

## Seeing through the Curtain: Agatha Christie's *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*

Wang, Ming-fong

*Curtain*, a detective fiction written in 1946 by Agatha Christie but posthumously published in 1976<sup>1</sup>, illustrates some cultural phenomenon in postwar England. Written in 1940s, *Curtain* reveals nostalgia of Victorian past and discontent with dominant capitalistic culture in postwar era. The aristocratic country house and the glory of British Commonwealth can stand for a Victorian past which gradually declines but still coexists with the dominant culture in the postwar era. Besides, the conflict between young people and senior generation as well as the women's role in a postwar society also turn more and more prominent and complicated at that time. The cultural phenomenon in 1940s presented in *Curtain* implicates that the Victorian cultural values are still both incorporated and not incorporated into the dominant postwar culture. Generally speaking, Christie's *Curtain* can be categorized as a classical detective novel written in Poesque/Holmsian tradition. However, the nostalgia of the Victorian cultural value and the discontent with an effective post-war culture lead this novel to differentiate a bit from this tradition, due to that the detective Poirot in *Curtain* closes his last case by using a personal justice that is higher than a lawful justice made by a dominant culture. The nostalgia and the discontent found in *Curtain* may relate to what Pierre Macherey calls the "silence" of a literary text. Macherey also relates the "silence" to Freudian "unconscious" and latent meaning hidden beneath a textual surface.

*Curtain* also reveals some traits that differentiate the convention of classical

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<sup>1</sup> Hercule Poirot, the series detective appearing frequently in Agatha Christie's fictions, span at least 26 years before she writes *Curtain* (Poirot makes his first entrance on Christie's crime stage in 1920 with the publication of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*). According to her autobiography, Christie mentions that she get tired of writing the character she created and deliberately wants to kill off him in *Curtain*. But the fame and popularity of Poirot in worldwide readers' mind drive her to procrastinate the publication of the book in 1976.

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detective fiction, the Poesque/Holmsian tradition. The detective story written in this tradition reaches its Golden Age between the 1920 and 1940s. Whereas, the American hard-boiled detective fiction emerges in America in 1930s and launches a pattern shift of the detective fiction. The development of detective fiction, from Poesque tradition and later Holmsian one, in which a rational, static, and intellectual detective is emphasized, to non-Poesque (American hard-boiled) one highlighting a not-so-smart, adventurous, and even decadent sleuth, actually undergoes a juxtaposed and interflowed process during the World War II. The structure of the detective fiction *Curtain*, on one hand, still inherits from the formulation of this classical tradition. This can be illustrated in the device of impeded retardation (too many false clues and red herrings)<sup>2</sup>, the relationship between the eccentric dandy detective (Hercule Poirot) and his friend narrator (Arthur Hasting), characters' imbecility (no one, except Poirot, ever suspects the real murderer), and finally the isolated setting (the rural country house—the Styles Court). However, *Curtain* contains some significant differences from Poesque/Holmsian tradition of detective fiction. The most shocking effect in this novel lies in the fact that Poirot the detective is the murderer himself committing a murder in shooting a cunning suspect. The cunning character, Stephen Norton, is actually a “perfect murderer” because he is legally untouchable: he does not commit murder; he causes others to commit it for him. For this reason, Poirot needs to find out Stephen Norton's next target victims and stops him from enticing another scapegoat to committing murder. In classical detective fiction, a restoration of social order and justice is much emphasized, but in *Curtain* the detective/murderer finally escapes from a lawful transaction and chooses his own way of death. Seen in this perspective, *Curtain* seems to reveal a discontent with a cultural value in a dominant culture. Instead of a “social justice,” the detective Poirot manipulates a “personal justice” in order to restore a social order. This undertone of “individualism” displays a discontent with the cultural value at that time. The discontent found in the text implicitly suggests what Raymond Williams calls “residual” culture, which “cannot be verified

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<sup>2</sup> These narrative principles of classical detective fiction are discussed by Dennis Porter. See the article “Backward Construction and the Art of Suspense.”

or cannot be expressed in term of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the base of the residual—cultural as well as social—of some previous social formation” (Williams 40). The nostalgia of the Victorian cultural value and the discontent with a dominant cultural one can be regarded as a “residual” culture—a previous cultural formation. In fact, *Curtain* reveals cultural phenomenon of residual-incorporated and of residual-not-incorporated. On the surface, the text explicitly presents a dominant post-war cultural value, in which the residual culture is incorporated into it. Put in another way, this kind of cultural value found in *Curtain* can be viewed as a “state of consciousness,” an ideology, entering the text<sup>3</sup>. In the “conscious” of the text, the cultural meanings and values are consistent with (incorporated into) it. Yet, when the “conscious” works in a textual process, it “inevitably produces certain lapses and omission which correspond to the incoherence of the ideological discourse” (Selden and Widdowson 89-90). The lapse or incoherence found in this dominant culture may function as “an unconscious,” which is hidden beneath the text and forms the textual unconscious. As Macherey suggests, the speech of a text comes from a certain silence; if the text tries to say anything, there are other things “*which must not be said.*” To Macherey, the text has nothing more to tell the reader, so the reader must “investigate the silence” (Macherey 85), for it is the silence that is doing the speaking. He further relates the “silence,” absence of certain words, to a Freudian term “*named: the unconscious*” (85).

In *Curtain*, the undertone of the discontent with a dominant culture implicates the “unconscious” of the text. This discontent also suggests a significance of a residual culture that is not incorporated into the dominant postwar culture. The capitalistic society and the emergence of new woman in 1940s presented in *Curtain* function as Williams’s “emergent culture,” which means that “new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences, are continually being created and that they are part of effective contemporary practice” (41). The Victorian

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<sup>3</sup> See Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson’s discussion of Pierre Macherey’s *A Theory of Literary Production* in their *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Theory* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 89.

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cultural value implicates a residual culture which, in *Curtain*, is both incorporated and not incorporated into the dominant culture; accordingly, some “non-metaphysical” (Williams 42) residual cultures are formed under the surface of the dominant culture. Based on Raymond Williams’s thought, the residual culture is not one cultural formation; rather, it contains various cultural activities and many various residual cultures. Some residual cultures may be repressed and unspoken cultural values subjected to a dominant cultural practice, but some residual cultures may create a new cultural value and meaning, the so-called emergent culture, when these residual cultures are no longer subjected to a dominant cultural practice. In *Curtain*, the Victorian cultural value, the old and previous cultural formation, is “unconsciously” presented as Williams’s residual culture oscillating between being-incorporated and not-being-incorporated into the dominant post-war culture. The women’s role in postwar era can be regarded as an emergent culture, a new meaning and a new value in Williams’s terms, which also oscillates between being-incorporated and not-being-incorporated into the dominant post-war culture. This oscillating process exemplifies a “non-metaphysical” cultural formation, which is the “unconscious” and the “unspoken silence” of the literary text—*Curtain*.

Pierre Macherey argues that the aim of cultural criticism is “to *speak the truth*, a truth not unrelated to the book, but not as the content of its expression” (83). He further emphasizes that the critic should notice what “is not spoken by the book” (83). Put it another way, the importance of a literary text should lie in its “silence,” a certain absence, as the source of its expression. An overall exploration of this novel must include a consideration of both the spoken, what the readers know explicitly about the book, and the unspoken, something implicit left unsaid in the literary text. Macherey explicates further the “unspoken silence” in terms of the Freudian *unconscious*: “[t]o reach utterance, all speech envelops itself in the unspoken” (86). That is, the unconscious silence functions as a latent/implicit meaning, which does not dispel a manifest/explicit meaning (86)<sup>4</sup>; rather, a true meaning is in the relation

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<sup>4</sup> The terms “latent” and “manifest” come from Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* in *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud* (Chicago: William Benton P, 1952). In discussing “dream formation” and

between the two. A literary text, viewed in this light, must present two kinds of meaning: a manifest meaning and a latent meaning. In a novel, what the characters speak can be regarded as the source of explicit meaning, while what the characters do not speak in their speech provides more interpretation of implicit meaning for the reader. As Macherey points out, the task of the reader is to “investigate the silence” of a text; he seems to suggest that the reader may resemble a detective who probes into the absent textual meaning. The lapse and inconsistency in a text may function as disorienting events and clues waiting to be solved by the reader/detective. To Selden and Widdowson, the role of Macherey’s reader is like that of a literary critic. They state:

The literary critic is not concerned to show how all the parts of the work fit together, or to harmonise and smooth over any apparent contradictions. Like a psychoanalyst, the critic attends to the text’s unconscious—to what is unspoken and inevitably repressed. (90)

Seen in this perspective, if the reader can work as the literary critic, then the reader can be compared to a psychoanalyst who not merely seeks to clarify the “conscious” (the explicit meaning) but strives to unveil the “unconscious” (implicit meaning) of a literary text. The reader/psychoanalyst formula is indeed more suitable when it is applied to the reading of some detective novels. The authors of these detective novels are like cunning criminals who always throw out false clues and digressive narratives to retard the revelation of truth and to divert reader’s rational mind. The reader, confronting lots of misguiding but manifest characters’ speech, must exert his/her insightful analysis in seeing through every suspect’s mind to find out the latent truth. In this sense, the role of a detective novel reader is just an epitome of a detective because both of them play the same role in tracing down a truth with a quasi-psychoanalytic skill.

Christie’s Hercule Poirot resembles a psychoanalyst. He sees through every suspect’s mind by talking to them and hence to find out inconsistencies and slip of

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“dream content,” Freud points out the combination of conscious/manifest dream and unconscious/latent dream in the formation of dream.

tongue of these suspects. Nonetheless, Christie depicts her detective hero as an eccentric, obsessively neat, and even ludicrous character. She seems to deliberately shape Poirot as an anti-heroic figure in detective story<sup>5</sup>. Poirot makes his debut in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), in which the narrator Hastings describes him as following:

Poirot was an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carries himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg...His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible. I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound. (22)

His extraordinary obsession of neatness and his being an egg-faced little man with funny moustache subvert the image of a masculine heroic figure. In addition, his feminine way of having domestic talks and gossips with possible suspects formulate his favorite way of ratiocination to pin down the murderer. Poirot's approach to questioning suspects resembles what Susan Rowland calls the "feminine methods of investigation"<sup>6</sup> (19). With a feminine method of occasional chatting and gossip, Poirot is able to perceive the unconscious of these suspects' mind. Similarly, the reader, like the detective, or the psychoanalyst, also attends to the text's unconscious—to what is unspoken and inevitably repressed.

As a Belgian refugee in England during the war time and finally settling down in an apartment in London, Poirot, a retired police officer, wins a great fame in England. The Styles Court in St. Mary is the place where he breaks his first case in England and since then he becomes a well-known sleuth<sup>7</sup>. In *Curtain*, an effect of nostalgic homecoming is cultivated by putting Poirot and his last case in a setting where he first appears and solves his first fame-winning case. Actually, Styles also proves to be the terminal of his life journey—he dies there, soon after he kills Norton.

<sup>5</sup> Christie seems to deliberately describe Poirot as a mock-heroic figure. His name is combination of Hercule (Greek mythological hero) and Poirot (the French pronunciation of the word is the same as that of the French word "poireau," which means a kind of tiny plant and a waiting fool).

<sup>6</sup> In Christie detective fictions, this feminine way of finding out criminal can be found more concretely in her another famous amateur spinster-sleuth—Miss Jane Marple.

<sup>7</sup> The story of Poirot's first case is presented in Christie's first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

With this sad undertone, *Curtain* projects the nostalgia of restoring a well social order and the discontent with a dominant culture. It actually reflects a “cultural pessimism” (Taylor 141) toward the state of *post bellum*. Born and raised in Victorian Age, Christie, the author of *Curtain*, cannot help sticking to her Victorian moral standard and the emphasis of a sound social order. The nostalgia and the discontent toward a dominant society are the “unspoken silence” in this detective fiction text and are hidden in these characters’ manifest speeches. When Hasting and Poirot come back to the Styles, the place reminds them of old good memories but also triggers their pain in experiencing the time change. Hasting says to Poirot:

“I think I can understand your feeling. As one gets on, one tends more and more to revert to the old days. One tries to recapture old emotions. I find it painful to be here, in a way, and yet it brings back to me a hundred old thoughts and emotions that I’d quite forgotten I ever felt. I daresay you feel the same.” (13)

If the old country house symbolizes a pre-war society of established values and social relation, the speeches between Hasting and Poirot project a nostalgia for a strict class and moral value of the upper class and a mourning for a loss of old emotions in a postwar era. After twenty-six years, all old good memories of the Styles are gone with the changing scene and new host. Hastings notices the change and strangeness in Styles, saying “what changes had take place since then! What gaps among the familiar faces” (2). The once old country house in war time now is sold by their old friends the Cavendishes to the Luttrell couple who turn the country house into a guest house for running business. If the country house estate implicates the consolidation of the aristocracy, then the selling of the country house to the hands of a middle class couple may suggest a declining aristocracy “challenged by outward Capitalism” (Rowland 44) manipulated by the rising middle class. After World War II, the worldly economic depression indirectly causes the rise of Capitalism in England. That is, the private person profits from the commercial benefit in turning the country house into a guest house. The government also regards the country house as a national heritage to attract

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tourists and as a public capital to resuscitate the economic prosperity. In the 1940s, the country house in Britain is no more the aristocracy's private privilege; some of them are sold to businessman and become hotel, while most of them are gradually handed over to the state bureaucracy and become national heritage<sup>8</sup>. This implication of the fall of the country house, along with the "class consciousness" between upper class and middle class, is *unconsciously* demonstrated in *Curtain*.

Moreover, *Curtain* reveals an ambiguous attitude toward the Victorian culture. Styles Court, the old country house, symbolizes "a Victorian relic" (73). Hastings seems to show his pessimism toward the decline of Victorian cultural value, saying:

That's the depressing part of places like this, Guest houses run by broken-down gentlepeople. They're full of failure—of people who have never get anywhere and never will get anywhere, of people who—who has been defeated and broken by life, of people who are old and tired and finished. (77)

Based on this passage, the old Victorian value seems to fade away. Yet, this Victorian value appears to be praised later in this novel. In contrast to the old people living in the old country house, Hastings depicts Sir William Boyd Carrington, a new tenant of the Styles guest house, with quite different tone:

Sir Williams is different. He doesn't belong here like the rest of us do. He's from the outside world—the world of success and independence. He's made of success of his life and he knows it. (78)

As a former governor in India with "a signal success" and "renowned as a first-class shot and big game hunter" (7), Sir Williams must be an upper-class ruling official in India. He also embodies the fading glory of the Victorian British Empire and later British Commonwealth. But in Christie's description, he also indicates a promising success because he is seemingly depicted as a charismatic and heroic figure in a

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<sup>8</sup> The Town and Country Planning Act of 1945 of the British Government has already instituted a policy of preservation, in which country house estates are owned by the government and the National Trust takes over responsibility for their maintenance. See "The Crisis of Country House in the Postwar Romance" in Philip Deborah and Ian Haywood's *Brave New Causes: Women in British Postwar Fiction* (London: Leicester UP, 1998) 43-44.

postwar era, an age in which old moral value and social order rarely exist. Hastings, the narrator of the novel, sees him as a type of man “that is becoming more and more rare—an Englishman of the old school, straightforward, fond of out-of-door life, and the kind of man who can command” (7). He also concludes that he is “the sort of man, I reflected sadly, that we no longer seemed to breed in these degenerate days” (8). The nostalgia of the past, the persistence of the old moral and social value in degenerate postwar days, is implicitly suggested by the voice of the narrator Hastings. This contradictory attitude toward the Victorian cultural value instances that the residual culture, the Victorian culture value, may oscillate between being-incorporated and not-being-incorporated into an effective dominant culture, the postwar capitalistic culture.

The oscillating incorporation between the old tradition and the dominant generation can be found as well in the generation gap and quarrels between Hastings and his twenty-one-year-old daughter Judith. To Hasting, Judith remains “[a] queer, dark, secretive child, with a passion for keeping her own counsel, which had sometimes affronted and distressed [him]” (4). He is aware that a generation gap becomes the encumbrance of their communication because his daughter is often “scornful and impatient of what she called [his] sentimental and outworn ideas” (4). She is actually a girl “sure of herself, modern, [and] independent” (111). In the postwar era, as mentioned earlier, the worldly economic depression indirectly causes the rise of Capitalism in 1940s England as well as the rise of what Deborah and Haywood call “the career girl” in the postwar England, who “needs not sacrifice the traditional ‘feminine’ virtues of beauty and domestic bliss, but can also look forward to acquiring the new, civilizing virtues of rationality and ‘logic’ and planning her own life” (6). Judith illustrates this type of “career girl.” She stays in Styles to make a biological scientific experiment in a studio with her instructor Dr. Franklin. Her absorption and devotion to the experiment lead Poirot to worry about her marriage, which is regarded as the most important thing for a girl in her life by him. Poirot tells Judith:

“Is it that you think nothing but the test tubes and the microscopes? ...It is not a good thing for your husband if you take no interest in his stomach.”

“I daresay I shan’t have a husband.”

“Certainly you will have a husband. What did the *bon Dieu* create you for?”

“Many things, I hope,” said Judith

“*Le mariage* first of all.”<sup>9</sup> (25)

Poirot, like Hasting, still embraces the old moral value in thinking that having a husband and a marriage is a girl’s ultimate destiny. Judith, though being self-reliant and conscious of her own talent and capability, is basically docile and obedient to her father except in the quarrel caused by a notorious flirt—Major Allerton. Hastings “instinctively dislikes” him, suspecting him of “racketing around, of gambling, of drinking hard, and of being first and last a womanizer” (30). Hastings cannot tolerate seeing his daughter talking joyfully to and going steady with “a nasty fellow” (31); he unrelentingly reproaches Judith for her behavior. Henceforth, a conflict between two generations is demonstrated in Judith’s harsh words to her father: She says:

“Father, you’re being too idiotic. Don’t you realize that at my age I’m capable of managing my own affairs. You’ve no earthly right to control what I do or whom I choose to make a friend of. It’s this senseless interference in their children’s lives that is so infuriating about fathers and mothers. I’m very fond of you—but I’m an adult woman and my life is my own.” (56)

Hastings is constructed as an old Victorian patriarchal norm which treats woman as a private property confined to a shackle of patriarchal surveillance. Contrasting with her father’s authorial confinement, Judith is associated with a feminist’s liberation from a patriarchal norm.

<sup>9</sup> Christie frequently uses French to be blended in her English writing. The reason why Christie uses French in Poirot’s speech is that Poirot is a Belgian. The French “*bon Dieu*” means the God, “*mariage*” means marriage.

However, in Christie's description, Judith, in spite of her desire to have her "own secret inside life" (115), still maintains an old traditional virtue in showing a filial obedience to her father. She does not choose Allerton, the man whom her father detests, as her husband; instead, she, although a great surprise to her father too, decides to be Dr. Franklin's lifetime partner. In determining to marry Franklin, her collaborating partner in a biological experiment, Judith conforms to "a new form of 'partnership' in postwar marriage." Marriage during that time is conceived as a partnership; "the endearments have become 'my mate!', 'my partner!', rather than the 'little darling!'" (Debora and Haywood 87-88). Viewed in this light, this kind of marriage may bring a dual role, an aggressive career woman and an able house wife, to the female, who "should contribute her new skills and experience to the new social order, while often simultaneously insisting that she should be the custodian of traditional values and ways of life" (ibid 73). Despite of being "a very enthusiastic scientific worker" (75) and an "independent highbrow kind" (112) of woman, Judith still concern about her traditional role of being a good wife; she tells Poirot that "[y]ou shall find me a nice husband and I will look after his stomach very carefully" (25). Another woman figure that illustrates this kind of career girl is Nurse Craven, who stays in Styles and looks after an old patient—Mrs. Franklin. Being a career girl like Judith, Nurse Craven is also very "smart and efficient in her trim uniform" (146); and when someone asks her medical opinion, her replies are "crisp and professional" (ibid). Working in "a businesslike way" (87), Nurse Craven delicates herself to her work and treats her nursing career as a profession and a business. Both Judith and Nurse Craven shape an image of new woman in postwar England.

This postwar woman role indicates a new cultural meaning and value oscillating between emergent-incorporated and emergent not incorporated into a dominant post-war culture. Judith is a proto-feminist but persists with traditional feminine virtue. The figure of Judith epitomizes the inner conflict in her contemporary British society: she is unable to let go the traditional value, but she cannot help facing the dominant capitalistic society. The text unconsciously conveys to readers a British nostalgia of

the past and a discontent but reluctant acceptance of the new mode of thought in postwar era. This testifies a process in which residual culture (Judith's traditional value) and emergent culture (Judith's being a new woman role—the career girl) are both incorporated and not incorporated into the effective dominant postwar culture. In similar veins, what lies beneath the “conscious” of the text is the unconscious-unspoken-“non-metaphysical” cultural formation. *Curtain*, indeed, unconsciously projects an intermediary phase of the cultural phenomenon in 1940s England. In an age dominated by a capitalistic economic development and by a postwar generation's value system, the nostalgia of returning to an idyllic past of aristocratic country house and discontent with the changing dominant contemporary echo what Raymond Williams calls a thought of a residual culture in an emergent cultural form<sup>10</sup>. The nostalgia and discontent implicitly suggested in *Curtain* turn into an unspoken silence, or unconscious in Freudian term, which is hidden beneath the surface of a text and is waiting to be uncovered and articulated by competent readers.

No one in *Curtain*, except Poirot, knows that the quarrel between Hastings and Judith should create a hot-bed for Stephen Norton to commit a perfect murder. As mentioned earlier, he is the perfect murderer with a perfect alibi because he never murders and never instigates anyone to commit murder, but someone always does it for him. Poirot even admits that he has never been defeated until he confronts Norton's “perfect crimes” (212). It is the first time for Poirot to be defeated by a perfect murderer, and Poirot even pays the price of his life in order to render Norton's deserved punishment—a very unusual device in British Poesque detective fiction. Calling this perfect murderer an X, Poirot states that “where X was present, crime took place—but X did not actively take part in these crimes” (195). As Poirot observes, Norton is “an addict of pain, of mental torture,” who “discovered how ridiculously easy it was, by using the correct words and supplying the correct stimuli, to influence his fellow creatures” (198). In Styles, Norton first indirectly causes Mr.

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<sup>10</sup> A residual culture “is usually at some distance from the effective dominant culture, but one has to recognize that, in real cultural activities, it may get incorporated into it.” See Raymond Williams's *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader*. Ed. by Kiernan Ryan (London: Cambridge UP, 1996) 24.

Luttrell to nearly shoot his wife to death by surreptitiously provoking the hatred between the Luttrell couple. He is not satisfied with the fact that Mrs. Luttrell is not dead, so the generation conflict between Hasting and Judith rekindles his sadist desire and becomes his next target. Not telling what he sees in his field glasses, Norton deceives Hasting by telling him that Major Allerton has a secret rendezvous with her daughter in a bush. With a view to provoking more Hasting's fury and grudge against Allerton, he even misguides Hastings to regard the woman Allerton kisses in summerhouse as her daughter (actually that woman is Nurse Craven) and consequently enrages Hastings to intend desperately to kill Allerton. Hastings does not know at all that he becomes Norton's puppet to satiate the perfect murderer's killing desire. Poirot observes that Norton's tricks are like "Iago's crimes, planned by him, carried out by him. And he remains outside the circle, untouched by suspicion" (195). Fortunately, Poirot, the only person who sees through Norton's deceiving curtain of the perfect murder, stops Hastings in time from murdering Allerton.

Poirot's way of investigation of crimes imparts a "feminine" method in which chatting and gossip construct detective's "intuition" in telling the real murderer after statistic contemplation in an armchair. In *Curtain*, Poirot's "intuition" in telling Norton's personality depends mostly on his psychoanalytic approach and then to know Norton's two unconscious lusts—"the lust of the sadist and the lust of the power" (199). Poirot the detective resembles a psychoanalyst who aims to see through the conscious of his suspect's mind by listening to his speech, and then seeks to explore his suspect's unconscious, another "unspoken silence" hidden within a person's mind. Based on a Freudian approach, it is not difficult to discern what possibly enables Norton to have such character. His "fondness of bird" (31) leads him to constantly carry a pair of field glasses to watch birds. Miss Cole tells Hastings what she feels about Norton:

"There isn't really much to tell. He is very nice—rather shy—just a little stupid, perhaps... He's lived with his mother—rather a peevish, stupid woman. She bossed him a good deal, I think. She died a few years ago.

He's keen on birds and flowers and things like that. He's very kind person—and he's the sort of person who sees a lot.”

“Through his glasses, you mean?”

Miss Cole smiled. (76-77)

The pair of field glasses not merely offers him a tool of peering at birds but, to a large extent, serves as a camouflaging curtain to satisfy his voyeurism, which, in a psychoanalytic approach, is associated with a childhood curiosity about a child's seeing his/her parents' bed—the “primal scene.” It is noticeable that the mysterious triangle love among Judith, Allerton and Dr. Franklin as well as the secret love affair between Mrs. Franklin and Boyd Carrington are exposed by his bird-watching through his field glasses. He seems to use the bird-watching as a curtain of pretext veiling his true intention of gazing at lovers' sexual relationship.

Seen in a Freudian light, Norton, though he says nothing (or keeps *silent*) about his childhood, may be treated as a neurotic patient who probably undergoes considerable frustration in seeing his parents' bed. This intensifies his curiosity and a repetitive drive to see sexual objects, by which, he masters over his desiring “lack” of his voyeuristic trauma in his childhood. Norton may be haunted by the trauma of a “primal scene,” because of his peeping at his parents' bedroom. When he sees his parents, especially his mother, on bed, he may feel that “there is something uncanny about the female genital organs” and that it “springs from its proximity to the castration complex” (Freud, *The Uncanny* 159). The fear of castration explicates Norton's “fetish,” his abnormal preference to bird-watching. For Freud, a repetitive drive to infatuate with something may be interpreted as “fetishism,” which “remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it” (Freud, *Fetishism* 161). The bird, in this sense, becomes a substitute for a penis to remind Norton of keeping his penis and to protect Norton against the fear of castration.

This infantile trauma of the primal scene, along with the fear of castration, entails the child to receive the law of symbolic father and to separate from his/her tie with mother. Thus, repulsion against the mother turns into a necessity for a child to

enter into a symbolic order. Norton once said that “[he] can’t stand blood” (87). Poirot, in telling the life history of Norton to Hastings, also mentions that Norton “dislikes blood” (198) since he was a child. Norton unconsciously reveals his loathing against maternity because the blood symbolizes an uncanny fear to him. As mentioned earlier, the uncanny is affiliated with the castration complex. That is, the implication of Norton’s infantile trauma of castration complex may concomitantly result in what Freud calls an “ambivalent father-complex” (Freud, *Totem and Taboo* 155) and simultaneously creates repulsion toward all maternal associations. Judging from Miss Cole’s words, Norton seems to have lost his father in his childhood and lives only with his mother. His father’s death, to Freud, may enhance Norton’s craving for a power and a sexual desire like his father does<sup>11</sup>; and his living with his “peevish and stupid” mother implicates his repulsion against her. “[A] masterful and bossy woman” (197), Norton’s mother is ambiguously linked to a surrogate father who assumes a patriarch authority over him and represses his desire of identifying with his father. This stimulates more his craving for power. His voyeuristic desire of prying into personal privacy illustrates his desire for a power, because everything and every person he watches through a pair of peeping hole turn into gazed objects subjected to his watchful gaze. Norton’s desire to hold the keys of someone’s life and death as well as preference to peep at sexual objects with field glasses are implicitly understandable. Norton’s unconscious desire for power is hidden beneath the veil of his deceiving curtain.

In fact, seeing things through a pair of field glasses, Norton contents with a pleasure of seeing something more clearly than other people do. Or, to a further extent, he can deceive other people by telling what he fabricates about what he really sees because no one, except him, is able to see what really happens through his glasses. Using the field glasses as a deceiving curtain to blind the truth, Norton nearly

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<sup>11</sup> According to Freud, boys have an ambivalent complex toward their father. They hated their father, who presented a formidable obstacle to their craving for power and their sexual desires; but they love and admire him too. He further suggests that after the father disappears or has gone, they have satisfied their hatred and enacts their desire to identify themselves with him. See Freud’s “Totem and Taboo” in Ed. Bob Ashley. *Reading Popular Narrative: A Source Book* (London: Leicester UP, 1997) 155.

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accomplishes his trick in causing two alibi murders. Besides Norton, Poirot, to Hastings's another great surprise, is another character who masters the using of a deceiving curtain in this criminal-hunting game. In the very beginning of the novel, Poirot has already known who the perfect murderer is, but he insists on refusing to tell Hastings and only giving him hints to re-assemble the clues of the puzzle. Moreover, in order to make Norton to confess his "perfect crime" to him and to punish the perfect murderer personally, he disguises himself as a limp and ill patient sitting on a wheelchair to misdirect people's attraction. He, using a similar strategy Norton frequently does, deceives all tenants in Styles, including his best friend Hastings, by distorting what he really sees in the truth of Mrs. Franklin's death. Interesting enough, a retired police officer who knows the law well, Poirot perjures himself in the police's investigation of Mrs. Franklin's death.

Apart from perjury, the most shocking deed that challenges the impregnable law is his killing the lawfully innocent Norton. Poirot, in a postscript left to Hastings explaining the truth of the "second mysterious affair at Styles" and the cause of Norton's death, suggests to Hastings that he never encounters a criminal rival like Norton, saying that "Norton's [murders] were the perfect crime. [His] was not" (212). After killing Norton, the perfect murderer, Poirot is reluctant to admit that he is outwitted by Norton, who never reveals any lawful evidence which makes Norton himself be accused of murder, but his murdering Norton still leaves some clues to trace his crime. Poirot resembles Norton in his avid desire to obtain the mastery power, but, unlike Norton who hurts others, he enforces a personal unimpeachable law to consolidate the social justice. Saying "I am the law" (214), he projects his personal justice and cannot stand a cunning criminal who always remains untouched by the law and escapes the lawful punishment in framing scapegoats to kill for him. He confesses:

"I, who do not approve of murder—I, who value human life—have ended my career by committing murder. Perhaps it is because I have been too self-righteous, too conscious of rectitude—that this terrible dilemma had

come to me.” (197)

Taking Norton's life becomes Poirot's "terrible dilemma" in saving other lives. From Poirot's angle, Norton's crime is the most vicious deed that is untouched by the secular law, so the only way to restore the social justice is to use his personal law. Shooting Norton "in the exact center of his forehead" (184), Poirot purposely marks "the brand of Cain" (215) in the center of Norton's forehead. Cain, the first murderer in the Bible, is inscribed an eternal mark on his forehead by God as a severe punishment for killing his brother Abel. By giving Norton a gun-shot hole in the forehead, Poirot seems to elevate his execution of Norton to a divine justice. Susan Rowland believes that Christie's detective Poirot "partakes of the secular form of the divinely sanctioned knight errant on a quest for metaphysical justice" (139). Poirot's killing Norton embodies a greater knowledge in endowing human affairs with a divine purpose. His investigation and solution of the second mysterious affair in *Styles* indeed combine the justice of God with the justice of the secular social order.

Christie's *Curtain* stresses the exertion of divine justice in order to restore the social order, and henceforth unconsciously displays a discontent with her contemporary secular world and nostalgia of returning to an old good past. In Christie's description, Norton's crime incarnates the evil disease of the secular contemporary which "has been an epidemic in the world of late years" (198). For this reason, Norton must be "disinfected" to save the wholeness of a good old social order. If Norton symbolizes a collapse of the social moral value; then the death of Poirot may be viewed as "a kind of self-sacrifice on behalf of his fellowman" (Maida and Spornick 103). *Curtain* expresses nostalgia of sustaining a good old past aroused by the fall of aristocratic country house and discontent of the deterioration of the traditional social order. The undertone of personal justice makes Christie's detective fiction differentiate from classical detective fiction. As said earlier, the nostalgia of old good past, the discontent with an effective dominant culture, and the manipulation of detective's personal (not social) justice may be viewed as Raymond Williams's oscillating between residual-incorporated and residual not incorporated within an

effective dominant culture. Beneath the veil of a cultural formation is a non-metaphysical and oscillating process of residual culture and emergent culture.

*Curtain*, under the surface of a detective novel, indeed, exhibits cultural phenomenon in postwar era. In this sense, *Curtain* is not only a curtain for Hercule Poirot to veil the truth of the murders in *Styles*, but also a curtain for him to bid farewell to the world on his detective life stage. To a larger extent, *Curtain* offers a curtain for readers to shade the unspoken silence of the emergent and the residual within a dominant post-war culture. In detective fiction, a detective usually needs to penetrate the curtain of disoriented face value to find out the hidden truth of a murder. The reader analogically resembles a detective owing to that only by his seeing through a superficial curtain can he discover the hidden meaning of a literary text. The reader is also like a psychoanalyst, who does not only probe into the conscious and explicit meaning of a literary text but also explores the unconscious and implicit meaning of it.

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