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# The Trusted Might Become the Traitor: A New Critic Reading of Agatha Christie's Detective Story *Black Coffee*

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## Abstract

Detective story is a very popular genre in literature that is characterized by unique plot formula involving suspense and mystery that make readers keep on turning pages to find out what happen next. To identify the suspense and conflicts in detective story, this study analyzed Agatha Christie's detective novel *Black Coffee* by applying the theory of New Criticism. This study aimed to identify the way the plot of the story revolved around the suspense that become the main interesting feature in a detective story. By analyzing the plot, this study was also expected to examine the characterization. The plot formula in the detective story is not similar to that of other literary genres as it contains not only suspense, mystery and complication, but also an element of surprise that makes readers unable to easily predict. Consequently, plot is the key element in a detective story as also shown from the analysis of *Black Coffee*. Along with the plot, characterization depicted in the novel has also helped to uncover the mystery since in detective story the crime is usually committed by the least suspected character in the story. In conclusion, this study on *Black Coffee* has shown that all the formal elements in the story have worked together to support the theme of "the trusted might become the traitor" and establish an organic unity.

**Keywords:** plot, suspense, detective story, organic unity, formal elements

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## Introduction

Detective story is one of the popular genres in literature that always becomes a favorite due to its ability to arouse curiosity among its readers. The atmosphere of mystery and suspense are among the characteristics of detective story that compel readers to keep on reading until the mystery is solved at the end of the story. Mystery can intensify and complicate the story of triumph over obstacle or of the successful development of love by increasing suspense and uncertainty and adding other interest to the final resolution (Cawelti 43). Accordingly, as the key element in the detective story, plot cannot be far from suspense, which signifies the ups and downs of the story. Furthermore, characterization in the novel is also built by the plot to make the story alive. The plot in a literary work helps the readers see the action of the characters, and as one of the formal elements of a literary work, plot along with other elements such as characterization, helps to create the theme by establishing an organic unity.

There are many famous authors of detective story in the literary world, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. Arthur Conan Doyle is famous for his detective character, Sherlock Holmes, while Agatha Christie is also popular with her detective character, Hercule Poirot. For this study, the detective novel to be analyzed is *Black Coffee* by Agatha Christie, a world famous detective novelist known as The Queen of Crime.

*Black Coffee* is a novel adapted by Charles Osborne. Originally, this novel was written by Agatha Christie in 1929 as a playscript. Twenty-two years after Christie's death, *Black Coffee* was re-published in the United Kingdom and the United States in the form of a novel. The transformation was undertaken by the Australian-born writer and classical music critic Charles Osborne, with the endorsement of the Christie's estate. Charles Osborne modified the text form from dialogues to paragraphs in 1956. Osborne is known internationally as an authority on opera, and has written a number of books on musical and literary subjects, among others include *The complete Operas of Verdi (1969)*, *Wagner and His World (1977)*, and *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie (1969)*. In 1993 he was presented with the Amici di

Verdi Gold Medal to honor his published work on Verdi, and in 1994 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by Griffith University, Australia, in recognition of his long and distinguished service to the arts (from *The Unexpected Guest*, 1999) As a loyalist of Agatha Christie, Charles Osborne was entrusted by the Christie's publisher to adapt her playscripts into novels.

*Black Coffee* becomes an interesting subject to study because it is full of suspense that builds the story plot, which according to DiYanni, makes readers keep on turning pages to reveal what will happen next (44). Even though literary works are mostly fictional, suspense story including *Black Coffee* depicts the lives of people that resemble life in the real society. Literature compels readers to create a universe of their own. As a universe exists, it can be considered alive by the readers to interpret the meaning of the existence itself (Tyson 136). *Black Coffee* tells us not only about crime, murder, and deceit but also relationship problems regarding family and love commonly occur in everyday lives, which become the main cause of conflict in the novel.

As this study is interested in the plot's suspense in compliance with the story line that builds the character's actions and supports the theme, the most appropriate theory to be applied is New Criticism, which suggests plot as one of the formal elements in a literary text along with character, characterization, figurative language, theme, and many others. Based on New Criticism, all the formal elements in a text work together to establish an organic unity and support the theme as the main idea of the text. New Criticism approaches a literary text with its formula to create the right interpretation of the text and by the text itself. The goal using new criticism is to improve the reading of literary text and also help to see and appreciate in new ways the complex operations of the text's formal elements and how these elements function to create meaning (Tyson 150).

Accordingly, this study attempts to examine the way plot works together with characterization to establish an organic unity and support the theme that "the trusted might become the traitor" in *Black Coffee* detective story. Even though plot is the key element of a detective story, as one of the formal elements of a literary text, plot cannot work alone to make the story work. Instead, it has to work together with other formal elements, such character, characterization, and theme. Plot helps the character to reveal his characterization during the story, and in turn they all work to support the theme. Therefore, in this study the plot analysis of *Black Coffee*, which includes conflicts happening to the main character, is related to characterization and theme.

This study applied qualitative method and the analysis was conducted based on New Critic approach to literary text. The step for conducting data collection was by doing close reading in which the novel was read more than once in order to select and sort out any parts of the text related to the main focus of this study. The process of data analysis in this study first began by revealing the plot elements based on detective story formula starting from the situation, rising action, climax, falling action until the resolution. In order to do so, this study examined each part of the plot that contains suspense, conflicts, problems, and other story elements that the characters experience throughout the story based on the characterization and setting. After identifying the suspense, the study then analyzed the theme established by the suspense and characterization in order to reveal the organic unity of the text.

## **The Plot Formula in *Black Coffee* Detective Story**

### **The Exposition**

The beginning of the novel starts with the introduction of the main character in this novel. DiYanni asserts that the exposition will provide the background information that the readers need about the action, settings, and introduction of the major characters (43). The main character in this novel is a Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot who has been renowned in the crime world for reveal some high profile cases. Hercule Poirot was known as a neat and extraordinary-looking little man. *He was hardly more than five feet four inches but he carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military* (70).

The exposition of *Black Coffee* novel noted as Hercule Poirot was doing his daily activity with his breakfast and cups of chocolate. Not so long after that, the telephone in the next room rang. Hercule Poirot answered it and he guessed it right; he could not really far from a case in this peaceful morning (15).

“I’ve produced a formula from which a new and deadly explosive can be made. I have reason to suspect that a member of my household is attempting to steal the formula. I can not say anymore now, but i should be greatly obliged if you would come down to Abbot’s Cleve for the weekend, as my house guest. I want you to take the formula back with you to London, and hand it to a certain person in Ministry.” Sir Claud said on phone (16).

Hercule Poirot asked his loyal partner, Captain Hastings, to follow him to Abbot’s Cleve, Sir Claud Amory’s house. Captain Hastings is a tall, middle aged man and of military bearing. As a retired police that is now is living in Argentine with his wife to run their ranch, for several times, he went to London on business connected with the ranch and at that time he always meet up with his friend, Hercule Poirot (10).

Based on the exposition, each character appears for the first time and there was no conflict happening yet in this stage. The Amory’s house as the main setting of the story is described as quite big to be occupied by a big family. Sir Claud Amory was a famous physician who worked for Defense Ministry. *He was a man in his fifties, of medium height and built, with greying hair brushed straight back from a high forehead, and eyes of a piercingly cold blue* (20). In this house, Claud Amory also lived with his big family. *His sister Caroline Amory, a middle aged spinster, had run Sir Claud’s house for him ever since his wife died some years earlier; she is somewhat a fussy elderly lady a few years older than her brother* (21). His son Richard Amory, *a conventionally young Englishman of about thirty, with sandy hair; he was of medium height, with somewhat thick set and muscular figure*. Meanwhile, Richard’s wife, Lucia, *a beautiful young woman of twenty five, had luxuriant dark hair which flowed to her shoulder and brown eyes which could flash excitingly* (27). Barbara Amory was a niece of Sir Claud Amory. She was an extremely modern young woman of twenty one and had a good spirit that made her live life freely as she wanted. She was identical with cigarette, make up, music, dance and whiskey. She acted just not like any other noble women.

Besides the family as the main members of the house, there was the secretary of Sir Claud Amory, Edward Raynor, who also lived in that house. Edward was an unremarkable looking man in his late twenties, normally polite and socially suave young man who was very loyal. He had been handed many jobs by Sir Claud Amory. Moreover, there was Tredwell the butler, *a tall, lugubrious looking individual with an impeccably correct manner to serve all members of the house* (20). There were also some maids who had just been hired and a guest who just mysteriously came in this morning, Dr. Carelli, an Italian doctor.

## **Complication**

Complication is the stage in the novel when the problem starts to rise. The differences of each character can be observed clearly. The misunderstanding starts to become a big deal in the story and the situation is getting more crowded and messy. In *Black Coffee*, there are many complication and conflicts arise along the story.

## **The Uninvited Guest**

The first complication rises when an uninvited guest came to Abbot’s Cleve. An Italian young doctor named Dr. Carelli suddenly appeared and claimed to be a friend of Lucia, Richard Amory’s wife. The coming of Dr. Carelli in that house created a different atmosphere. Lucia who should be happy with this visit from a friend suddenly acted strangely. The conflict between Lucia and Dr. Carelli made Richard Amory who felt the change in his wife inquire about the problem of Lucia. Even so, Lucia kept silent and acted as if nothing happen. She had an external conflict with Dr. Carelli, which she could not inform anyone.

The bad relationship between Richard and his father has caused a financial problem in his marriage that made him trapped in that house. On the other hand, his father seemed not to care too much about him

and treated him unwell. His father preferred working all day to spending time with his family. "*I suppose he is one of the leading scientist of the day but he can't see any point of view except his own, he trated me damned badly,*" Richard said with increasing irritation (31).

### **The Formula was Stolen**

The second problem escalated the complication in the story. Before the coming of Dr. Carelli was solved, the next problem occurred. As Sir Claud Amory was working on his secret formula for Defense Ministry, at the night when all family members gathered in the library, he announced that he called a detective to send his formula to Defense Ministry. However, before it was sent, the formula has been stolen.

As his glance swept around the assembled company, "The formula, written on an ordinary sheet of notepaper and enclosed in a long envelope, was stolen from the safe in my study some time before dinner this evening, it was stolen by someone in this room!" (63)

Consequently, Sir Claud randomly accused his family of stealing his formula, and he was sure that the thief is one of the people in the library. The conflict between Sir Claud and his son, Richard, has made him suspect his own son of stealing.

### **Sir Claud Amory was Found Dead**

Before, the mystery of the missing formula was solved, Sir Claud Amory was found dead in the chair in the middle of room in darkness. Everybody just shocked with this sudden situation. *Poirot moved slowly to the arm-chair and stood looking down at the motionless body of the scientist. Poirot look at him and felt his pulse, "I fear that Sir Claud Amory has sent for me too late, mademoiselle".* (72) The envelope that lied on the table was also empty and it turned out to be the joke of the thief. The thief was not found yet and Sir Claud Amory was also dead. Complication, thus, arises as one conflict appears after another in this story. According to Kennedy, complication is usually how thriller, mystery and detective fiction opens with smooth pattern of life and then something disturbs it. The shape of complication could be a murder, an inexplicable event or something out of ordinary such as coincidence (12).

Dr. Carelli who spontaneously checked the condition of Sir Claud Amory informed that the cause of death might have been heart disease. Richard directly called Dr. Graham Kenneth, the family doctor, to come to see his father. Everyone was shocked and sad to learn about the fact. Conflicts after conflicts have not been solved, yet another conflict of murder occurred. This apparently fits the characteristics of detective story that has suspense built out of unsolved conflicts that help complicate the story.

### **Poisoned Black Coffee**

The complication rises again as all of the Amory family members were shocked with the truth that there was a murderer among them. The relationship among each of the family members has even worsened. They also randomly suspected each other as the culprit who poisoned Sir Claud. They felt that everyone in that house had a reason to kill Sir Claud. Shocked by the truth that his father was poisoned, Richard refused to involve the police in this case because he wanted to keep his family's dignity.

Dr. Graham talking to Poirot as he did so. "I'm not all surprised that Richard Amory is upset. The newspaper will make the most of this Italian doctor's friendship with his wife. And mud tends to stick, Monsieur Poirot. She was probably wholly innocent. The man obviously made her acquaintance in some plausible way. They are astonishingly clever, these foreigners. Of course. I should not be talking this way, but what else is one to imagine?" (118)

Meanwhile, Richard also had his personal reason for not wanting to involve the police. In his mind, he was afraid that the murderer might be his own wife, Lucia. After the arrival of the mysterious Italian doctor, Dr. Carelli, Lucia's actions have aroused a lot of suspicion. Her whims were not like what she usually did. Richard was so afraid that the problem of the stolen formula and his father's death actually had connection with his wife. He loved her and did not want to lose her. In spite of that, a crime is still a crime. There must be a suspect that finally had to be caught.

## The Blackmail

When the investigation turned to Edward Raynor, Hercule Poirot asked anything that Raynor might know. Edward Raynor confessed that one day before Sir Claud Amory's death, he found a memo on his desk containing information about Selma Goetz. Hercule Poirot was suddenly in flashback as he remembered something his friend has told him long time ago about this familiar name. Selma Goetz was an Italian female spy that worked for Italy and some other countries. She had a daughter whose whereabouts was unknown. Raynor had a suspicion about Lucia. He suspected that "her brood" meant that the daughter was in that house and it referred to Lucia.

Raynor took a letter from his pocket, "Only this", he replied as he rose, moved across to Poirot and handed him the letter. "One of my tasks was to open and sort out all of Sir Claud's correspondence. This came two days ago". (142)

Raynor spoke eagerly, "Mrs. Amory Italian maid. She brought her from Italy, could she possibly be this daughter of Selma Goetz?". (144)

The accusation of Edward Raynor to Lucia was also based on some facts that he knew about Lucia that night. Edward Raynor had seen Lucia with a tube in her hands but Edward did not ask what that tube was for. Lucia was seen to take a tube of hyoscine from the medicine box above the desk. He was afraid that the death of Sir Claud Amory had a connection with Lucia's tube and the poisoned coffee.

## The Investigation on Lucia

Lucia eventually confessed that she was the daughter of Selma Goetz. She hid her true identity because she wanted to live happily without the shadows of her mother's crime. The conflict that happened in Lucia's self is included as internal conflict. She felt guilty and afraid at same time because she already hid her true identity from all the family members. She just wanted to live peacefully like any other women.

"When Mama died, I was at last free! Free to be honest and from that life of lies and intrigue. I met Richard came into my life, I loved him, how could I tell him who I was? Why should I tell him?". "Carelli began to blackmail me, I had no money on my own. I sold my necklace and paid him. I thought that was the end of it all. But yesterday he turned up here. He had heard of this formula that Sir Claud had invented". (Osborne 156-157)

## Lucia's Confession and Dr. Carelli's Arrest

Later it was known that Dr. Carelli was not the person he claimed he was. As his true identity was about to be revealed, Dr. Carelli went towards the door, but Hercule Poirot already blocked the way out. He forced to get out from the library but Hercule Poirot reflexly took his suitcase and Inspector Japp, the police who also investigated this case, entered the room. At that time, Inspector Japp directly recognized him. He was Tonio who had been involved in some crimes. Therefore, he was so familiar to Inspector Japp. Feeling insecure, Carelli forced to get out but he failed.

"I protest! -" Carelli gasped. Suddenly he grabbed his suitcase and made a dash towards the door. Japp rushed after him, grabbed him, and threw him on the settee, taking the suitcase from him as he did so, "No one's hurt you yet, so don't squeal", Japp barked at the now thoroughly cowed Italian. (183)

Hercule Poirot gathered all family in the library as he wanted to reveal important information to the family members. Everybody just sat down and Hercule asked Lucia to confess what she had been hiding. It was so hard for Lucia to tell the truth, but she believed in Poirot. She finally revealed her true identity as the daughter of Selma Goetz and explained her reasons for hiding her identity.

There was an urgency in her tone as she spoke. "He threatened to tell you about my mother unless I got the formula for him, but I didn't do it, I think he must have stolen it. He had the chance. He was alone in there. And I see now that he wanted me to take the hyoscine and kill myself, so that everyone would think that it was I who had stolen the formula. He almost hypnotized me -". (190)

The conflict concerning Lucia and Dr. Carelli had cleared them from the suspect list since the mystery related to them was finally solved and revealed. The conflict that also happened among the people who

hated Dr. Carelli was finally proven. Even though he was neither the true murderer nor the thief, he still had to be arrested in accusation of threatening and extorting.

### **The Formula was Found**

The situation of the house was calmer and more quiet after one mystery was solved. In the library, Hercule and Hastings investigated every side of the room to find the formula. They were both sure that the formula was still in the library since the night it was stolen. Surprisingly, Hercule found paper spills inside the flower vase. They arranged them into a complete form and it was actually the formula. *Hasting unfolded the spills and scrutinized them 'C19 N23' he began to read aloud from one of them. "Yes, yes!" exclaimed Poirot. "It is the formula."* (204) The finding of the formula made them happy and satisfied, yet they had to keep it a secret from the family members. Hercule Poirot and Hastings were sure that this formula would lead them to the truth about the thief and the murderer.

It can be concluded that from all the conflicts that happened in the novel, the conflicts are rising after Dr. Carelli's coming, Sir Claud's death, and the stealing of the formula. The conflicts also add to the complication as everybody accused each other of committing the crime. The bad relationship among the family members made it even worse. A mysterious guest suddenly came, Lucia acted strangely, the formula was stolen, Sir Claud was found dead, and the chaos of investigation actually also worsened the conflicts. Meanwhile, Lucia also hid her identity that caused some people to suspect her.

### **Climax**

Climax is the step when all of the problems which happen in the story become worse. The conflicts that happen in previous stage make every conflicts reach its peak because the situation is very crowded and awful. According to DiYanni, climax in a plot is a turning point for all the main characters in the story (45). In the story, as Edward Raynor entered the library, he had some conversations with Poirot who said that he wanted to gather all the family members to the library to announce about the name of the murderer. At the same time, Hercule Poirot left a note to Captain Hastings to be delivered to Inspector Japp. With only two of them in the library, Edward Raynor offered Whiskey to Hercule Poirot, and as Poirot was feeling nausea as the effect of drinking the whiskey, Raynor made a confession, *"You see my dear Monsieur Poirot, I took not just one but several tubes of hyoscine from that box. If anything, you have had slightly more than I gave Sir Claud."* (215)

Hercule Poirot sank back into his chair and his eyes closed. When Edward Raynor stepped out into the garden, Poirot suddenly rose up and spoke cheerfully. Inspector Japp then came and said, *"Edward Raynor, I arrest you for the witful murder of Sir Claud Amory, and I warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence," Jap made a gesture to the constable to take Raynor away.* (218)

The arrest of Edward Raynor as the thief and murderer becomes the climax of this detective story as the mystery was solved with the revelation of the culprit. Everyone was in their bad condition or the highest level of shock. What exactly matches with the climax is the final decision of the case and usually has the form of revealing the suspect (Diyanni 46).

### **Resolution**

The Amory family wanted to live happily without the shadow of the deadly formula, which actually was in the right hand of Hercule Poirot. As the order of Sir Claud Amory before he died, Hercule Poirot had to hand it to the Ministry of Defense. Afterall, everything had been done successfully and wisely. He did not want to make the Amory family involve in another problem because of the formula, which might allure anyone to steal it due to its valuable price.

Ah! He exclaimed as he went to the mantelpiece over the fireplace and starightened the spill vase, Voila! Now, order and neatness are restoed,'With that, Poirot walked towards the door with an air of immense satisfaction (224).

Resolution is the stage of the novel when the problem is already clear. The situation is cooling down and the story is coming to an end, whether it is sad or happy ending. The resolution in this detective story also functions as the substitution of falling action stage that is not included in the plot of detective story formula. Resolution becomes the cooling down stage after some complications, conflicts and climax take

place. Robert Diyanni states that the action falls off as the plot's complications are sorted out and resolved as the resolution (Diyanni,45). The resolution or also called as *denouement* signifies the stage when the cases are concluded.

The character of Edward Raynor is classified as flat character. Flat character itself has a few characteristics. Gill states that "*some characters are closed and flat most of the novel and then surprise the reader by displaying characteristics the reader did not think they had*" (130). Raynor seems to be a good character at first, however, he is later revealed as an evil one. Similarly, according to Diyanni, flat characters are commonly considered inferior in the story but some characters who are marked by a particular trait or feature, and are therefore considered flat, may still be quite essential and intriguing (62).

The opposite type of flat character is round character. Round character is richly described along the story and has some characteristics. Kennedy argues that round character tends to stay the different throughout a story and learns or becomes enlightened, grow, or deteriorate (74). Based on the plot revealed in this study, it can be concluded that Hercule Poirot is a round character in the novel. As the main character, he is portrayed as dominant and multi dimensional. He is kind, smart, and polite to everyone, especially women, and he always has neat appearance. Throughout the story, the characterization of Hercule Poirot is always represented in a very clear way whether regarding his physical appearance or his behavior.

### **The Trusted Might Become the Traitor**

The analysis above shows how New Criticism is applied to examine the formal elements in *Black Coffee* detective story. The formal elements that become the focus on this study are plot and the characterization. Based on the analysis of the plot and the characterization, it can be stated that the story mainly concerns with the process of revealing the thief and the murderer, in which some conflicts along with the ups and downs come to complicate the story and create suspense.

The conflicts that begins with the coming of the strange Dr. Carelli, the stealing of Sir Claud Amory's formula, the death of Sir Claud, and the process of crime investigation have left readers wondering about the potential suspect. From the exposition, the story always refers to Dr. Carelli's coming that was very strange. Each member of the family also focused on the connection between Dr. Carelli's coming and Lucia's peculiarity that later bring conflicts to the whole family. However, the investigation is still in progress even though Dr. Carelli has already been arrested until the real thief and murderer, Edward Raynor, was trapped in Hercule Poirot's game.

The characterization of Edward Raynor depicted him first as a trusted person in the house who in the end turns into a traitor against the people in his surrounding. This something that no one had never been imagined before. Raynor's portrayal as flat, grey, inferior and undominant made anyone never suspected him. His action throughout the story was not quite elaborately depicted in the story. He even helped Hercule Poirot to reveal the blackmail against Lucia, and he seemed to take advantage of Lucia's identity by blaming her to cover his fault.

No one at this house ever imagined before that the trusted secretary of Sir Claud Amory himself that stole his formula and even took his life. He could do the all crime smoothly because he already knew the weakness and the fissure of the house and he made use of Sir Claud Amory's faith to trick and kill him. Because of the depiction of Edward Raynor in this case and the unpredictably surprising revelation, the study concludes that 'the trusted might become the traitor' as the theme established by the plot and the characterizations that work together to support the story as an organic unity in *Black Coffee* detective story.

### **Conclusion**

The plot formula in the detective story is not like the plot formula in other literary genres. Plot formula for detective story is arranged without falling action. So, after the climax has its significant, the plot directly turns down to the resolution of the text. This is due to the fact that the resolution in a detective story is intended to bring an element of surprise that makes readers unable to easily predict the ending of the story or solution to the mystery. Consequently, plot is the key element in a detective story as also

shown from the analysis of *Black Coffee*. Along with the plot, characterization depicted in the novel has also helped to uncover the mystery since in detective story the crime is usually committed by the least suspected character in the story. In conclusion, this study on *Black Coffee* has shown that all the formal elements in the story have worked together to support the theme of “the trusted might become the traitor” and establish an organic unity.

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