



THE FORMULA OF AGATHA CHRISTIE'S DETECTIVE STORY *THE THIRD-FLOOR FLAT*

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Abstract

This research aims to explain the detective formula as portrayed in Agatha Christie's *The Third-Floor Flat* short story and the techniques that are employed to maintain the suspense by using Cawelti's formula theory. Cawelti explains there are four aspects of the classic detective's formula: situation, the pattern of action, character and their relation, and setting. This research is descriptive qualitative research. The formulas of detective stories exist in *The Third-Floor Flat*. The plot goes straight on the definite formula: the preliminaries, birth of the plot, intentional misleading, the crime, grouping for the murderer by the police, friends, relatives, and amateur detective, failure of everybody, detective's announcement of facts and proof. The author used some techniques such as the whodunit, metaphor, foreshadowing, and fake devices to maintain the suspense.

Keywords: detective, foreshadowing, formula, whodunit

I. INTRODUCTION

Detective story has particular characteristic, each event leads to the secret of the crime. The first event is the crime itself. To reach the suspense, the flashback technique can be employed to portray the motive and the guilty. During the process of revealing the crime, the author of detective story creates conflict as intentional misleading of the real guilty. Everyone who has relation with the victim even can be the suspect of the crime. At the end of the story, the guilty can be someone close to the victim with some motives.

“a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more universal story form or archetype” (1976 : 6)

“It is said that formula appears as a popular story type that can also decide a work of literature belonging to” (1976 : 7)

This kind of pattern in popular fiction is called formula. Cawelti explained there are four elements of detective formula : the crime, pattern of action, characters and its relation, and setting. Some popular detectives are Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, Ian Flemming’s James Bond, and Christie Hercule Poirot. *The Third-Floor Flat* is one of Christie’s short stories. It was first published in *Detective Story Magazine* in the U.S. and in the *Hutchinson’s Magazine* in the U.K., both in January 1929. In the U.S., the story was gathered and included in the

collection *Three Blind Mice and Other Stories*, published by Dodd, Mead and Company in the U.S. in 1950. In the U.K., the story was not anthologized until it was included in *Poirot’s Early Cases* in 1974.

The Third-Floor Flat tells about a murder happened in a flat. A body of woman is discovered by two young people who landed a coal lift at the wrong flat. Donovan Bailey and William Faulkner are friends of Patricia Garnett, the woman who lives at the forth floor. Detective Poirot who coincidently lives in the same flat, helps them investigating the case.

Some researches discuss the formula of detective. The first research written by Yohanes Ivan Christianto Hidayat (2014) entitled “ The Classical Detective Formula of Agatha Christie’s *The A. B. C. Murders*”. Another research, “The Detective Formula in Agatha Christie’s *Sleeping Murder: Miss Marple in The Last Case* “, was conducted by PK Lontaan (2022). Both research discussed how the formula is built in Christie’s novel. The object of this study is a short story. In general, novel and short story are different in the number of pages. Novel is expansive, characterized by richness, abundance, and magnificent plot while short story is intensive, concentrate on single story.

Based on the discussion above, the researcher is interested on discussing the formula of detective story. The focus of this

study is explaining the detective formula as portrayed in Christie's *The Third-Floor Flat* short story. Besides, this study also discuss the techniques that are employed to maintain the suspense of the story.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Cawelti (2014 : 80-97) explains there are four aspects of classic detective's formula.

1. Situation

Classic detective story begin with a crime and ended by its solution. The type of crime occurs in detective story reflect the mystification and investigation of detective story.

2. Pattern of Action

The formula of detective story focus on the investigation and solution of the crime. Cawelti mentions six phase of detective pattern; introduction of the detective, the crime and hint, investigation, revelation, explanation and solution.

3. Characters and Their relations

There are at least four character in detective story : the detective, the victim, the guilty and the witnesses.

4. Setting

Setting in classical detective story usually happen in an empty room in middle of town, house, isolated village or suburb.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method. The selection in qualitative methods aims that researchers can analyze in depth and detail with the object being analyzed. Qualitative research is research that uses analytical and descriptive as well as interpretive and naturalistic approaches to the world by testing several things to understand or interpret existing terms (Creswell, 2007).

To explain the formula of detective story and the technique used to maintain the suspense, this study needs the descriptive qualitative method which is concerned with providing description of phenomena without experiment, so the method produces data in the form of words in sentences.

IV. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The data result was taken from the analysis process through data concerning about the mystery formula in *The Third-Floor Flat*. This section shows the mystery formulas that exist and the techniques employed to maintain the suspense of the story.

1. The Formula of Detective as seen in *The Third-Floor Flat*

a. Pattern of Action

The Third-Floor Flat is written in about six thousand words. The riddle of story reveals the case of a murder happened at the third floor of a flat as used for the title. In

most of detective story, the victim of the murder is a wealthy woman who took another woman's husband or fiancé for financial motive. *The Third-Floor Flat* employs similar but not identical pattern.

There are four characters introduced at the preliminaries : Jimmy Faulkener, Patricia Garnett, Donovan Bailey and Mildred Hope. Jimmy Faulkener is a short, broad-shouldered young man, with good-tempered blue eyes. His friend, Donovan Bailey, a lazy, pleasant voice that match his lean, and dark figure. Mildred Hope is a sensible girl, who kept to the point; she is less attractive than Pat. Patricia Garnett or Pat is described as attractive, impulsive, trouble-some and never been particularly strong on weights-and-measures table. She lives on the upstairs of the crime scene which also become the setting of the story. The traits of the character, the place where the event happened accompany the birth of plot.

The author constructs the plot at the beginning of the story. The actors start doing their tasks of the story. Pat lost her flat key; it makes them can't enter the flat. They know that isn't the first time Pat lost something. She is so confident she bring the key out of the house when Mildred blames her but her impulsive character drives her to accuse other than to think carefully. It can be seen from the text below, they back up each other when Pat tries to find a scapegoat.

'If you ever brought it out,' said the other girl, Mildred Hope. 'Of course I brought it out,' said Pat. 'I believe I gave it to one of you two' She turned on the men accusingly. 'I told Donovan to take it for me.'

But she was not to find a scapegoat so easily. Donovan put in a firm disclaimer, and Jimmy backed him up.

Jimmy and Donovan decide to go upstairs through coal lift to open the door from the inside. Landed at the wrong floor is their part to rise the problem of the story. They don't know there is a murder at the third floor until they arrive at Pat's flat. When they find blood on Donovan's hand, they decide to go down again to confirm it. That is the crime scene when they find a woman body lays down on the floor beneath the curtain.

Donovan followed the pointing finger, and in his turn uttered an exclamation. From beneath the heavy red curtains there protruded a foot a woman's foot in a gaping patent leather shoe.

Jimmy went to the curtains and drew them sharply apart. In the recess of the window a woman's huddled body lay on the floor, a sticky dark pool beside it. She was dead, there was no doubt of that. Jimmy was attempting to raise her up when Donovan stopped him.

The author points out the place of the victim's body, the color of the curtain, the position of the body, but not physical

description. Even after police investigation, the author mention only the name and age.

‘There’s no real secret about the matter. Well, the dead woman’s Mrs Grant, all right. I had the porter up to identify her. Woman of about thirty five.

She was sitting at the table, and she was shot with an automatic pistol of small calibre, probably by someone sitting opposite her at table. She fell forward, and that’s how the bloodstain came on the table

The police then make analysis of the murder. They assume the murder was someone named John Fraser as initial written on the evidence . At the end the detective find and prove the real murder. The author uses less ornament and comment on each event.

b. The motive

Thievery or murder is a form of crime. There are two elements of crime, the act and the motive (Davies, Hollind, & Bull, 2008). Money, love, revenge can be the motives. The emotion of anger, jealousy, desperateness, frustated activate the act of crime.

‘Why, certainly, M. Poirot. I know what they think of you at headquarters. I’ll leave you a key. I’ve got two. It will be empty. The maid cleared out to some relatives, too scared to stay there alone.’

‘I thank you,’ said M. Poirot. He went back into the flat, thoughtful.

‘You’re not satisfied, M. Poirot?’ said Jimmy.

‘No,’ said Poirot. ‘I am not satisfied.’

Poirot listens to the police’s analysis and he looks not satisfied with it. He decides to go back to the flat in a thoughtful mind. The story tells more on the chronology of the murder. There isn’t many hints given about the motive until it is revealed at the end of story. In this short story, the murder was someone who are close to the victim.

Poirot nodded. ‘Donovan knew he went to see his wife this evening before going to the flat above a strange irony, by the way, that led the unfortunate woman to come to this building where her rival lived—he murdered her in cold blood, and then went on to his evening’s amusement. His wife must have told him that she had sent the marriage certificate to her solicitors and was expecting to hear from them. Doubtless he himself had tried to make her believe that there was a flaw in the marriage.’

It can be seen from the evidence above, the murder is the victim’s husband. He killed his wife to avoid her telling Pat about his marriage. It’s ironic since both his wife and the woman he loves live at the same building. He even killed his wife before he went upstairs. Eventhough love become the

motive but there is no room for romance in detective story.

c. The people and their social relation

1. The Detective

Poirot was born in 1920 at The Mysterious Affair novel. He appeared in 33 novels and more than 50 Agatha's short stories. He is a private detective who meets the crime coincidentally in most of the stories. In this story, he lived at the same building in where the crime happened. The limited length of short story leads the author to rely on the coincidence so it allows the plot to proceed without interruption.

They had been standing in the doorway of the flat, and now they peered out on the landing.

A figure was standing on the stairs a little way above them.

It moved down and into their range of vision. They stood staring at the little man with a very fierce moustache and an egg-shaped head. He wore a resplendent dressing gown and embroidered slippers. He bowed gallantly to Patricia.

'Mademoiselle!' he said. 'I am, as perhaps you know, the tenant of the flat above. I like to be up high—in the air the view over London.

I take the flat in the name of Mr O'Connor. But I am not an Irishman. I have another name.

That is why I venture to put myself at your service.

Permit me.' With a flourish he pulled out a card and handed it to Pat. She read it.

Poirot is a Belgian detective who speaks French. His physique described as a short man with a very fierce moustache and egg-shaped head. He always dress neatly and like cleanliness. From his speech it can be seen very gentle and courtesy. "The inspector recognized Poirot and greeted him in an almost reverential manner. Then he turned to the others." shows the police's attitude toward Poirot. He is a famous detective that the police are in owe of him, viewing him in an almost superhuman light.

'I will say good night to you, mademoiselle. You must be tired. You have had much cooking to do—eh?' Pat laughed. 'Only the omelette. I didn't do dinner. Donovan and Jimmy came and called for us, and we went out to a little place in Soho.'

'And then without doubt, you went to a theatre?'

'Yes. The Brown Eyes of Caroline.'

'Ah!' said Poirot. 'It should have been blue eyes—the blue eyes of mademoiselle.' He made a sentimental gesture, and then once more wished Pat good night, also Mildred, who was staying the night by special request, as Pat admitted frankly that she would get the horrors if left alone on this particular night.

Poirot gives compliment for Pat's cooking. He also admires her beautiful blue eyes and care for her. Some characteristics can be seen

from the way he speaks and acts: politeness, consideration, charm, sentimentality.

2. The Murder

The murder contributes on constructing the plot throughout the story. The problem arise on their way back to Pat's flat after enjoying a night-out party. Donovan also navigate his friends to use coal lift as the solution of the problem. He let his friend to decide it but then it was him who convinced the others agreeing the idea. He made others trust him more than the owner of the forth-floor, the woman he loved. He constructed his character to be bold, having a strong or vivid appearance.

But the idea was instantly negative d.
'Don't you believe it,' said D
onovan.

He volunteered himself to go upstairs by coal lift. He asked his boy friend to accompany him. He led long conversation during the lift. It made his friend not focus on how many floors they had go through. He asked him if he counted the floor. When his friend answered he forgot to do it, he mention the number of the floor convincingly. It can be seen from the evidence, the way he mentioned the floor without a doubt shows that the question he asked to his friend was to navigate him that he is trusted, dominant and the man in charge. It strengthen his bold character.

Poirot reveals at the end that it was Donovan who steals Pat's key.

Ghosts or burglars, I expect,'
said Donovan.

Hauling this rope is quite heavy work. The porter of Friars Mansions does more work than I ever suspected. I say, Jimmy, old son, are you counting the floors?'

'Oh, Lord! No. I forgot about it.'

'Well, I have, which is just as well. That's the third we're passing now. The next is ours.'

Donnovan leads the way on exploring the flat. He tells Jimmy the light at the kitchen was off then he tries to turn on the light at the sitting room. They don't know they are at the wrong flat untill Donovan makes some noises hitting the furniture.

Her hands were still in his. She had left them there was even clinging to him.

Darling Pat how he loved her. Did she care at all for him? Sometimes he thought she did. Sometimes he was afraid that Jimmy Faulkener remembrances of Jimmy waiting patiently below made him start guiltily

Rivalry between Donovan and Jimmy for Pat's affection is described through the evidence above. It reveals the main characters and their relationship.

3. The witnesses

There are five the witnesses in this story. Donovan and Jimmy who found the corpse, Pat the owner of the forth floor and

Mildred and the house keeper. Pat lived on the upstairs but she doesn't know the all occupants. When they lost the key and couldn't go upstairs, she didn't try to call or ask help from the neighbours.

Pat had passed on into the sitting-room,
where she switched
on the light and
dropped her wrap on the sofa.
She listened with lively interest to Donovan's account of his adventures.
'I'm glad she didn't catch you,' she commented. 'I'm sure she's an old curmudgeon.
I got a note from her this morning wanted to see me some time—something she had to complain about—my piano, I suppose.
People who don't like pianos over their heads shouldn't come and live in flats.
I say, Donovan, you've hurt your hand. It's all over blood.
Go and wash it under the tap.'

Pat told her friends that she got a note from the woman downstairs. She thought she was just going to complain about her piano. It made her conclude that the woman downstairs was an old bad-tempered person. Another witness in this story is the maid. At the evening, when the crime happened, the maid was out. She went back at ten and thought the mistress was already slept since there was no sound.

2. Maintaining Suspense

a. Whodunit

It comes from the words "who has done it?" or "who did it?", a plot of detective story. This type of plot takes the reader on a trip to find the guilty. In this short story, the reader does have a role as the detective, doing investigation, find evidence and prove the guilty. The reader doesn't know the guilty until it is revealed at the end of story

'There are all sorts of people going in and out all the time. These are big blocks. I suppose none of you-' he addressed the four collectively 'saw anyone coming out of the flat?'
Pat shook her head.
'We went out earlier—about seven o'clock.'
'I see.' The inspector rose.
Poirot accompanied him to the door.

The doctor put the time of death around 6.45 to 7.45. Donovan, Jimmy, Pat and Mildred left the flat around 7 so at the time the murder happened, they were still at there. The evidence shows that all characters with the plausibility doing the crime. Their night out weren't an air-tight alibi.

b. Figurative Language

'I devoutly trust we are,' said Jimmy as he stepped out into another inky void. 'My nerves won't stand many more shocks of this kind.' *Another inky void* is an figurative expression used to emphasize that the men are in total darkness as they climbed off the lift into the apartment. The author

also use Metaphor to explain the maid's room in Mrs. Grant's apartment.

He tiptoed across the kitchen into a little pantry, out of which led a door. He opened the door and switched on the light. The room was the kind of dog kennel designed by the builders of flats to accommodate a human being. The floor space was almost entirely occupied by the bed. In the bed was a rosy-cheeked girl lying on her back with her mouth wide open, snoring placidly.

She compared the maid's room to a dog kennel in order to convey its small size, boxy shape and general lack of comfort.

c. Foreshadowing

Some sentences in the story is sometimes featured to build suspense about what is going to happen. For example "In another minute two young men were looking at each other in silent horror." It shows how the two young men realize there is something wrong happened. This is followed the moment they know they aren't at Pat's flat. 'That's odd,' he said, frowning. When Donovan and Jimmy back to Pat's flat, they see blood on Donnova's hand. 'There was quite a lot of blood. Where did it come from?' It makes them curious and decide to investigate the flat downstairs. It is another hint given by the author to predict what will happen the next.

Another expression can be seen when Donovan asks Poirot what will he do the next to investigate the case. A hint given to

predict what will happen the next through this sentences.

'Well, M. Poirot,' he said, 'what next?'

'There is nothing next. The case is finished.'

'What?'

Poirot said nothing, the case is finished. It leads to a prediction that he finally knows whom will be accused of murdering Mrs. Grant.

d. Fake Devices : The "Trace" Fallacy

The police found a handkerchief in the pocket of dead woman's dress. There is no fingerprint on it but some words printed in small, prim capital. I WILL COME TO SEE YOU THIS EVENING AT HALF PAST SEVEN. J.F. The police suspect the murder is someone initial JF, John Fraser. It is the fake device used by the murder to divert attention from himself.

V. CONCLUSION

The plot tells on one story line . This goes straight on definite formula : the preliminaries, birth of plot, intentional misleading, the crime, grouping for murderer by the police, friends, relatives and amateur detective, failure of everybody, detective's announcement of facts and proves. The formulas of Cawelti's detective story exist in The Third-Floor Flat. In the case of detective story, the distinction of detective formula between novel and short story is imperceptible. The problem and its solution is the one solitary plot of detective story; the difference between detective novel and

detective short-story is on the length. This short story employs some techniques such as the whodunit, metaphor, foreshadowing and fake device to maintain the suspense.

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