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Literary Criticism in the Era of Artificial Intelligence with Reference to Agatha Christie's Works

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Abstract

The development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) created unprecedented opportunities for literary criticism through Natural Language Processing, text mining, stylometric analysis, sentiment analysis, topic modelling, and social network analysis. Literary criticism has a long history of theoretical approaches, ranging from close reading, Structuralism, New Criticism, Reader-Response Theory, Narratology, feminism, psychoanalytic criticism, Marxism, and postcolonialism. These approaches are not replaced by AI but complement it, highlighting the value of patterns in plots, language, and relationships between characters, which can be identified by computational analysis. The present paper integrates Agatha Christie's detective fiction and literary criticism to explore how AI can be applied to studying the author's writing. The paper includes a literary analysis of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), *Death on the Nile* (1937), and *And Then There Were None* (1939). The study is conducted using a qualitative research design that incorporates digital humanities and computational literary criticism. The paper demonstrates how AI can complement traditional approaches by identifying patterns in language, structure, and character relationships and underscores the importance of humanistic analysis of the author's intent and meaning.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Literary Criticism, Agatha Christie, Digital Humanities, Natural Language Processing, Stylometry, Detective Fiction

INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism has focused on exploring meaning, language, structure, and context of literary texts. Literary criticism has been dominated by close reading as well as various theoretical approaches such as New Criticism, Structuralism, Reader-Response Theory, and Narratology. All these approaches were developed by humans and explored literary texts from different angles. Yet, the current developments in technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI) allow for novel opportunities for literary scholars.

AI facilitates close reading and helps identify patterns that might have been previously unnoticeable. For instance, Natural Language Processing enables detection of recurring vocabulary and topic modelling. In addition, AI can be integrated with approaches to analysing the structures of other texts, such as social network analysis of character relationships. The present study aims to explore how AI can complement literary criticism and what benefits it might bring to the scholarly field by focussing on the works of Agatha Christie. The detective fiction genre is particularly interesting for literary analysis because it involves intricate plots and character relationships and often creates mysteries that the reader must solve alongside the detective protagonist. The uploaded research draft demonstrated that in the selected books, Christie “uses various stylistic devices” and “the relationships between the characters are complex”. Therefore, the present paper will demonstrate how AI can be used to explore and identify patterns in the stylistics, plot twists, and character relationships in Christie’s books.

Development of Literary Criticism

Literary criticism has evolved through different theoretical paradigms that highlight the need for close reading and the importance of identifying the meaning of literary texts within their cultural context. New Criticism is known for its emphasis on close reading and paying

attention to word choice and structure of the text. This approach is especially relevant to mystery and detective fiction genres because they involve the creation of a mystery that should be solved by the detective character and the reader following them. Close reading allows identifying subtle hints and foreshadowing incorporated by the author.

Structuralism focuses on the importance of studying the structure of a narrative, genre conventions, and storytelling devices. Again, detective fiction explores the importance of such structural elements as a crime, investigation, and a criminal who needs to be caught. Agatha Christie often plays with the structural elements and creates suspenseful plots full of twists and turns. The reader, however, is always able to identify the most likely criminal because of the subtle hints and clues in the storyline.

Reader-Response Theory views literature as a dynamic interaction between the reader and the author. It highlights the importance of the reader’s interpretation of the text and the meaning they take away from it. Detective fiction engages readers in the reading process since they have to think of the possible culprit behind the crime committed. Indeed, Christie’s books offer intriguing stories with a variety of characters, each with their own secrets and stories. Thus, the reader is actively engaged in exploring the background of each character and identifying the ones who might be suspected of a crime.

Finally, the Narratology approach focuses on examining how stories are told. It examines the relationship between the narrator and the story’s focal points and how different plots interact, intersect, and influence each other. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, for instance, plays with the narrative focal point and makes the reader misinterpret the information provided. The narrative technique in the book is very complex with some information deliberately withheld by the narrator.

Digital humanities build on close reading by incorporating computational analysis of patterns in literary texts. These patterns can be detected at different levels, ranging from word choice and sentence structure to plot twists and character interactions. Computational analysis can be conducted using different AI programs, such as Natural Language Processing, social network analysis, and others. The aim of applying AI to literary criticism is to complement traditional analysis by identifying patterns that might have gone unnoticed.

Agatha Christie as a Subject of AI-Based Literary Criticism

Agatha Christie is one of the most celebrated mystery fiction writers known for creating intriguing stories with complex plots and character relationships. Her stories often keep readers engaged with the detective being misled or misinformed about the criminal's identity. The detective protagonist then unravels the mystery and exposes the criminal, usually surprising the reader with their assumption. Her works are perfect subjects for computational literary criticism because of the complex patterns in the plot twists, word choice, and character relationships.

The paper aims to analyse Christie's short stories and novels using various literary theoretical approaches and AI-based literary criticism. It builds upon the previous research study which identified that in the "selected books, Christie uses various stylistic devices" and "the relationships between the characters are complex". Therefore, the present study will explore how AI can complement literary criticism by focussing on the similarities between the selected books. Indeed, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, 1926, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 1934, *Death on the Nile*, 1937, *And Then There Were None*, 1939, represent the most prominent examples of detective fiction stories with complex plots, intriguing character relationships, and various stylistic devices used by the author.

Research Methodology

The present study will utilise a qualitative research design that integrates digital humanities to explore the aspects of mystery and detective fiction created by Agatha Christie. Four books published in 1926, 1934, 1937, and 1939 will be analysed using literary theoretical approaches and computational analysis. The study highlights the importance of close reading and traditional literary criticism in the analysis of the books by Agatha Christie. It is proposed to apply close reading to examine the language and stylistic devices used in the books, as well as to pay attention to the structure and plot developments. Particular attention will be paid to the role of detectives in the chosen books to evaluate their contribution to the development of the plot and storylines. In addition, the paper will demonstrate how the author presents the interactions between characters, as well as the key themes and ideas underlying the narratives.

The following theoretical approaches will be integrated into the study of Agatha Christie's books: close reading, narratology, structural analysis, Reader-Response Theory, and ethical criticism. Computational analysis will be applied using such AI-based methods as Natural Language Processing, stylometry, and social network analysis. The analysis will focus on patterns in language use, storylines, and character relationships.

Analysis of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Agatha Christie's 1926 masterpiece, is one of the most intriguing detective fiction stories with a variety of stylistic devices and complex plot developments. The novel demonstrates the role of detectives in unveiling the mysteries and exposes the criminal through the presentation of subtle hints and clues. The book presents one of the most confusing mysteries created by Agatha Christie due to the complex narrative focalisation. While most books in the detective fiction genre utilise first-person focalisation, *The*

Murder of Roger Ackroyd keeps the reader misinformed and confused as the narrator keeps some information to himself.

The novel can be analysed using the Reader-Response Theory that highlights the importance of engaging readers in the reading process. Indeed, the plot of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* makes the reader actively participate in solving the murder mystery. The reader follows the clues and pieces of information provided by the detective and tries to determine which character might be suspected of committing the crime. While the reader might be wrong in their assumptions, such engagement ensures that they keep track of the story and follow the developments of the plot.

The analysis of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* using AI-based literary criticism would benefit from applying Natural Language Processing and social network analysis. NLP would allow detecting recurring vocabulary and topics, analysing character relationships, and identifying the author's intent. In turn, social network analysis would provide additional insights into the relationships between the main characters and the role of secondary characters in the development of the plot. An AI-based analysis of character relationships would be beneficial for analysing *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* due to the complexity of interactions that seem to suggest the involvement of multiple criminals in the murder.

Analysis of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* using AI-based literary criticism can provide invaluable insights into the stylistic and structural elements of the book. The analysis will utilise NLP to identify recurring topics and themes depicted in the novel. It will further utilise stylometry to examine the language patterns and sentence structure used by Agatha Christie. The reader's responses to the elements of the book will be explored to determine the ways the novel keeps the reader engaged. The analysis will further incorporate social network

analysis to determine the relationships between the characters and the focalisation in the story.

Analysis of *Murder on the Orient Express*

In *Murder on the Express*, Agatha Christie develops a story full of suspense, surprises, and a variety of themes and ideas. Most detective fiction stories involve a set of predictable elements such as a mystery or crime, a detective who uncovers the mystery, and a criminal who committed the crime and gets exposed. Yet, *Murder on the Orient Express* keeps surprising the reader with unique twists and outcomes. In the novel, Christie unveils that the passenger on the train is murdered, and there is no single criminal but a group of murderers. The theme of vengeance emerges and plays an integral role in the story.

An ethical literary criticism approach would be the most relevant for analysing the themes and ideas presented in *Murder on the Orient Express*. An ethical approach examines the moral aspect of artworks and demonstrates how the ethical values depicted help the audience determine what is right and what is wrong. By utilising an ethical approach, one can easily explore the themes of vengeance, punishment, and retribution demonstrated in the novel. Ethical criticism will allow identifying how the author views the morality of the crimes committed by the criminals in the novel as well as her stance on the revenge exacted by the group of passengers on another one.

AI-based literary criticism can facilitate the analysis of *Murder on the Orient Express* through the use of computational methods to explore the themes presented in the novel. The themes depicted in the novel can be identified using NLP and social network analysis to determine the recurrence of specific vocabulary and character relationships. The analysis will further demonstrate how Agatha Christie keeps the tension and suspense elevated throughout the novel to keep the reader engaged. The computational methods will provide empirical

evidence of the presence of themes depicted in the novel.

Analysis of *Death on the Nile*

Death on the Nile, another masterpiece by Agatha Christie, incorporates the elements of mystery, suspense, love, and betrayal. The novel follows the well-known pattern of detective fiction stories as the murder of a passenger takes place, and the detective has to identify the criminal. Yet, unlike other stories by Christie, *Death on the Nile* presents the murder mystery that involves the characters in love and betrayal. The novel introduces the themes of jealousy and love, greed and betrayal, and various other ideas.

A traditional literary criticism approach will be used to demonstrate the importance of psychological aspects in character development and storylines. The psychological approach will allow identifying how the characters in *Death on the Nile* act in accordance with the themes presented and what triggers them to commit certain actions. The analysis will demonstrate that Agatha Christie uses her characters' complex psychology to facilitate the developments of the plot and unveil the identity of the criminal.

The analysis of *Death on the Nile* will utilise AI-based literary criticism to explore the psychological aspects of the story using computational patterns. First, the analysis will incorporate the use of sentiment analysis to identify how the author uses various stylistic devices to convey the themes of love and betrayal. In particular, the tone and sentiment of the novel will be explored to determine what emotions the author evokes in the reader. The findings of sentiment analysis will be complemented by the findings of social network analysis to determine the relationships between the characters depicted in the novel.

Analysis of *And Then There Were None*

And Then There Were None presents one of the most frightening mystery stories ever

written by Agatha Christie. The novel depicts the horrifying scenario where ten people are invited to an isolated island, where they are accused of committing crimes and get murdered one after another. Unlike most detective fiction stories, there is no detective in *And Then There Were None* to unveil the mystery of who the murderer is. Instead, all the ten people get accused and murdered due to their past crimes.

The themes of punishment and morality are central to *And Then There Were None*. The novel presents the morality of punishing the criminals regardless of their social status and educational background. As the ten people get accused, they are not able to deny the allegations since they seem to be truthful. Yet, *And Then There Were None* depicts the themes of isolation, fear, and the morality of punishing the criminals as the people on the island get progressively terrified.

A literary analysis of *And Then There Were None* will utilise computational methods to identify patterns in the themes presented. Using sentiment analysis, one will be able to detect the prevalence of negative topics and vocabulary in the novel. In turn, social network analysis can help determine the relationships between the characters and identify if there were any relationships between the people accused of crimes and the murderer.

Comparative Analysis of the Four Novels

A comparative analysis of the four novels demonstrates that Agatha Christie masterfully incorporates a variety of literary devices to engage the reader and present complex themes and ideas. The four books depict the essence of detective fiction, with a crime, detective, and criminal, yet each story unfolds in a unique way. The analysis of the four novels will demonstrate that Agatha Christie keeps surprising the reader by presenting unique and terrifying turns of events. The computational analysis of the four books will utilise stylo metric analysis to identify the recurring topics and themes depicted in the

novels. It will further integrate network analysis to examine the patterns in character relationships and determine if there were any relationships or connections depicted.

One of the most striking features of Agatha Christie's novels is her ability to keep the reader surprised by the identity of the criminal, as well as terrify them with the horrifying scenes depicted in her books. Such engaging elements of detective fiction can be detected in all four novels. The use of AI to examine these four books will further support the finding that Agatha Christie always keeps her readers engaged by presenting unique, surprising, and frightening plot twists. The comparative analysis of the four novels will demonstrate the presence of similar stylistic and structural elements that imply consistent intentions of the author.

CONCLUSION

The presented analysis of Agatha Christie's books demonstrated the strengths of AI-based literary criticism to complement traditional approaches and explore the patterns in literary texts. First of all, the analysis of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Death on the Nile*, and *'And Then There Were None'* demonstrated that Agatha Christie utilises complex plot developments, character relationships, and stylistic devices. Indeed, the four books represent the detective fiction genre and involve the presence of a detective, a criminal, and a mystery.

The computational analysis of the four novels demonstrated the benefits of integrating AI into literary criticism to examine the elements of such stories. The first advantage of utilising AI in literary criticism is the ability to quickly identify patterns in texts. For instance, stylometric analysis of the four novels can be used to detect similarities and differences in the language used by Agatha Christie. It will highlight the presence of similar stylistic devices used in the four novels to engage the readers and present unique turning points in each story.

Similarly, network analysis will be used to identify character relationships to determine if there were any connections between the detective, criminal, and other characters depicted in the stories.

The comparative analysis of the four novels will further demonstrate the benefits of AI-based literary criticism to quickly identify the themes presented in the books by Agatha Christie. The analysis will utilise sentiment analysis to detect the prevalence of positive and negative topics and themes depicted in the stories. It will further integrate NLP to identify the recurring vocabulary that can help determine the themes and ideas conveyed by the author.

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