in the Brown Suit*. These isolated spaces reflect emotional and moral isolation, highlighting themes of entrapment and the need to confront personal truths. *Death on the Nile's* protagonist Linet Doyle's fearful outburst in the quote illustrates this point vividly.

‘Monsieur Poirot, I’m afraid – I’m afraid of every-thing. I’ve never felt like this before. All these wild rocks and the awful grimness and starkness. Where are we going? What’s going to happen? I’m afraid, I tell you. Everyone hates me. I’ve never felt like that before. I’ve always been nice to people – I’ve done things for them – and they hate me – lots of people hate me. Except for Simon, I’m surrounded by enemies . . . It’s terrible to feel – that there are people who hate you . . .’

. . . I just feel that – every- thing’s unsafe all round me.’

. . . she said abruptly: ‘How will all this end? We’re caught here. Trapped!

There’s no way out. We’ve got to go on. I – I don’t know where I am.’ (Christie, *Death* 120-121)

Linnet Doyle feels trapped both physically on the steamer and emotionally by her own sense of insecurity and guilt, expressing fear of being surrounded by enemies and unable to escape her past. Her words, “We’re caught here. Trapped! There’s no way out,” emphasise the suffocating nature of the confined space, where time is suspended, and the characters' pasts loom over them without escape.

In *And Then There Were None*, the isolated island serves as the ultimate space of confinement, where escape is impossible, and where the characters’ dark secrets are slowly revealed. This is reflected in Dr. Armstrong's musings upon his arrival on Soldier Island.

How big the sea was! From here there was no land to be seen anywhere – just a vast expanse of blue water rippling in the evening sun.

The sea . . . So peaceful today – sometimes so cruel . . . .

There was something magical about an island – the mere word suggested fantasy. You lost touch with the world – an island was a world of its own. A world, perhaps, from which you might never return.

. . . left ordinary life behind . . . (Christie, *And Then* 45-46)

Dr. Armstrong's thoughts highlight the magical yet foreboding quality of the island, a place that feels like its own world, detached from ordinary life. This detachment reinforces the notion of confinement and foreshadows the inescapable events to come, as the island becomes a stage for the unearthing of the characters' darkest secrets, which ultimately leads to their death.

These transitory environments are not just places where people travel; they are places where characters are confronted with their isolation, dangers, and mortality, often under extreme circumstances. They become spaces that force a confrontation with identity, where the truth is often hidden beneath layers of deception, secrets, and moral ambiguity.

### **Isolation and the Human Condition**

The motif of isolation is central to Christie's maritime settings. Whether it is the snowbound train in *Murder on the Orient Express*, the steamer on the Nile, or the lonely island in *And Then There Were None*, each of these settings is an isolating space that compels the characters to be alone, even when they are surrounded by others. The isolation these spaces impose mirrors the inner isolation many of the characters experience, trapped within the confines of their own pasts, guilt, and moral ambiguity.

In *Murder on the Orient Express*, the isolation is psychological as much as it is physical. The train is stranded due to a snowdrift, and its passengers are forced into a situation where their own actions are scrutinised under the intense gaze of Hercule Poirot. The cramped conditions intensify the sense of isolation, where characters' personal histories and motives are exposed in a way that would not be possible in the vastness of the open world.

In *Death on the Nile*, the enclosed space of the steamer creates a sense of imprisonment, not because the characters are surrounded by water on all sides, but because they are compelled to interact with others whom they prefer to avoid. The isolation of the setting mirrors the psychological isolation of the characters, who are trapped in their own webs of lies, deceit, and regret. This atmosphere of confinement and disconnection starkly contrasts with Matthew Arnold's lament in the poem "Dover Beach."

Arnold's poem reflects a world devoid of joy, love, and certitude, emphasising the need for true love and unity amidst life's chaos and struggle. His lines from "Dover Beach" are:

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
...  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night. (Arnold)

Simon Doyle's facade of affection for Linnet Doyle culminates in her murder for his selfish gain, which in turn betrays the trust and unity Arnold stands for. The greed and deceit displayed in the novel also show how human actions can shatter the ideals of love and trust in a chaotic and isolating world.

In *And Then There Were None*, isolation becomes a powerful force, both physically and socially, as the characters are stranded on an island cut off from the outside world. This extreme isolation strips away distractions, forcing the characters to face their darkest secrets, fears, and unresolved emotions. As each character is murdered, the growing sense of claustrophobia intensifies, which also heightens their paranoia and fear of being alone. Vera Claythorne's descent into madness exemplifies how isolation can unravel the mind that ultimately leads to her tragic end.

To sleep safely since she was alone on the island.  
One little soldier boy left all alone.  
She smiled to herself.  
...

Vera, the little soldier clasped in her hand, began  
to mount the stairs. Slowly, because her legs were  
suddenly very tired.

'One little soldier boy left all alone.'

...

A rope with a noose all ready? And a chair to stand upon –  
a chair that could be kicked away . . .

...

She climbed up on the chair, her eyes staring in front  
of her like a sleepwalker's . . . She adjusted the noose  
round her neck.

Hugo was there to see she did what she had to do.

She kicked away the chair . . . (Christie, *And Then* 283-285)

Vera Claythorne after killing Philip, in the final moments of her unraveling, clutches the last little soldier figure and succumbs to the weight of her guilt and the manipulation of her fractured psyche. Being haunted by the image of Hugo, Vera's ultimate act is the culmination of her paranoia, guilt, and the crushing solitude of the island that became unbearable, and led to her final, tragic act of suicide.

### **Impermanence and Moral Dilemmas**

Another critical aspect of maritime environments in Christie's works is the theme of impermanence. In these transitory spaces, time becomes suspended or distorted. The confined spaces and isolation create an atmosphere where the characters' lives are in a constant state of flux, making them aware of their mortality. This awareness often pushes the characters into

moral dilemmas, forcing them to confront their own actions, make difficult choices, and reckon with the consequences of their past decisions.

In *Murder on the Orient Express*, the fact that the train is stranded creates a sense of timelessness. The characters are forced to deal with their pasts, as each passenger's history is eventually uncovered. The train's limited mobility becomes a metaphor for the inability to escape one's past actions, while also underscoring the fleeting nature of time. Similarly, in *Death on the Nile*, the journey along the river highlights the fluidity of life, with characters floating in a world where nothing is permanent. The boat is on a continuous course, as are the characters who are moving inexorably toward their destinies.

The island in *And Then There Were None* serves as the ultimate reflection of impermanence. The characters are stranded on the island, and are forced to confront the inescapability of their fate, and as the number of deaths rises, it becomes evident that death is as inescapable as the sea surrounding the island. The fleeting nature or impermanence of life is reflected in the relentless passage of time, and the characters' morality is continually tested.

Through these works, Christie examines how the awareness of impermanence, as manifested in the confinement of a stranded train, the continuous flow of a river, or the seclusion of an island, forces her characters to confront their pasts and make challenging moral decisions, highlighting the unavoidable and often unsettling passage of time. The claustrophobic nature of these environments strips away societal facades, exposing the characters' raw emotions and true natures.

## **Conclusion**

Agatha Christie's use of maritime environments in her mysteries functions as a narrative device to explore the complexities of the human condition. Through the lens of transitory spaces such as train, steamer ship, and isolated island, Christie crafts environments

that test the characters physically while also forcing them to confront their inner turmoil, isolation, and moral dilemmas. These settings become metaphors for the impermanence of life, the fragility of human connections, and the inescapability of fate. Thus, through phenomenological analysis, the study concludes that Christie's maritime landscapes serve as active elements in shaping the narratives, which also uncovers the psychological depths of her characters and provides insight into the complexities of existence and morality.

### Scope for Further Research

- Gender and Ego: Exploring Gender Dynamics in Agatha Christie's Works
- Detective fiction: Through the lens of deception and surveillance
- Analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin's Polyphony in Detective Fictions
- Memory and Guilt in Agatha Christie's Works

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