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EXTENDED ESSAY

Group 2

English B HL

Category 3: Literature

Justice

Research Question: How is the theme 'justice' portrayed in the novel Murder on the Orient Express by Agatha Christie?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Murder on the Orient Express by Agatha Christie is a suspenseful crime novel taking place on the Orient Express, featuring the fictional detective Hercule Poirot, whose trip is interrupted by a murder case after the train stranded on its way by a snowfall. Detective Poirot encounters a murder that is finalized by the murder of the killer. He aims to attain justice through his investigation and efforts. The novel portrays the twelve passengers on the train as the twelve members of a jury in a real courtroom and develops how these twelve characters view the case of the homicide of the murderer as poetic justice since the traditional justice system proves to fail.

It is self-evident that the novel mainly focuses on the key theme 'justice'. However, the novel pinpoints that the theme justice is so debauched and deviant that the question if justice is really fair or if it is morally corrupted remains a question unanswered. As a result of which; "*Can the meaning of the term justice differ according to situations?*" and "*What makes justice distinguishable from revenge?*" are the ensuing questions and the latter are as crucial to answer as the former to grasp the meaning and acknowledge the importance of justice; not only in this novel but in a wider sense as well.

Detective Poirot, is the only character who presents real justice. However, after investigating and analyzing the situation from the passengers' perspectives, Poirot, supports that everyone there has a responsibility in the crime that is committed, the paradox in the resolution is being unethical, provides justice, not only for those close to the Armstrong family but also for the society. Deciding not to expose the passengers to the police, evokes a discussion of the act if

homocide of the murderer ensures justice and what justice is. Therefore, the main character Hercule Poirot needs to be analyzed in the novel along with the passengers and their backgrounds, perspectives and other contributory elements portrayed in the novel to acknowledge what justice really is.

Regarding the concept justice, I have decided to analyze, in how many different ways 'justice' is portrayed in the novel, leading up to the research question; *"How is the theme 'justice' portrayed in the novel Murder on the Orient Express by Agatha Christie?"*

The essay will explore how the concept justice is beyond the mere meaning of the word itself as the novel presents, how the symbols in the novel reflect justice, and how the reflection of justice on characters shows if it is a concept which can be literally very personally understood. How justice restores social order is a core issue to be examined as well in the novel.

II. JUSTICE

The term justice is defined as fairness in the way people deal with and the condition of being morally correct. In the evaluation and judgement of the concept justice, perspectives play a big role as many emotions and backgrounds indicate the morally correctness of an act.

In the crime novel 'Murder on the Orient Express', Agatha Christie bases the plot on a past crime of murder that had not been brought out to justice; a failure of traditional justice. The case Poirot is investigating in the novel is an attempt to re-address the justice which failed earlier. The

murdered character in the novel, Ratchett, is the kidnapper and murderer of Daisy Armstrong. Ratchett, whose name is Cassetti, had not been brought to justice after kidnapping and murdering Daisy Armstrong, and somehow was able to get away with it.

The author builds the basis for the novel's discussion of justice by revealing who the murdered victim Ratchett is, alongside being responsible for a previous crime. Ratchett's guilt is established through Poirot's observations of his personality in the novel along with the descriptions of the crime's severity. Ratchett receives threat letters at the beginning of the journey and asks for Poirot's help for his safety. Poirot knows Ratchett is an evil man and refuses to help him. Ratchett is described as a "*bland philanthropist*" but when his "*gaze stopped on Poirot for a moment [...] just for that second there was a strange malevolence*" implying his hidden guilt. Later, Bouc finds Ratchett's dead body with twelve stab wounds in the compartment with some stuff left behind. Ratchett's compartment's window is open, there is a handkerchief with the letter "H", a pipe cleaner, and a piece of paper with the name "Armstrong" written on-which helps Poirot conclude that Ratchett is actually Cassetti- in the compartment.

It is established in the novel that Ratchett deserved to be brought to justice but got away from it. On the other hand, the murder of Ratchett is committed by the passengers on the train, who are related to Daisy Armstrong- Countess Andrenyi who actually is her aunt Helena Goldenberg, Mary Debenham her governess, Greta Ohlsson her nurse, Antonio Foscanelli the family's chaffer, Masterman the valet...-, lays claim on the justice on the ordinary justice system. Poirot reveals the passengers' true identities and their connections to the Armstrong family, thus their potential reasons to be the murderer of Ratchett before he reveals the solution to the case. Poirot

remarks that “*A jury is composed of twelve people -there were twelve passengers- Ratchett was stabbed twelve times.*” implying the similarity of the passengers, the murderers of Ratchett, to the jury in the ordinary justice system, while he reveals his solution to the case.

Gathering all the passengers, Poirot propounds the two possible solutions to the case. It is either a stranger who got on the train and murdered Ratchett at Vincovci or one of those on the train, or a less probability all of those on the train who were involved in Ratchett’s murder altogether. It is admitted that they are all involved but the police are informed that a stranger entered the train and committed the murder. With the twelve passengers being there, Ratchett’s murder was apparently planned a long time before the party came together on the train.

Poirot decides to settle on the alternative solution of a stranger entering the train, murdering Ratchett and running away. Poirot’s decision to incriminate the passengers’ underlines whether justice is maintained inside or outside the court; the same concepts of demonstrated guilt and communal judgement. The theme of justice appears mostly in Part 3 where Poirot gathers the passengers and propounds the two possible solutions, the part of the novel where “justice” is questioned.

III. REFLECTION OF JUSTICE THROUGH THE CHARACTERS

Portrayed over every character in the novel, justice is provided for each of them in different ways. The characters that reflect the theme “justice” the most and how justice is reflected over them are:

a. Ratchett (Cassetti)

“*Ratchett had escaped justice in America. There was no question as to his guilt.*” Cassetti kidnapped and murdered a three-year-old, Daisy Armstrong. He was not punished for his crime; instead, he escaped justice, changed his name Cassetti to Ratchett and started a new life. He destroyed many lives when he murdered Daisy. He deserved to be punished as any criminal did, but easily managed to escape justice because of the failure of the justice system. He successfully escaped being convicted of the crime he committed, but could not escape poetic justice; and surprisingly enough, the lives he destroyed came after him to make sure he received his punishment. All characters agree on Ratchett getting what he deserved, and justice has been retained. Ratchett is many things- the criminal, the kidnapper, the murderer, the social order breaker, the evil, the guilty and all the ugly negatives one could think of- but there is one thing he is not- the victim. He committed murder, escaped from justice and finally was murdered with a perfect plan. In other words, the scene reveals as a place of “*poetic justice*”. It is mentioned several times that he would definitely be executed if the real justice system did not fail, so him being murdered is the enforced righteousness to attain poetic justice. As a matter of fact, he would have already been executed if he had been convicted for the death of Daisy Armstrong.

b. Hector McQueen

The person closest to Ratchett, is Hector McQueen, his secretary. McQueen was employed by Ratchett. For a particular plan Mrs Hubbard says; “*Then we had to try to get Masterman and Hector into employment (...)*” McQueen had witnessed how the justice system failed for

Ratchett closely as his father was the district attorney who handled the case. He knew the laws entitled to attain proper justice would not be efficient enough to imprison and punish Ratchett as a sad consequence of which he escaped from the punishment he well deserved. McQueen reflects his opinion on what justice is for Ratchett and what punishment he deserved, when he says *“If ever a man deserved what he got, Ratchett or Cassetti is the man. I’m rejoiced at his end. Such a man wasn’t fit to live!”* He expresses his conviction in them murdering Ratchett as a delayed inevitable justice.

c. Mrs. Hubbard

Mrs. Hubbard turns out to be Mrs. Armstrong’s mother. After the tragedy Ratchett caused, she is the person devastated the most among the twelve murder suspects. She despises Ratchett and does not refrain from showing what she feels for Ratchett clearly when she says *“I would have stabbed that man twelve times willingly.”*- which can be considered evidential to accuse her as she shows that she would not feel guilty for murdering Ratchet. Mrs. Hubbard believes that Ratchett’s death has provided justice and he finally received the punishment he deserved: *“We decided then and there- perhaps we were mad- I don’t know- that the sentence of death that Cassetti had escaped had got to be carried out.”* Ironically, she believes ending Ratchett’s life is justice for all.

d. Colonel Arbuthnot

Colonel Arbuthnot, who clearly believes that the twelve of them together represent the jury in a real law court, considers their gathering on the train as justice being carried out. “I remembered a remark of Colonel Aruthnot’s about trial by jury. A jury is composed of twelve people- there were twelve passengers- and Ratchett was stabbed twelve times” and him being mentioned as *“Colonel Arbuthnot was very keen on having twelve of us. He seemed to think it made it more in order.”* demonstrates his conviction in what they did provided justice just like how it would have been in a real trial by a real jury. During his interview with Poirot, Colonel Arbuthnot implies his opinion about Ratchett’s death when he says Ratchett deserved death and adds, *“Though I would have preferred to have seen him properly hanged -or electrocuted, I suppose, over there. (...) you can’t go about having blood feuds and stabbing each other like Corsicans or the Mafia.”* which suggests that he does not think murdering him was the best idea to provide justice; as he should have been sentenced to death in a law court and the punishment should have been carried out by law. Colonel Arbuthnot believes Ratchett had deserved to die, with which lawful state justice would have fulfilled its responsibilities. The duality of opinions and conflicts of feelings between Colonel Arbuthnot’s ideas that Ratchett deserved what happened to him but this should not have happened as though it were blood feud retaliation- consequently killing Ratchett neither solves the contradiction nor answers the question whether moral law should be considered superior or inferior to the written state law.

e. **Princess Dragomiroff**

Natalia Dragamiroff states her opinion about Ratchett's death as *"In my view, then, this murder is an entirely admirable happening!"* humorously and ironically finding homicide admirable in Ratchett's case with which she disregards the written state law and favors emotional relief and moral law. Her reaction cannot lawfully be appreciated neither her appreciation of moral law can be disregarded in a little child's murder case. *"You do not believe in doing your utmost to further the ends of justice?"* asks Poirot after she admits that the handkerchief with the letter "H" found in Ratchett's compartment is hers and the letter "H" is her initial "N" in Russian characters. She replies to Poirot's question *"In this case I consider that justice-strict justice- has been done."* Thus, she does not refrain from announcing that poetic justice is what she values over lawful justice.

IV. **THE SYMBOLS REFLECTING JUSTICE**

The author uses symbols to underscore the primary instruments of the criminal justice system, the judge and the jury, in order to portray and contribute to concepts related to justice and restoring social order. These symbols are:

a. **The Twelve Murderers**

The presence of twelve murderers was not a coincidence as mentioned in the novel; *"I remembered a remark of colonel Arbuthnot's about trial by jury. A jury is composed of twelve*

people- there were twelve passengers- and Ratchett was stabbed twelve times (...) Colonel Arbuthnot was very keen on having twelve of us. He seemed to think it made it more in order."

Ratchett's murder is arranged, organized and planned by all of the twelve passengers together and is committed by all the twelve of their participation: *"It took a long time to perfect our plan. We had first to track Ratchett down (...)"* The courtroom jury of a serious criminal case like murder is consisted of twelve members, who hear evidence, discuss and determine innocence and guilt, and decide the punishment. The jury that judged Ratchett in the past failed to convict him of Daisy Armstrong's abduction and murder. The twelve murderers decide to accomplish justice for Daisy Armstrong, whom they are all related to, and after the misjudgment of the jury in which they all become the self-appointed jury to the case: *"I visualized a self-appointed jury of twelve people who condemned him to death and were forced by exigencies of the case to be their own executioners."* says Poirot. They eagerly decide on Ratchett's unfulfilled and delayed execution. Even though they break the law by murdering Ratchett, Poirot decides to treat them like a valid jury, consisting of twelve members, and the act, a legal manifestation of a verdict announced in a court of law.

b. Hercule Poirot

Hercule Poirot is the highest authority and the adjudicator of truth, the symbol of a judge. The unwritten moral law serves to attain justice according to Poirot's beliefs in this unusual case of law and order in the novel. Poirot is the one who is to accept or override the jury's verdict. After evaluating the reasons of their motivation for this illegal act, he decides to accept their moral decision and sets them free by telling the police another solution. Poirot, as a judge, is convinced

that these suspects who confess to their crime do not deserve punishment. Poirot is considered as a self-sufficient qualified expert to make such a judgement, so he is portrayed to embody a superior level of morality.

c. Twelve Stab Wounds

The twelve murderers all wanted to murder Ratchett, but not one of them wanted to be responsible for his murder individually. They were all convinced that the execution of Ratchett morally right, but they neither wanted to be convicted of nor be sentenced imprisonment for murder. The knife is a weapon that can be used by anyone, no matter how strong or how weak they are as is stated in the novel *“was a weapon that could be used by everyone- strong or weak”* and *“I make it twelve. One or two are so slight as to be practically scratches. On the other hand, at least three would be capable of causing death.”* The murderers chose the weapon knife which caused his death but without evidence that who was responsible. All twelve of them stabbed Ratchett with that knife in turns. In this way, they would all have their own share of justice and guilt, but they would not know whose stab caused his death. With one stab by each, they murdered Ratchett fairly, not one of them would be more guilty than others: *“They themselves would never know which blow actually killed him.”* Similar to the decisions the jury makes. The verdict they make leaves no responsibility to one single individual.

V. RESTORING SOCIAL ORDER

The term “*social order*” is often used to state stability and balance without chaos in social life. To sustain social order different parts of a society, they have to work together in coordination in order to maintain the stable and unchaotic safe society state of well-being. The term social order comprises social relations, interactions, beliefs, values and most importantly behavior. Various representatives of different parts of society need to agree on a social contract which include both written laws, and the unwritten moral laws which are the values, norms and certain standards all of which serve for the purpose of maintaining and protecting the peaceful stable life and social order. Without considering both laws where one is a societal conscience social order is impossible to attain. In the novel, the crime Ratchett committed is against both the written and the moral laws. He causes emotional chaos, breaks the social contract and disregards many values and standards all at once. His crime leads to agitation and turmoil in many lives. As a result of his crime social order is perturbed, agitation is caused and social order is spoilt to an extent in which a murder is committed, and found legitimate.

The twelve murderers were all those people whose lives were dragged into the middle of the chaos and to the center of the spoilt social order. With their plan of ending Ratchett’s life, they did provide justice and restore order. Ratchett broke the social order in a morally devastating way in which could not be restored ever since he was not punished properly. The deleterious effects of his crime on the people who were related to Daisy Armstrong caused the society acute suppressed anger because everyone witnessed how the justice system failed and lost their trust in it. As is mentioned earlier, social order can only be present when different parts of the

framework, in the novel the society work in alignment for stability. When the society loses trust in the justice system, the center of laws and authority; the ties of the social order break off from their center. Mrs. Hubbard says “*Society had condemned him; we were only carrying out the sentence.*” The twelve murderers chose to end Ratchett’s life as a result of the despair and desperation of loss of trust in the judicial system. They had to attain justice and restore the social order themselves as the system proved itself to be entirely unsuccessful earlier.

VI. CONCLUSION

Justice might be a complex concept in some extraordinary conditions such as it is in the novel Murder on the Orient Express. Unlike in the traditional justice and judicial system, there is poetic justice, which can be so debauched and deviant, as well. Understanding the difference between systematic justice and poetic justice is important in order to distinguish whether the murder in the novel attains justice or not. With symbols underscoring the primary instruments of the judicial system, which are the twelve murderers symbolizing the twelve members of a real jury and Hercule Poirot himself symbolizing the judge, the novel makes connections to how the case would be handled in a courtroom, therefore convinces the reader that Ratchett being murdered attains justice. Restoring social order is another theme that is essential for the discussion of the theme justice in the novel; as the morality of murder empowered from the need to maintain the balance and stability of society before the tragedy Ratchett had caused. Characters’ background and perspectives also contribute to the reader to acknowledge the poetic justice Ratchett had well deserved, by reflecting their moralities of murder, quests for delayed justice and efforts for restoring social order. Analyze of various ways justice is portrayed in the novel Murder on the

Orient Express is essential in order to answer the questions “*Can the meaning of the term justice differ according to situations?*” and “*What makes justice distinguishable from revenge?*” ensued after reading the novel; therefore, this essay is as crucial to answer to grasp the meaning and acknowledge the importance of justice; not only in this novel but in a wider sense as well.

VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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