

# Analysing the Loss of Characters in Movie Adaptations

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**Abstract:** *This paper focuses on studying Kenneth Branagh's 2017 Murder on the Orient Express, a film adaptation of Agatha Christie's novel of the same name, released in 1934. Film adaptations are dynamic portrayals of words in black and white on a colourful screen. Film adaptations make amends like reduction, addition, and modification to the characters, plot, setting, and even style of the novel they are adapted from to foster a deeper understanding and bring cohesion to the portrayed scenes. A major loss of elements can be observed in film adaptations even when original stories remain intact. This paper deals with the instance of the removal of Dr. Constantine, a coroner, who in the novel declares the victim dead. Even with a small role, Dr. Constantine played a part in Christie's imagination but seemed redundant in Branagh's vision. The following study records Dr. Constantine's role in the novel and a comparison with the movie adaptation.*

**Keywords:** Dr. Constantine, Murder on the Orient Express, Movie Adaptation, Agatha Christie, Kenneth Branagh

## 1. Literary Review

Ecranisation theory refers to the changes made in the consumption process of content, from reading to watching, to make it accessible to a larger population. According to Eneste (1991, p.60), ecranisation is adapting a story from a novel into a film where elements like stories, plot, setting, characterisation, and language style are changed from page to screen.

In their research, Aspriyanto and Hastuti blame time constraints for reducing Dr. Constantine's character. According to Eneste (1991), "Reduction is a process of equalisation where from the novel to the film there are parts that are reduced because both of time is different."

Aryanti (2020) notices Dr. Constantine is replaced by Dr. Arbuthnot, who in the movie continues to carry the traits of his character as a Brit who returned from India and is in love with Ms. Debenham. However, his profession changes from colonel to doctor, who served alongside Colonel Armstrong in the movie.

Aryanti continues to observe that M. Bouc and Dr. Constantine accompany Detective Poirot through the novel, whereas in the movie only M. Bouc is present to aid with the investigation.

Aspriyanto and Hastuti conclude, "The difference of character that the novel and the film showed concludes that this data indicates variation of change in terms of character. The reason is the director wanted to make a creative scene and also because of the duration."

## 2. Introduction

Movie adaptations refer to adapting the story, plotline, and characters from page to screen. Corrigan (1999) estimates that 30 percent of films take origins from novels, which can, in turn, be understood with the estimation that 80 percent of bestseller books have been adapted to cinema. The research aims to find the instances where Dr. Constantine is removed

from the movie and replaced by any of the other characters and how the transaction of the roles changes their character and the plotline of the film.

### 1) Colonel Arbuthnot

The book introduces Colonel Arbuthnot as a war veteran who has returned from India and served alongside Colonel Armstrong. Arbuthnot's designation in the movie changes to that of a doctor, with a similar background; additionally, the character, both in the novel and the film, is deeply in love with another passenger, Ms. Debenham.

### a) Role

Arbuthnot replaces Dr. Constantine by taking the role of a doctor. In the book, he is the first one to investigate the body, make a deduction of the estimated time of death, and question the weird nature of multiple wounds. On the other hand, in the movie, Dr. Arbuthnot is the first to look at the body and explain the gashes. In the book, Dr. Constantine creates further suspense in the readers as he gives reasons to clarify whether the killer is a male or a female. While doing so, Christie leaves a hint of the involvement of more than one murderer. This information is not brought up in the film by Dr. Arbuthnot.

### b) Plot

The change in the plot becomes significant because, in Agatha's composition, Poirot ensures that no suspect is involved in the internal investigation and his findings. ". . . and that the word Armstrong was exactly the word remaining, he must at once have communicated his news to the others." (Christie 281 - 282). This proves the distance between the twelve suspects and the integral investigation and marks Pierre Michel as the only personnel who could have provided them with any information along with possible connections that could be made through their interrogations. However, the movie employs Dr. Arbuthnot as the first person to look at the body, leaving a gap for question and doubt whether the doctor tampered with any evidence. Hercule Poirot's invitation to Dr. Arbuthnot leads to the formation of a fake positive outlook on the character, which is thus fuelled by his statement, "If the doctor is guilty, he certainly did not let it influence his responsibilities." (Branagh 00: 47: 18 - 00: 47:

22). Poirot, in this statement, provides a sense of relief and, for the moment, instills trust in an outsider and presents him as a man of positive intentions.

## 2) Hercule Poirot

The detective, M. Poirot, is another character who serves as a replacement for Dr. Constantine. The star of Christie's world of mysteries, Hercule Poirot's rest is disrupted as he comes across the murder on his journey and is persuaded by his friend, M. Bouc, to solve the case. Hercule Poirot in the book is a master of psychology and human nature. Most of Agatha's works pair the psychological mastery of Poirot with the medical and forensic brains of medical personnel.

### a) Plot

Poirot in the novel is accompanied by Dr. Constantine, who makes medical deductions while Poirot focuses on the behavioural aspects of the clues and hints found in the surroundings. In the movie, the detective concentrates not only on the psychological and analytical parts but also makes medical and forensic deductions. Poirot in the movie states, "If you look at these two wounds, they are powerful and deep, and yet there is no blood." (Brannagh 00: 47: 33 - 00: 47: 38). Similar lines can be traced back to pages 62 and 63 in the book, under chapter 7, "*The Body*," where Doctor Constantine, in brief, describes the nature of the attack and not Poirot.

The novel towards the end gives the onus of decision - making and ensuring justice in the hands of Dr. Constantine and M. Bouc. The closing question posed by Poirot to M. Bouc and Dr. Constantine helps the revival of humanity. Dr. Constantine and M. Bouc give the final nod on which of Poirot's theories will go forward, the one that serves justice to the victim or the one that lets one of the many grieving families avenge their daughter and lost loved ones. The movie, on the other hand, follows a montage where contemplation on Poirot's hand is paired with the catharsis of the 12 fellow passengers, which ends with Poirot's decision to cater to the Yugoslavian police with the theory of an escapee that levied the open window.

### b) Plot

The transition brings significant changes to the character of Hercule Poirot and, as a result of any commercial cinema, raises his character to a pedestal. Poirot's knowledge of human psychology makes him an exceptional detective. Yet, in the novels, he is aided by medical professionals like doctors or nurses to reach physical clues for his investigation, like Dr. Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (Christie 1926) and Nurse King in *Appointment with Death* (Christie 1938). Christie's creation of Poirot shows her inclination towards the physical environment and attention to detail. It delves deep into the chain of thoughts of the people and how it is reflected in their actions.

By changing the plot, the movie gives Poirot an inflated outlook and increases his stature by portraying him as a medical expert to appeal more prominently to the viewers. This can be argued further by focusing on the fact that even though Colonel Arbuthnot's profession was changed to become a doctor in the movie, he is not the one to make the most detailed analysis and give any deep notes on the pattern

of wounds or make any valuable deduction about the possible splatter of blood left on the body. Dr. Arbuthnot, as discussed, makes a statement, yet a deeper analysis and plethora of possibilities are given by Poirot, boosting the character further.

Poirot, to further secure his status as a protagonist through a montage, makes the final decision by himself, compared to the book's plot, where Poirot leaves the decision to M. Bouc and Dr. Constantine. The Poirot in Christie's creation does not run on the binary of focusing on wrong and right and has continuously, through various stories, shown moments of following the grey between the opposites of black and white. Poirot, in *Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, towards the end, makes amends in his ways to spare Caroline Sheppard from the hurt she would feel upon knowing the truth. Michael Green, the screenwriter, shows Poirot as a man of strict rules and peculiar characteristics, which makes him focus on the minutiae that are not in the proper order. He attributes his years of success to his keen observation and, very importantly, being a stickler for the binary of wrong and right; eight minutes into the movie, the audience witnesses a foreshadowing where there could be a possible change in Poirot's opinion of viewing the world through a specific lens.

This point of view changes as, to complete the nerve - wracking montage, Poirot admits that he will have to learn to live with the imbalance of justice this case puts in front of him and hopes for everyone to attain peace with this. This instance ignites a level of catharsis amongst the viewers, who finally feel at peace upon knowing that justice is not easy to deliver and the detective whose quirkiness and impersonal outlook toward the world changes as he ends up sympathising with the twelve passengers who have lost their loved ones due to the greediness of Ratchett. Such ways have been employed by other productions, like BBC's *Sherlock*, where the impersonal and eccentric behaviour of the detective is exaggerated and elevated, yet towards the end, triggered by a situation, there is a certain change of behaviour or melt of heart that leaves an imprint on the viewers' minds.

## 3. Conclusion

Agatha Christie's novels, short stories, and other productions have more than 180 medical personnel, varying from doctors to nurses and victims to suspects. Christie gives each character a role and inserts them into the plot to complete their desired duties. Similarly, Dr. Constantine in the novel serves various purposes, being a trusty outsider, a medical professional, and an autobiographical voice for Christie. The autobiographical element springs from Christie's days in WW1 as a voluntary dispenser and nurse, which provided her with medical knowledge of poisons, syringes, medicines, and drugs and is reflected in her writing throughout.

The character, Dr. Constantine, was replaced by another character, M. Bouc. Even though the replacement does not alter the film plot heavily, it insults the intelligence and contributions of Dr. Constantine, who was present throughout the interrogation alongside M. Bouc. The constant questions, minor deductions, and insights of Dr. Constantine are now divided among M. Bouc and Poirot. Although there are only minor alterations, and they do not affect the overall flow of

the plot and climax of the movie, the adaptation, due to several hindrances, removes a character who held significant importance and made substantial contributions to the plot. The process altered the public's view of the characters and disrupted the autobiographical element of Christie's years of experience.

This study hopes to prove the power of narrative through a retracted character's analysis and bring to notice the minute changes that affect the story, as in the case of Dr. Arbuthnot, whose involvement creates loopholes and gaps in the investigation. Similarly, changes in Poirot's case alter the public's view of him and portray him as a protagonist even more than Christie intended.

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