

# Verbalization of Concept of “Vigilante Justice” in Agatha Christie’s Creative Work

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**Abstract.** The article deals with the concept of “vigilante justice”. The authors analyze the creative works of Agatha Christie to find out the ways of the representation of this concept. They use the linguistic hermeneutic method of interpretation based on the three-leveled system of comprehension which was worked out by Prof. Bogin. The main objective of this method is discovering of metaconcepts because only by understanding them a reader can reach the level of deep meanings of the text. Using this method, the authors discover the artistic details which contain symbols referring the concept of “vigilante justice”. Moreover, with the help of metaconcepts represented in the novels they try to find out the deep inner meaning decoded by Agatha Christie in her creative works.

## 1 Introduction

This article is dedicated to one of the most complicated social phenomena (from both the moral and judicial points of view) – “vigilante justice”. The material we are going to deal with is taken from Agatha Christie’s bestsellers: “The Murder on the Orient Express”, “Ten Little Niggers” and “Three Blind Mice”. We are trying to interpret the author’s messages in two novels and a short story where the criminals, who had not got the retribution from the law, were punished by people who couldn’t have stayed aside from such injustice.

First of all, it should be mentioned that the core of our article, i.e. the basic method, that we are going to use while analyzing the chosen creative works of Agatha Christie, is the method of interpretation worked out by an outstanding Russian Linguist G.I. Bogin. According to the scientist, the process of interpretation includes three levels of comprehension which are connected with each other. The first level is called “the level of semantic comprehension”, the second one is “cognitive” level and the last comprehension level is a “metaconceptual” one. Semantic comprehension deals with understanding of words, phrases and idioms. Cognitive comprehension embraces the plot of the creative work, in other words, it is the understanding of the situations taking place in it. The metaconceptual level of comprehension undergoes on the level of metaconcepts which can be represented in text with a help of symbols or “artistic details” [1].

Artistic detail is a condensed, laconic and very expressive representation of a complicated, multifaceted phenomenon, fact or idea in a text. It is an important element to be taken into account when seeking out the message of a text. Moreover, it reproduces the implicit content and the author's attitude to events and characters. Artistic detail is created with a help of different language

means perceived as unusual and unexpected or it may be usual thing that is repeated too many times to attract readers’ attention [1, 6, 7].

As we have already mentioned, all three levels of comprehension are connected and cannot function separately, sometimes the reader must reread the extracts of the text or the whole text to understand it properly. That is why the process of understanding in philological hermeneutics is called “a hermeneutic circle” [1, 6, 7].

Let us start with defining of the notion “vigilante justice”. It is an act of retribution done by a person who can be called “vigilante”. Vigilante is someone who takes the law into his/her own hands by trying (judging) or punishing the other person. Vigilante has no legal authority. There is one more definition. “Vigilante is a person who is not a member of law enforcement, but who punishes the person suspected in lawbreaking.” [5].

Further, we are going to find out the ways of representation of the concept of “vigilante justice” in Agatha Christie’s creative works using Prof. Bogin’s method of comprehension.

## 2 Linguistic hermeneutic analyses of Agatha Christie’s creative works

When the author wants to attract reader’s attention to this or that important fact or message, he/she may use different devices. Our article is not a literary opus but a linguistic research. Besides, we try to “go in an ordinary reader’s shoes”, as Agatha Christie wrote for this kind of readership. For this reason, we are paying more attention to artistic details than to stylistic devices. An artistic detail, from Prof. Bogin’s point of view, is broader and deeper than a stylistic device. Sometimes it is difficult to recognize it because it may be hidden in the description of unimportant, from the first point of view, things or

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events. But it may lead the reader to a very important symbol referring to a metaconcept [5].

The first meaningful artistic detail is the description of the place where the events happen. In the story “Three Blind Mice”, the author shows us the place where retribution is to be done. “It was a lonely house, two miles from a village, two miles ... from anywhere.” [2]. So the author puts the characters into an isolated house. The house symbolizes the center of the space, human world, the Universe. Besides, and this is very important concerning Agatha Christie’s works, it symbolizes the returning to the Great Mother’s womb during the initiation or descending into darkness before regeneration. Another symbol in the text which overlaps the symbol “house” is “well”. The author puts it into the name of the manor where the act of punishment takes place. It is called “Monkswell manor”. “Well”, in the mythology of different peoples, symbolizes the womb of the Great Mother or the soul. So the name of the house refines that this place is like purgatory where sinners (offenders/criminals) have to be convicted of their sins and resurrect in a new life.

In the novel “Ten Little Niggers”, we have a similar situation. The action also takes place in a “luxurious modern house” which is located on a “little island off the Devon coast” [3]. That makes the place of retribution even more isolated. In this novel Agatha Christie again summons all the criminals in one place to do the justice upon them. The vigilante (Mr. Justice Wargrave) sentences them to death and then executes them one by one according to the degree of their blame. The guiltier the convict is the later he/she dies and the more torments he/she suffers. That underlines the idea of purgatory where the quantity of sins burdening a soul requires equal quantity of suffering to clear it.

Moreover, these houses in the stories symbolize the whole world that we live in. The author shows us that our world like these houses is a perfect place to inhabit. However, human beings lose the possibility to live here happily by committing crimes.

In the novel “Murder on the Orient Express” the scene of action is a train. Again the author isolates the location of vigilante justice from the surrounding world. The train is at a standstill. “Heavy banks of snow surrounded the train.” In comparison with the previous creative works, in this novel there is only one criminal and twelve vigilantes just like in a trial jury. Execution is being done when the train stops. Since the moving train symbolizes life, the still train means death. Moreover, the snow and winter outboard also refer to this concept. So the still train again becomes a purgatory for the soul of the convict.

Another not less meaningful artistic detail in Agatha Christie’s creative works is the description of the weather which is an allusion to the symbols “Nature” and “Heavens”. The author uses the following words and word combinations: dreadful weather; cold, dark and heavy sky; unshed snow; bitterly cold; thick feathery flakes; lugubrious weather forecasts; grim warnings about the weather; nightfall, snowdrift and so on. She wants to show the readers that people, blocked in the scene of action, are captured there by Providence, like in

a mousetrap. Thus, the author makes us believe that the punishment for a crime is inevitable and the forces of Nature and Universe take care of it.

In “Three Blind Mice” and “Murder on the Orient Express” we can see that after the snowfall everything becomes white. The snow symbolizes white shroud which refers to the concept of death. “The world was white, silent, and - in some subtle way – menacing” [2]. In the novel “Ten Little Niggers” instead of snowfall, the author uses storm which isolates the Nigger island from the mainland. “The storm broke just as the old man’s body was borne in through the door... There was a sudden hiss and roar as the rain came down.” [2]. In this extract we can also see that Nature reflects the inner world of the characters. The storm begins when the people on the island realize at first time that something dreadful is going on, and it ends when the last of them leaves the world in peace.

The third important artistic detail is the description of characters who, mostly, are criminals and vigilantes. One of the main idea, underlined by the author in her novels, is that the outlaws, while braking human law, lost their human faces and “turned into beasts” (metaphorically and literally). The author implied this idea into her text via the description of these criminals. Thus we can find this artistic detail, containing such an idea, in the novel “Murder on the Orient Express”.

From the very first meeting with M. Ratchett Hercules Poirot did not like him. In his conversation with M. Dubouc he described him in the following way: “When he passed me in the restaurant ... I had a curious impression. It was as though a wild animal – an animal savage, but savage! ... had passed me by. The body – the cage – is everything of the most respectable – but through the bars, the wild animal looks out... I couldn’t rid myself of the impression that evil had passed me by very close ...” [4].

The words written in bold are sketching the conception of the whole novel. They are preparing readers to the inevitable denouement: the wild animal (the evil itself) will be hunted, cornered and killed. The murderer must change his role from the predator to the prey. This transformation is the essence of retribution (or vigilante justice). Ratchett ought to feel like his victim – a little three-year-old girl who was kidnapped and killed cruelly.

The vigilantes who tracks the animal down are ordinary people of “all classes and nationalities”: “an Italian chauffeur, and English governess, a Swedish nurse, a French lady’s maid and so on.” All these people are connected with the Armstrongs and their tragedy. There are twelve of them. The number is symbolic because it refers to a trial by jury. “Ratchett had escaped justice in America. There was no question as to his guilt... a self-appointed jury of twelve people ... condemned him to death and were forced by exigencies of the case to be their own executioners.” [4]. In this extract the concept of Vigilante Justice is verbalized comprehensively. It represents the scheme or the frame of it, as we can find here a criminal, who is guilty but escaped the law, and vigilantes who have to execute him to right a wrong.

The same scheme is carried out by Agatha Christie in her favorite novel “Ten Little Niggers”. But if in the previous creative works there is only one criminal escaping justice and twelve vigilantes, in this one the author shows us how ten outlaws are executed by one vigilante. The person, who takes the act of retribution into his own hands, is a real judge. And this fact makes stronger the reference to the concept of “vigilante justice”. Let us analyze the way the author describes outlaws and a vigilante.

Mr. Justice Wargrave, who plays the role of the vigilante in the novel, executes nine people on Nigger Island and one on the mainland. These people are not outlaws from the legal point of view as there are neither evidences nor clues against them. Mr. Justice Wargrave collects the information about them from different sources, entraps them on the island and sentences them to death. It is necessary to add that unlike the vigilantes in the novel “Murder on the Orient Express”, who have strong mental health, Mr. Justice Wargrave has mental disorders. He writes in the manuscript written for Scotland Yard the following: “From an early age I knew very strongly the lust to kill. But side by side with this went a contradictory trait – a strong sense of justice. It is abhorrent to me that an innocent person or creature should suffer or die by any act of mine. I have always felt strongly that right should prevail...” [3]. However, the older Mr. Justice Wargrave became, the stronger was his desire to kill a criminal with his own hands, that is why he decides to capture nine criminals and to commit vigilante justice.

It is remarkable that Agatha Christie describes Mr. Justice Wargrave comparing him with a turtle. “Like a wary old tortoise, Mr. Justice Wargrave sat hunched up, his body motionless, his eyes keen and alert.” Firstly, turtle symbolizes firmness of Mr. Wargrave’s believes which are like a hard carapace surrounding him. Only a man with such strong believes can bear and accomplish a plan of vigilante justice. Secondly, turtles are also known due to their slowness. So we can see that vigilante justice takes much time and requires deliberate preparations.

The first criminal executed by Mr. Justice Wargrave was Anthony Marston. The judge imposes the following sentence to him: «Anthony James Marston, that upon the 14th day of November last, you were guilty of the murder of John and Lucy Combs» [3]. Anthony is guilty in involuntary manslaughter. He hit two children by car. But, the only punishment he got was the deprivation of driving license for one year. Marston says, “I’ve just been thinking – John and Lucy Combes. Must have been a couple of kids I ran over near Cambridge. Beastly bad luck”. Mr. Justice Wargrave said acidly: “For them, or for you?” Anthony said, “Well, I was thinking – for me – but, of course, you’re right sir, it was damned bad luck for them. Of course, it was a pure accident. They rushed out of some cottage or other. I had my license suspended for a year. Beastly nuisance» [3].

The main thing to be noticed here is that this man does not feel guilty. After the accident, he has never been tortured by his conscience and the only thing that upsets him is a deprivation of driving license. The author shows us that he is just a selfish person thinking only

about himself. The judge executes him in the first order by poisoning. «Anthony Marston I selected from a large group of people who had committed similar offences. His complete callousness and his inability to feel any responsibility for the lives he had taken made him, I considered, a type dangerous to the community and unfit to live» [3].

The next outlaw executed by Mr. Justice Wargrave is Ether Rogers. «Thomas Rogers and Ether Rogers, that on the 6th of May, 1929, you brought about the death of Jennifer Brady». Ether and her husband were Jennifer Brady’s servants. According to Rogers’s words they were devoted servants and did their best for their mistress who was always in poor health. «There was a storm, sir, that night — the night she was taken bad. The telephone was out of order. We couldn’t get the doctor for her. I went for him, sir, on foot. But he got there too late.” Nobody believes him, because of his twitching face, his dry lips, the fright in his eyes. Besides one of the other criminals asked him if they got something after Miss Brady’s death and he answered that she left them a legacy in recognition of their faithful services. Even doctor Armstrong admits that it must have been very easy to get rid of the elderly woman. Here is a conversation between him and Lombard: «Lombard went on: “...What do you think they did? Poisoned the old lady?” Armstrong said slowly, “It might be simpler than that. I asked Rogers this morning what this Miss Brady had suffered from. His answer was enlightening. I don’t need to go into medical details, but in a certain form of cardiac trouble, amyl nitrite is used. When an attack comes on an ampoule of amyl nitrite is broken and it is inhaled. If amyl nitrite were withheld – well, the consequences might easily be fatal.” Philip Lombard said thoughtfully, “As simple as that. It must have been – rather tempting.” The doctor nodded. “Yes, no positive action. No arsenic to obtain and administer – nothing definite – just – negation! And Rogers hurried through the night to fetch a doctor and they both felt confident that no one could ever know.” “And even if anyone knew, nothing could ever be proved against them,” added Philip Lombard.» [3].

The judge shares the opinion that negation is equal to murder and punishes the Rogers. The lady goes first. It is not only because of the etiquette but, mostly, because Mr. Justice Wargrave thinks that she is less guilty than her husband who initiated the crime. The judge is a professional that is why he has his own approach to the whole affair. «There were... amongst my guests, varying degrees of guilt. Those whose guilt was the lightest should, I decided, pass out first, and not suffer the prolonged mental strain and fear that the more cold-blooded offenders were to suffer. Anthony Marston and Mrs. Rogers died first, the one instantaneously, the other in a peaceful sleep. Marston, I recognized, was a type born without that feeling of moral responsibility which most of us have. He was amoral — pagan. Mrs. Rogers, I had no doubt, had acted very largely under the influence of her husband» [3]. So Mrs. Rogers dies while sleeping.

The third criminal is general Macarthur. «John Gordon Macarthur, that on the 14th of January, 1917,

you deliberately sent your wife's lover, Arthur Richmond, to his death» [3]. At first he denies that he is guilty, then after two deaths Macarthur admits it. «Yes, he sent Richmond to his death and he wasn't sorry. It had been easy enough. Mistakes were being made all the time, officers being sent to death needlessly. All was confusion, panic. People might say afterwards, "Old Macarthur lost his nerve a bit, made some colossal blunders, sacrificed some of his best men." They couldn't say more» [3].

When the general makes a confession, he starts remembering his previous happy life. And at last he realizes that by murdering Richmond he destroyed everything with his own hands. Macarthur is the only criminal who repents and wants to be punished. «He thought: "Best of an island is once you get there – you can't go any farther... you've come to the end of things..." He knew, suddenly, that he didn't want to leave the island.» [3].

The fourth criminal is Thomas Rogers. He is guiltier than his wife and dies later. The judge writes in his manuscript about the execution: «I killed Rogers in the morning of August 10th. He was chopping sticks for lighting the fire and did not hear me approach» [3].

The fifth executed criminal is Miss Brent. According to judge she is responsible «for the death of Beatrice Taylor». Miss Brent does not take the blame and even do not want to justify herself. «Miss Brent said coldly: "There is no question of defense. I have always acted in accordance with the dictates of my conscience. I have nothing with which to reproach myself» [3]. Emily Brent is a religious zealot who tries to follow all God's testaments except the main one – "love thy neighbor as thyself". To her mind God is in charge for punishing sinners and that is His main function. And there is no wonder in it if we take into account that her father made her to read the following pray before diner: «The heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made: in the net which they hid is their own foot taken. The Lord is known by the judgment which he executeth: the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands. The wicked shall be turned into hell» [3]. This pray is also an important artistic detail which represents the concept of "vigilante justice". So, she was grown up with the idea that God could punish her for her sins anytime. That is why she does not love Him, she is just afraid of His punishing hand. She tries to stay pure and sinless and, expelling the poor pregnant girl, she drives her to suicide. «Beatrice Taylor was in service with me. Not a nice girl – as I found out too late. I was very much deceived in her. She had nice manners and was very clean and willing. I was very pleased with her. Of course, all that was the sheerest hypocrisy! She was a loose girl with no morals. Disgusting! It was some time before I found out that she was what they call 'in trouble.' She paused, her delicate nose wrinkling itself in distaste..." [3]. The parents of Beatrice also were too religious to forgive her for her sin and the poor seduced girl took her own life, throwing herself into the river. Miss Brent does not blame herself in the tragedy. She believes strongly that it was Beatrice's sin that drove her to the suicide. She resumes that if she behaved like a decent modest young woman

none of this would have happened. «She turned her face to Vera. There was no self-reproach, no uneasiness in those eyes. They were hard and self-righteous. Emily Brent sat on the summit of Nigger Island, encased in her own armour of virtue. The little elderly spinster was no longer slightly ridiculous to Vera. Suddenly — she was terrible» [3].

The sixth criminal sentenced by the judge is doctor Armstrong who caused the death of his patient on the surgical table. He knows that he is guilty because he was drunk. «Drunk – that's what it was – drunk... And I operated! Nerves all to pieces – hand shaking. I killed her all right.» [3]. That is why he was added to Mr. Justice Wargrave's list of invitations. The judge pushed him off a high cliff into the stormy sea. So, his sin was washed from his soul in the sea.

The seventh criminal, William Henry Blore, is an ex-police officer from Criminal Investigation Department. Blore put into the jail an innocent man who died soon there. The judge kills him by a big heavy marble clock dropping it on Blore's head. The clock as a machine symbolizes a system. And the system executes Blore like the penitentiary system killed his victim. Moreover, there is an image of bear on the clock. And we know that bear also may be the symbol of lycanthrope. That is a direct reference to the fact that Blore is a bent copper.

The eighth criminal in Wargrave list is Philip Lombard. He is "guilty of the death of twenty-one men, members of an East Africa tribe" [3]. Agatha Christie uses a wolf image when describing him. «His lips drew back from his teeth in that curious wolf-like smile characteristic of the man.» «A wolf - that's what it is - a wolf's face... Those horrible teeth.» So the author lets us know that this man is a wild beast inside. This situation is similar to the Ratchett's situation in "Murder on the Orient Express". In the end, Lombard is killed like a beast with a bullet from his own gun.

The most cold-blooded murderer is Vera Claythorne, the ninth and the last criminal in the judge's list. Her sin is the heaviest because she committed a crime against an innocent child. She let a little boy swim away from the shore and he drowned. She did it because she wanted to get rid of him. She dies the last. The judge makes her hang herself. This is the allusion to Juda's story. Vera like Juda did not kill personally but she sent an innocent soul to death for money and comforts.

The short story "Three Blind Mice" correlates with Vera's story as the main character, Molly Davis, was also guilty in child's death because she did not come to help in time. But in opposite to Vera she realizes her blame and the bar of conscience bothers and troubles her in her new life. That is why vigilante justice finds her but does not execute her.

In this short story Agatha Christie uses a very meaningful description of the characters. She represents them as shadows and silhouettes. «Shadow passed the window, and she jumped – a strange man was coming through the snow.» «All that Molly, standing in the library door, could see of the newcomer was his silhouette against the white world outside.» [2]. First of all, shadows symbolize afterlife world and it shows us that vigilante justice is nearby carrying death with it. As

for silhouettes, they mean that people do not see each other clearly as they are indeed. That happens because instead of living their own lives they play different social roles. “And instead there was just herself, Molly Davis, playing a role that did not yet seem a very natural role to play. Her whole life, at the moment, seem unreal – Giles seemed unreal. She was playing a part – just playing a part.” [2]. Perhaps, that was the reason why Molly did not interfere to help the boy. At that moment she could not see things clearly and feel for that boy. Though the real world of people is hidden from their sight, the author uncovers it by describing the weather. “The only thing that was wrong was the weather.” [2]. Here we can see that despite the visible prosperity of Molly’s life her inner world is not correct. So, as we can see, vigilante justice operates with the inner world of people neglecting external indicators of their life such as wealth, social status, cultural background etc.

### 3 Conclusion

We analyzed these three creative works of Agatha Christie by means of Prof. Bogin’s methods and found out that the concept of “vigilante justice” was represented comprehensively in them. The writer described situations when a criminal avoided legal penalty and triggered vigilante justice.

On the semantic level of comprehension, we revealed and interpreted artistic details representing the most important concepts and symbols. Thus all three creative works contained the following artistic details:

- description of the weather;
- description of the scene of action;
- description of the characters.

Cognitive level of comprehension links semantic and metaconceptual levels: analyzing words, which belonged to artistic details, we bound them with the situation and came to metaconcepts – eternal symbols of human world perception.

Thus we discovered such symbols as “snow”, “snowfall”, “storm”, “sea” in the description of the weather which referred to such eternal concept (metaconcepts) as “death”, “divine forces”, “nature”, “retribution”. In the description of the scene of action, we found out the following symbols: “house”, “well”, “clock”, “train”, “island” which represented the metaconcepts of “world”, “life”, “regeneration”, “purgatory”. As for the description of characters there were such symbols as “wolf”, “tortoise”, “shadow” and “silhouette” which lead us to the metaconcepts of “evil”, “wrath”, “forbearance”, “afterlife world”.

Another important link between these three creative works on the cognitive level is the murder of an innocent child which works like a trigger for the vigilante justice. The author unfolds the plot around that horrible crime, because nobody can justify or forgive the murderer of a child and have any doubt that the criminal deserves death. The writer refers us to the novel of F.M. Dostoevsky “The Brothers Karamazov”. In this novel there is a dialogue between two brothers, Ivan and Aleksey, where Ivan explains his rejection of the world

order. He cannot forgive the criminal who tortures and kills an innocent child despite that it should be everyone’s Christian ought. Ivan Karamazov believes that the criminal must be executed in this world. “Retribution is not in the eternity, somewhere or sometime, but it is here on the earth.” “... I totally reject the supreme harmony. It does not cost a little teardrop of even one child tortured to death... It does not cost it because his tears are left unredeemed. Unless they are redeemed there must not be any harmony...”.

Agatha Christie shares this opinion and executes murderers in her fiction. It is clear from the denouement of “Murder on the Orient Express” where Hercules Poirot lets the vigilantes go with no doubt of hesitation. He even helps them to hide the evidences that they executed Ratchett.

So after analyzing these three creative works of Agatha Christie, we can conclude that they can be interpreted on different levels of comprehension. These novels and a short story are not pulp fiction but they contain philosophical content, i.e. a mere desire of the author to make the world a better place and find out some answers to some eternal questions of the western civilization.

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