

IB Extended Essay**May 2020*****The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time: A Unique Detective Novel*****Research Question:** How does Mark Haddon subvert the conventions of detective fiction in *The**Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*?**Subject Area:** Language and Literature Category 1**Word Count:** 3916

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Section 1: Introduction to the Text

1.1: The Text as a Detective Novel

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time is a fiction novel by Mark Haddon, which centers around the life of British fifteen-year-old Christopher Boone. Christopher has a fondness for mathematics, prime numbers and logic puzzles, and he dislikes talking to strangers or eating yellow food—all things which make it difficult for him to relate to other people. When he discovers that his father lied about his mother's death two years before the start of the novel, he sets out on a perilous journey to London to reunite with her at last, all while navigating a hostile environment of social pressures and trying to prove to himself that he can be self-sufficient. Oh, and he's also a detective trying to solve the murder of a dog.

This novel evidently does not follow the formula of what a reader might consider a “detective story”. But as detective novels continue to take more and more forms, it's difficult to pinpoint exactly what makes it different. How does Mark Haddon subvert the conventions of detective fiction in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*?

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time disrupts many inflexible aspects of the detective genre with the motifs of family, communication and coming of age. Christopher Boone's poignant journey to understand the complex web of relationships that surround him adds an interpersonal touch to a genre based on facts and evidence, which often requires its main character to take on an detached, distanced view of their environment. Whereas the detective story's protagonist views their clues and evidence from the perspective of an outsider, Christopher Boone stays right in the thick of things, navigating his home life, neighbors, and an unfamiliar setting all while trying to solve a mystery. The titular “incident of the dog in the

night-time” is not central to the story, but rather one mystery of many that Christopher is trying to make sense of.

In order to discover what sets this novel apart from a “conventional” detective novel, it is necessary to first understand what a “conventional” detective novel even is. Obviously, all detective novels have their differences, and there’s no one true detective novel that can speak for the entire genre. Detective novels can be set in the distant past or the distant future, in any part of the world and beyond, with all ranges of characters and motivations. According to George N. Dove, author of *The Reader and the Detective Story*, there are four key components that define the detective genre:

First the main character is a detective; this person may be male or female, professional or amateur, public or private, single or multiple, but there is an identifiable detection role.

Second, the main plot of the story is the account of the investigation and resolution; there may be love themes, ghost themes, social themes, or others, but the detection retains precedence. Third, the mystery is no ordinary problem but a complex secret that appears impossible of solution. Finally, the mystery is solved; the solution may be unknown to the detective-protagonist, the official police, or anybody else in the story, but it must be known to the reader. (Dove 10)

Upon basic examination of the plot of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, it would seem to mostly fit these criteria. Christopher Boone is a fifteen-year-old mathematician with a penchant for logic and solving puzzles, which molds him perfectly for the role of amateur detective in this story. He eventually does solve the mystery that he sets out to solve, a mystery which is a “complex secret that appears impossible of solution” (10) as Dove describes. It’s only with the second point that there may be some contention—while much of Christopher’s journey

is spent unraveling the mystery around his neighbor's dog Wellington, that mystery itself is not the center of the story, and is in fact solved about halfway through the text. The story's "social themes" do not happen *alongside* the investigation; rather, they completely derail the investigation, turning the second half of the book into an entirely different kind of text, which instead focuses on Christopher traveling to London to find his long-lost mother. However, since this can technically be seen as an "investigation" in and of itself—albeit a more personally-focused one—one can conclude that *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* loosely meets Dove's criteria for a detective novel.

So, if this text has a basic connection to the detective genre, in what ways is it disconnected from it? Subversion is something of a gray area, in that too much connection to the genre would make a text representative of that genre, but too little connection might place it outside of that genre entirely. Since *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* has already been established by Dove's criteria to have basic detective elements, it would be unnecessary to examine whether it is outside of the detective genre. Instead, more focus can be placed on where *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* falls within the *specifics* of the genre. The question is not "is it a detective novel?" but rather, "is it a detective novel which is similar to other detective novels?"

1.2: Defining Elements of Detective Novels

The first and foremost detective story element to examine is perhaps the most obvious: the detective. The detective is the lens through which the reader understands the mystery, and thus the detective is usually given unique traits or flaws to retain the reader's interest. As Pavao Pavličić states, "Detectives in this genre should be unusual and interesting, so that we easily

remember them, like them, become attached to them, feel the joy of recognition when we encounter their eccentric habits in the next novel, but also are able to identify with them” (translated in Matković 454). This establishes three clear purposes of a detective in a detective story: to foster emotional attachment to the reader, to be unique so as to stand out amongst other detectives, and to have traits which are easily recognizable across other media. That last purpose is not very applicable in this case (*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a standalone novel and Christopher Boone does not appear as a character in any other series) but the first two will be important when analyzing this novel’s relationship to the conventional elements of detective fiction, as well as its more general effectiveness as a story.

The setting and secondary characters are also important elements of a detective story. As mentioned earlier, these two things are often variable; there is no set time, place or environment that is the standard for detective novels, and character relationships fluctuate as well. It seems that detective stories are less defined by specific settings and characters and more by the way these settings and characters are organized: “In general, detective stories have ‘a highly organised structure and recognised conventions’ (James 5). ... Agatha Christie begins many of her novels, including *Hercule Poirot’s Christmas*, by introducing the reader into the setting, the characters, their relationships, and the atmosphere of the novel” (Matković 450). Detective stories seem to build up their background elements initially, presumably so the actual investigation, the central point of the story, can “retain precedence” (10) as Dove states. This is supported by another assertion of Dove’s: “Detective fiction adapts easily to thematic, but not to structural, invention” (5). While the settings, characters and even themes may change, the structural boundaries of detective fiction remain unchangeable.

The final element of detective fiction is the reader. Being centered around a complex mystery, detective novels often attempt to cultivate some kind of reader engagement in solving said mystery. Essayist Willard Huntington Wright likens this engagement to a person solving a crossword puzzle:

Indeed, the structure and mechanism of the cross-word puzzle and of the detective novel are very similar. In each there is a problem to be solved; and the solution depends wholly on mental processes — on analysis, on the fitting together of apparently unrelated parts, on a knowledge of the ingredients, and, in some measure, on guessing. Each is supplied with a series of overlapping clues to guide the solver; and these clues, when fitted into place, blaze the path for future progress. (Wright)

The reader of the detective novel is assumed to take on a role similar to that of the detective, interpreting the clues as they are given and trying to reach a conclusion in real time alongside the fictional protagonist. In order to inspire this sort of mental participation in the reader, a detective novelist has to offer just enough clues for the mystery's resolution to make sense, while leaving just enough up to the reader's intuition and speculation—"guessing", as Wright puts it. The detective novel is essentially the balance between reader imagination and authorial explanation, both of which play equal parts in guiding the mystery.

Section 2: Analysis of the Text

2.1: The Premise

The setup of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is as uniquely bizarre as the story's premise. The novel begins at what one might consider a natural starting point for a murder mystery: at the murder itself. Except, it is not exactly a murder—rather, a dog belonging

to Christopher's neighbor has been killed with a garden fork, and Christopher has just found its body. The scene is described in a peculiar level of detail, noting things which the average reader might deem irrelevant: "It was 7 minutes after midnight. The dog was lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs. Shears's house. Its eyes were closed. It looked as if it was running on its side ... but the dog was not running or asleep. The dog was dead" (Haddon 1). This is because, as the reader soon discovers, the text is written as a first-person journal of Christopher's discoveries. Christopher's detail-oriented, matter-of-fact narration lends a bit of zest to an already interesting premise. However, "interesting" is not the same as "subversive", and the novel's beginning is still relatively straightforward; Chris details the mystery, the setting, and the main characters involved within the first chapter of his book. This could easily fit Matković's description of a details-first organizational structure (Matković 450) which is present in many detective novels. Even the specific details of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* are not entirely unique: by Christopher's own admission, other detective stories involve dogs, such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, a story which he often draws inspiration from when solving his own mystery (Haddon 5). And, out of the many thousands of detective novels out there, it's likely that more than a few use first-person narrators, narrators who might have offbeat or unconventional narration styles. In its beginning chapters, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* sets out to be an *interesting* detective novel for sure, if not yet a genre-bending one.

2.2: The Detective

Upon a closer look at the novel's detective, however, one can begin to see where the differences start. Christopher is a teenager, and not a professional detective, but it is not these things which make him a subversive detective. As Dove states, a detective may be "professional

or amateur” (Dove 10), and many modern detective stories have teenage protagonists, such as *A Study in Charlotte* by Brittany Cavallaro or *Tokyo Heist* by Diana Renn, among many others.

Rather, it is Christopher’s *perspective* that makes him unique. As mentioned earlier, Christopher has a very matter-of-fact narration style, and is incredibly good at picking up on details.

However, unlike other detectives, he seems to select at random which details he wants to pay attention to: “So I decided to do a description of the garden. But the garden wasn’t very interesting or very different. . . . But the sky was interesting and different because usually skies look boring because they are all blue or all gray or all covered in one pattern of clouds and they don’t look like they are hundreds of miles above your head” (Haddon 68). Instead of considering himself an objective observer, Christopher willingly admits that he ignores things that he just *doesn’t like*. This is directly contrasted with the kind of observations made in another detective novel when he talks about reading *The Hound of the Baskervilles*: “And sometimes Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (who is the author) describes people like this: *There was something subtly wrong with the face, some coarseness of expression, some hardness, perhaps of eye, some looseness of lip which marred its perfect beauty*. And I don’t know what *some hardness, perhaps of eye* means, and I’m not interested in faces” (Haddon 71). Christopher is a unique detective because he establishes no pretense of trying to see the whole truth, or notice everything that’s going on around him. Some details are simply uninteresting to him.

Christopher’s style of detection is not the only thing that makes him an unconventional protagonist. His social habits and lack of understanding of nonverbal cues (such as his aforementioned disinterest in facial expressions) have led many readers to speculate that Christopher is somewhere on the autism spectrum. Now, representation of neurodivergent or disabled characters is evidently lackluster in all forms of media—not just detective fiction—so

an autistic main character who is not made into an object of pity, nor defined by his disability, would be cause for interest anyway. As novelist and book critic Mark Sarvas puts it, “All too often, in lesser hands, such [disabled] characters suffer one of two fates: they become little more than maudlin stereotypes, or they are reduced to walking collections of simplistic tics and gestures” (Sarvas). The fact that Christopher’s so-called disability, in some senses, actually makes him a *better* detective is a revolutionary concept—a much-needed new idea in a genre that rarely undergoes structural changes. Sarvas states that, “Although Christopher’s perception of events are always partial, circumscribed by the boundaries of his condition, the honesty and sheer literalism imposed by the same condition anoints him with a clarity and a perceptiveness that serves both him and the reader well” (Sarvas). Christopher has difficulties understanding other people, but his eye for detail and devotion to logic make him well suited for the role of crime-solver, presenting the reader with the exciting novelty of an entirely new kind of detective, with new abilities and limitations that have not yet been explored. Mark Haddon shows that neurodivergent characters are not just a subversive addition to the detective genre, but that they might just be the future of it.

2.3: The Plot

Christopher’s journey as a detective offers more still in terms of unconventional elements. While the main plot of most detective stories revolves around “the account of the investigation and resolution” (Dove 10), *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* involves a dual mystery: first, the titular incident of the dog, and second, the mystery of Christopher’s mother’s disappearance from his life. While the latter is only solved due to the investigation of the former, it is a completely different narrative arc, with different tones and themes. This turning point happens about midway through the story, when Christopher, while

searching his father's room for his confiscated journal, finds a letter from his mother dated after her supposed death:

I looked at the letter and thought really hard. It was a mystery and I couldn't work it out. Perhaps the letter was in the wrong envelope and it had been written before Mother had died. But why was she writing from London? ... I was excited. When I started writing my book there was only one mystery I had to solve. Now there were two. (Haddon 99)

Christopher discovers that it was his father, Ed, who killed Wellington, and he did so as revenge against Mrs. Shears. Ed reveals that Christopher's mother is not dead, but rather had an affair with Mr. Shears and fled to London, prompting Ed to lie about her death. Then, Ed began a relationship with Mrs. Shears, who also left him, causing him to lash out in anger and kill her dog. Now, this is where the mystery should end. The "investigation and resolution" (Dove 10) is over. But, instead, the story continues in the aftermath of this complex personal revelation that Christopher's mother is alive, and Christopher becomes determined to find her and escape his dog-killing father. What follows is akin to a different story altogether.

The second half of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is much less detective-focused. There's still a mystery, sure, but absent is the finding of clues and red herrings, or the discussion of evidence and witness accounts. In other words, Christopher's journey at this point is nearly unrecognizable as a detective novel. It instead takes the form of a more stream-of-consciousness description of Christopher's surroundings as he tries to get to London by train to find his mother. There are more emotionally charged overtones—whereas Christopher has spent most of the story in the familiar environment of his house and neighborhood, and is thus able to think and write more coherently, his extreme fear and hyper-awareness produces a different style of writing, which is far separated from the kind of

cool, detached rationality exhibited in other detective novels. An example of this is when Christopher first enters the train station and is overcome with a kind of sensory overload:

And eventually I got to the end of the tunnel and there were some stairs and I went up the stairs and there were still lots of people and I groaned and there was a shop at the top of the stairs and a room with chairs in it but there were too many people in the room with chairs in it, so I walked past it. And there were signs saying **Great Western** and **cold beers and lagers** and **CAUTION WET FLOOR ...** and **The Lemon Tree** and **No Smoking** and **FINE TEAS**. (Haddon 146)

While Christopher's observation skills remain prevalent, they are tuned to an absurd degree, to the point that "detection" is no longer being done, because all details are seen with the same amount of importance. This also differs from Christopher's previous style of detection, which was to only pay attention to things he found personally interesting. Detection no longer "retains precedence" (Dove 10). In this way, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* offers two ways in which the standard crime-solver perspective is subverted.

2.4: The Resolution

The resolution of the novel is also wholly unique to the detective genre, because it is not centered around the solution to any mystery. At this point, Christopher has already found out who killed Wellington (his father) and he has reunited with his mother, who shortly after his arrival has an argument with Mr. Shears and breaks up with him. While most detective novels try to create some emotional payoff for the reader as the mystery is finally unraveled (in the same sense, as Wright states, that one might be satisfied after finishing a crossword puzzle), *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* has a much more emotionally nuanced ending. On one hand, Christopher is imbued with a new sense of confidence after having solved two

mysteries and reunited with his mother: “And then I will get a First Class Honors degree and I will become a scientist. And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of **Who Killed Wellington?** and I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything” (Haddon 221). However, the other characters do not get the same unambiguously happy ending. As Christopher states, “there were more bad things than good things. And one of them was that Mother didn’t get back from work till 5:30 p.m. so I had to go to Father’s house between 3:49 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. ... I pushed the bed against the door in case Father tried to come in. And sometimes he tried to talk to me through the door but I didn’t answer him” (Haddon 217). Although Christopher’s father does not face any legal punishment for killing the dog, Christopher still refuses to trust him, only eventually allowing him to talk to Christopher in brief periods (Haddon 218). Christopher’s father is forced to deal with the consequences of his actions, and accept that his relationship to his son may never be the same. One could argue that this is simply the “villain” of the story getting his comeuppance, except that Christopher’s mother, whose only crime is caring more for her son than she does for Mr. Shears, fares no better by the story’s end. Being a single mother working a low-income job, she is forced to live in a cramped shared-living space, which Christopher claims “smelled like gravy and the bleach they use to clean the toilets at school” (Haddon 216). This mixed resolution, which is not so much a “happy” or “sad” ending for any one character as it is an ending that *changes* them in some way, demonstrates the nuances of this novel. Unlike a traditional detective story, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is not a game for the reader, which results in some great emotional victory and fulfillment of the reader’s logical fantasies. Instead, it is a uniquely human story—the only puzzle is the same one

that perplexes all people, one that does not have a simple, neatly-wrapped solution: the puzzle of human behavior, of anger, love, forgiveness and cruelty.

Section 3: Conclusion

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time demonstrates the remarkable ability of humankind to improve upon things, or to find beauty and meaning in the mundane. In a genre defined almost exclusively by its physical components, with few guiding principles in terms of tone, themes, or emotional depth, Mark Haddon found a blank canvas for a richly detailed and character-based story. Christopher's journey to pursue justice, unite his family and achieve self-sufficiency under the pretense of solving a mystery makes for an effectively subversive detective novel.

To summarize, there is a unique set of conditions that allows *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* to be the novel that it is. It has been established that the detective genre is something of a placeholder genre, which is defined by the objects required for it—a detective, a mystery, an investigation, and a solution—rather than by any more intangible components. This makes it widely adaptable to thematic differences, which paves the way for authors such as Haddon to implement more creative components into their work. This allows for the invention of a unique premise, an unusually reflective protagonist, and a two-part, stylistically discordant journey ending in a nuanced resolution. These singularly personal components allow the novel to be pushed beyond the realm of creativity, where many detective stories can be found, and instead into the realm of subversion. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is not wholly separated from detective novels, but it is not a traditional detective novel either. Rather, it is something in between.

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