

# A Study of Nursery Rhyme Adaptation in Detective Agatha Christ's Novels in the Perspective of Story Poetics

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## Abstract

This study focuses on Agatha Christie's adaptation practice of Western nursery rhymes in her detective novels, with the theoretical framework of the modern transformation of story poetics, providing an in-depth analysis of how Christie achieves the contemporary reinterpretation and aesthetic revitalization of folk literary resources by means of cross-genre and cross-media adaptation, recon-structive and subversive narrative strategies, and a reader-centered reception mechanism. The paper aims to systematically elucidate Christie's creative rein-terpretation while inheriting the traditional folk narrative, thereby offering in-sights for the theoretical construction of Chinese story poetics and the modern practice of local folk literature.

## Keywords

Story Poetics; Folk Literature; Adaptation of Nursery rhymes; Agatha Christie

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## 1. Introduction

Story Poetics is a new direction in the study of story (Liu, 2020), which is a reflection on the anthropological and cultural tendencies in the study of story, and advocates returning the study to the study of literature and aesthetics to emphasize the charms of the classic stories. Story poetics aims to re-examine the integration and development of folktales, popular literature and writer's literature from the perspective of literary aesthetics, focusing on the transformation of traditional stories in modern context and the construction of modern poetic discourse. The poetics of story advocates the establishment of a classic anthology of local stories as the main poetic object from the viewpoint of the history of literature as a trinity of "folk literature - popular literature - elite literature". Taking folk aesthetics as the poetic stance, the contemporary influence of folk classics is stimulated, and the effective fusion of poetic characteristics and contemporary propositions is realized (Sun, 2023). Under the guidance of this view of the history of literature, the poetics of

story should also take the trinity mechanism as the path of poetic practice, refer to the poetic object of classical literature, combine with the classic cases of international folklore adaptation, so that the creative rewriting of folktales can become an important path for renewing the contemporary vitality of folklore.

Agatha Christie, who is known as the “Queen of Detectives”, often uses nursery rhymes to promote her narratives, and has used nursery rhymes as a narrative tool many times, such as the creative use of “Ten Little Soldiers” in her *And Then There Were None*. She incorporated modern aesthetics on the basis of retaining the original style, which not only strengthened the suspenseful atmosphere but also promoted the plot development, demonstrating the adaptability and regenerative potential of folklore in modern creation, and influencing the rewriting practice of many detective writers in later generations.

Therefore, based on the concept of Chinese story poetics and taking Agatha Christie’s adaptation of nursery rhyme as a case study, this study summarizes the paths and methods of rewriting Western folk literature in terms of multiple aspects of the story’s modern transformation, with a view to providing reference and inspiration for the creative transformation of domestic folk literature.

## 2. An Overview of the Concept of Story Poetics

Story poetics focuses on the structure, function, and meaning of stories and their dissemination and acceptance in culture, and its core lies in revealing the intrinsic laws and aesthetic characteristics of stories through the analysis of narrative texts. Story poetics emphasizes the folklore, exhortation, and colloquial features of stories, fits the modern concept of literature, and focuses on the combination of fiction and integrity (Wang, 2021).

On the one hand, story poetics emphasizes the structural integrity of the story, that is, the story should have a clear beginning, development, climax and ending. This structural integrity not only provides readers with a coherent reading experience, but also endows stories with logic and comprehensibility. Secondly, the poetics of storytelling holds that story, as a form of literature, is not only fictional, but also contains a certain “authenticity”. This truth is not historical fact, but rather the moral, emotional, or philosophical meaning conveyed through the fictional plot. On the other hand, the poetics of story focuses on the function and value of story in culture, believing that story is not only a tool for entertainment, but also an important carrier for transmitting cultural values, social norms and historical memory. Story poetics integrates the research methods of literature, folklore, psychology, sociology and other disciplines, and emphasizes the analysis of the process of story generation, dissemination and acceptance from different perspectives.

## 3. The Use of Nursery Rhymes in Agatha Christie’s Novels

Nursery rhymes are a form of short, rhyming poems written specifically for children.

Its language is concise, rhythmic and strong, and it often attracts children through its repetitive structure and amusing content. Nursery rhymes are not only a form of physical and mental entertainment, but also contribute to language acquisition, cognitive development, and the transmission of knowledge and values. As an important part of children's literature, it has a far-reaching and positive impact on children's overall development. British scholar John Curran (2011) points out that children's literature is charming in both title and theme, and often provides inspiration for detective writers. Agatha Christie's works are not lacking in the use of English nursery rhymes, such as the popular adaptation of "Ten Little Soldiers" in *And Then There Were None*, and the clever use of the phrase "Sing a Song of Sixpence" in *The A Pocket Full Of Rye*. Nursery rhymes in novels not only create a scary atmosphere for detective novels and attract readers' interest, but also imply the clues and structure of events and promote the plot development.

Most of the nursery rhymes used by Agatha come from a famous collection of English folk rhymes, the Mother Goose nursery rhymes (known as Nursery Rhymes in England and Mother Goose in the United States). Mother Goose nursery rhymes have a long history, dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries, and include humorous stories, game songs, lullabies, riddles, tongue twisters, and many other types of rhymes. Over time, these rhymes have expanded and enriched, and many of them are not simply heartwarming and pleasant, but contain a great deal of cruelty, gore, and realism. These ancient and meaningful nursery rhymes reflect the social background and humanities of the time, and their dark side provides a unique perspective for modern people to understand history.

Take *And Then There Were None*, a representative work of Agatha Christie, for example. The story is based on the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldiers", which tells the story of ten strangers who come to an isolated island and die one after another in the way described in the rhyme, and then there were none of them left alive.

"Ten little soldier boys went out to dine;  
One choked his little self and then there were Nine.  
Nine little soldier boys sat up very late;  
One overslept himself and then there were Eight.  
Eight little soldier boys travelling in Devon;  
One said he'd stay there and then there were Seven.  
Seven little soldier boys chopping up sticks;  
One chopped himself in halves and then there were Six.  
Six little soldier boys playing with a hive;  
A bumble bee stung one and then there were Five.  
Five little soldier boys going in for law;  
One got in Chancery and then there were Four.  
Four little soldier boys going out to sea;  
A red herring swallowed one and then there were Three.

Three little soldier boys walking in the Zoo;  
 A big bear hugged one and then there were Two.  
 Two little soldier boys sitting in the sun;  
 One got frizzled up and then there was One.  
 One little soldier boy left all alone;  
 He went and hanged himself and then there were None.(Christie, 2011)”

In the novel, the nursery rhyme “Ten Little Soldiers” is used as a narrative tool throughout the whole text, which is not only a clue to the plot development, setting up suspense for the development of the story, and foretelling the development of the ending that “and then there were none” in the end, but also implies and metaphorically represents the whole case. The “little soldier” in the nursery rhyme symbolizes the irresistibility of the fate of the characters, and at the same time reflects the complexity of human nature and moral judgment.

#### **4. The Practice of Rewriting Western Folk Literature from the Modern Transformation of Story Poetics**

Folk literature, popular literature, and writer’s literature influence and nourish each other, collide and merge in the long river of years, and jointly push the wheel of literature forward. From ancient times to the present, the “two-way traffic” between folk literature and writer’s literature has always existed (Ellis Davidson, 1975). This exchange is not unidirectional or static, but a dynamic process of vitality and change. On the one hand, folklore has been constantly baptized and reshaped in its historical evolution, and its elements have been continuously reinterpreted and given new meanings, providing writers’ literature with rich materials and sources of inspiration. Myths, legends, ballads, proverbs and other forms of folk literature have injected vivid vitality into literary creation. On the other hand, writers also select, refine, and artistically recreate these folk materials according to their own creative intentions and the context of the times. The re-creation of folk literature is not a simple copy, but an in-depth dialog and integration. It not only preserves the core essence of the traditional cultural treasures so that they can be inherited and continued, but also injects new literary value and contemporary significance into them so that they can be revitalized in the contemporary context. Take the culturally rich Mother Goose Rhymes as an example, many writers in the later generations like to draw materials from it and carry out various localization studies and creations (Zhao, 2014).

On this basis, it can be said that Agatha Christie’s rewriting of nursery rhymes as folk literature is a typical case of two-way interaction between folk literature and writers’ literature. In the creative practice of the Golden Age of detective novels, Agatha Christie’s use of nursery rhymes goes beyond simple decorative references and elevates them to a structural poetic device. Through her masterpieces such as *And Then There Were None* and *A Pocket Full of Rye*, she has constructed a mul-

ti-dimensional poetic mechanism, making nursery rhymes a composite narrative carrier that combines atmosphere creation, plot advancement and cultural metaphor.

At the same time, the Chinese story poetics, with its folklore, exhortation, and colloquial features, has demonstrated its unique literary value in modern literature. In the modern context, story poetics has shifted from focusing on the authenticity of “what has happened” to pursuing the embellishment, fantasy, longevity and transcendence of stories, and reconstructed the poetic discourse system of modern significance (Sun, 2023). The experience of rewriting nursery rhymes by detective fiction writers, such as Agatha Christie, fits several aspects of the modern transformation of story poetics, and can provide a mirror for the rewriting of Chinese folklore.

#### **4.1. Cross-genre and Cross-media Adaptation**

The modern transformation of Chinese story poetics is reflected in the shift from cultural inheritance to cultural innovation. Traditional story poetics focuses on the cultural inheritance function of stories, emphasizing the preservation and transmission of national culture through stories. Modern transformation, on the other hand, further emphasizes cultural innovation, that is, how to give stories new cultural connotations and forms of expression on the basis of inheritance, so as to give them new vitality in modern society.

For a long time, adult literature and children’s literature have not been distinct from each other, but have penetrated each other and been closely connected. The prevalence of crossover reading and crossover writing in the late twentieth century, and especially in the twenty-first century, has led to the discussion of crossover novels as a literary phenomenon and attracted attention. The popularity of crossover novels also promotes the integration of cross-literary categories and different genres (Zhang, 2022). Agatha Christie skillfully integrated nursery rhymes, a form of children’s literature, into her detective novel works, combining the innocence of children’s literature with the suspense and horror of detective novels, so that the colloquialism and simplicity of nursery rhymes contrasted with the violence and deaths in the stories, enhancing the drama and suspense of the stories and creating a unique narrative structure and suspenseful atmosphere.

The original Mother Goose nursery rhymes, in which each story is followed by one or two moral allegories presented in poetic form, exemplifies the author’s deeper thinking and direct expression of children’s stories. Unfortunately, however, due to possible commercial considerations, almost all Chinese translations seen on the market today do not retain these poetic morals. This practice deprives readers of the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the morals and philosophies behind the stories, and influences the integrity and depth of these classics (Zhang, 2020). Therefore, the use of nursery rhymes not only adds cultural connotations to

the popular text of detective novels, but also restores the moral allegory contained in the rhymes themselves. Nursery rhymes are not only a part of the work, used as the title of the novel or throughout the development of the story, but they also carry the rich social history and other cultural background behind the work, and skillfully reflect the political, economic, religious and social issues of the time through the way of metaphors. For example, racism is implied in *And Then There were None*, the concern about the cultural culture of pursuing luxurious life and economic inequality in the society at that time expressed in the *A Pocket Full of Rye* by quoting the nursery rhyme “Sing a song of sixpence”, and a veiled reference to the Catholic-Protestant debate in *How Does Your Garden Grow*, a short story collected in the *Poirot’s Early Cases*, by using the nursery rhyme with the same name as the story. Through these highly recognizable nursery rhymes, Agatha allows Western readers to feel the strange horror of detective novels in cultural resonance, which enhances the appeal of the stories.

As a collection of famous English nursery rhymes, one of the main reasons why *Mother Goose’s Nursery Rhymes* has been passed down for a long time is that the subject matter originated from the folk and has a unique artistic charm (Ni, 1992). The close combination of detective novels and nursery rhymes has brought those nursery rhymes, which might have been forgotten in the corners of history, back into the public’s view and become an important element in literary creation, injecting new vitality into folk literature and allowing it to continue to be inherited and developed in modern society. Through the use of nursery rhymes in the works of Agatha Christie and many other well-known British and American detective novel writers, *Mother Goose’s Nursery Rhymes* have been sublimated from the folk songs of the past to the literary symbols known by readers all over the world, and their influence has far exceeded the nursery rhymes themselves. This process not only gave these nursery rhymes a brand new literary value, but also promoted more writers to excavate and reuse folk literature, and promoted the dissemination and development of folk literature in a broader cultural field.

The modern transformation of Chinese story poetics is reflected in the change from oralization to pluralism. Traditional story poetics was characterized by orality, emphasizing the oral transmission of stories and improvisation. The modern transformation, on the other hand, further expands the forms of story and makes them more diversified. This includes a variety of forms such as written literature, film and television adaptations, and multimedia dissemination, enabling stories to be received and disseminated on a wider range of platforms.

A number of Agatha Christie’s works have been widely adapted into film, television, theater, and other forms, and are renowned worldwide. Her classics such as *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile* have been remade repeatedly and translated to various countries. *Murder on the Orient Express* helped Ingrid Bergman win an Oscar, while the stage production of *The Mousetrap* has become the

longest running play in the world. Adaptations have remained active in recent years, with the 2023 release of *A Haunting in Venice* (adapted from *Hallowe'en Party*) starring Michelle Yeoh, and the 2025 BBC drama *Toward Zero*. These adaptations continue to testify to the narrative excellence, enduring market appeal and far-reaching cultural impact of Agatha's work.

Agatha Christie's film adaptations are full of symbols and metaphors (Zhang, 2024). In 2015, the BBC produced three episodes of the TV series *And Then There Were None*, which was also nominated for Golden Satellite Award for Best TV Miniseries. As in the novel, the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldiers" is used as an important narrative thread in the TV series. In the series, the image of the statue of the little soldiers is a recurring reminder of the nursery rhyme, and the protagonists repeatedly emphasize their familiarity with the rhyme: "I know it off by heart. When I was a little boy, my nanny used to recite it to me". Meanwhile, Vera, one of the main characters, is one of the first to realize the dark reality of "nursery rhyme murder" and associates nursery rhymes with the constant occurrence of death. With each death, a character repeats the corresponding line from the rhyme. This repeated emphasis enhances the fatalistic and macabre atmosphere of the story, providing the audience with more room for interpretation.

Under the cross-media adaptation of Agatha Christie's works, nursery rhymes are widely disseminated as core elements, prompting nursery rhymes to break through the original single-media limitations, transforming from literary texts to visual and auditory symbols and reaching a wider audience, thus further expanding their cultural influence.

#### 4.2. Reconstruction and Subversive Adaptation

The modern transformation of Chinese story poetics is reflected in the shift from folklore to modernity. Traditional Chinese story poetics emphasizes the folk nature of stories, focusing on the dissemination and acceptance of stories in folklore. The modern transformation, on the other hand, further emphasizes the modernity of story, that is, how to maintain the vitality and influence of story in modern society. This modernization and innovation of story is also evident in Agatha Christie's novels. In the use of the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldiers", Agatha Christie arranges and expands the plot of the nursery rhyme in the novel to promote the development of the storyline. Each line of this nursery rhyme foreshadows the death of one of the main characters until "and then there were none": Anthony Marston suffocates after drinking wine containing potassium cyanide; Mrs. Rogers overdoses on drugs and never wakes up; General Macarthur is struck in the back of the head on the beach by a man who has been shot in the head. General was killed by a blow to the back of the head on the beach; Manservant Mr. Rogers, was hacked to death with a large axe while chopping wood; Miss Emily Brent was injected with poison, and bees appeared at the scene; Justice Lawrence Wargrave died after being dressed up as a

judge; Dr. Armstrong, out for the night, was pushed off a cliff and landed at the bottom of the sea; Detective William Blore was killed by a doggie-seat clock; and Captain Philip Lombard was shot dead by a teacher, Vera Claythorne; Vera hangs herself.

On the other hand, Christie also modernizes the theme of nursery rhymes by taking the racist metaphors carried by the rhymes themselves and combining them with the modern theme of moral judgment, which is a profound exploration of the relationship between justice and sin. In the novel, Judge Wargrave, ostensibly a fair and impartial judge, is in fact filled with anger and resentment against sin. Through various means, he gathers ten people (including himself) whom he considers guilty in a deserted island villa and begins his justice trial, hoping that through his own way, these criminals who have escaped the justice of the law will be duly punished. So far, *And Then There Were None* has realized justice through the revelation of the crimes of the guilty as well as the trial, but it will inevitably lead the readers to think: is this kind of lynching “justice” really justice? In the face of viciousness, how should individuals view and deal with the relationship between law and morality?

Agatha Christie’s adaptation of the nursery rhyme plot and modernization of the theme make the nursery rhyme text realize the innovation of the content. By doing so, she not only enhances the suspense of the detective novel, but also creates a horrible and gloomy atmosphere for the novel, giving the readers a strong sense of predestination, as if everyone’s fate has been predetermined by the nursery rhyme. At the same time, the complexity of human nature is also revealed in the story, enabling the nursery rhyme to be more in line with the aesthetics and values of modern readers. In the isolated and helpless environment, the greed, fear, selfishness and suspicion of human nature are magnified, leading to a series of tragedies and showing the fragility and collapse of human nature in extreme situations.

### 4.3. Reader-centered Adaptation

The modern transformation of Chinese story poetics is reflected in the shift from exhortation to inspiration. Traditional story poetics focuses on the exhortative function of stories, emphasizing the moral lessons conveyed through stories. The modern transformation, on the other hand, emphasizes the inspirational function of stories, which means to stimulate the readers’ thinking and imagination, and to guide the readers to explore the deeper meanings behind the stories on their own.

The enlightenment means that the story is no longer closed, but open and inviting, emphasizing the reader’s participation and interaction. For novels, the reading process itself is a dynamic interaction between the author, the work and the reader (Jauss et al., 1987), which is more prominent in detective novels. Agatha’s rewriting of nursery rhymes reflects the emphasis on reader participation and interaction. As Tzvetan Todorov summarizes the detective novel as two stories, the story of murder and the story of detection. Before reading a detective novel, the reader has a pre-

conceived idea of the general structure of the text and the direction of the story, i.e. the “horizon of expectation” (Jauss et al., 1987). Agatha’s use of nursery rhymes in detective novels, on the one hand, enriches the traditional structure of detective novels: the case occurs, the detective appears, the detective clues and finally the truth comes out, strengthen the story suspense, constantly update the reader’s reading expectations. Readers will unconsciously guess the identity of the murderer and the next victim according to the familiar nursery rhyme clues, this interactivity greatly enhances the interest and immersion of reading. On the other hand, the use of nursery rhymes in detective novels is also in line with the acceptance of aesthetics theorist Wolfgang Iser’s view of response-inviting Structure of the text, i.e., the literary text evokes the reader to fill in the blanks, connect the gaps, and renew the field of vision (Zhu, 2005). The recurrence of nursery rhymes in the novel pushes the readers to participate in the reasoning of the case during the reading process, to actively think, add and reconstruct the storyline based on the content of nursery rhymes, and to fill in the gaps of the story, so as to form a complete process of the case.

In addition to focusing on reader participation, Agatha’s use of nursery rhymes in detective novels also adapts to the reading needs of different groups of readers. For young adult readers, the references to nursery rhymes focus on the simplicity and clarity of the novel’s language and the interest of the plot. For adult readers, it focuses on the depth and complexity of the story, gives the novel a profound philosophy of life and social criticism, and inspires readers to think deeply in reading. Although the main audience of nursery rhymes is children, it is usually adults who create these rhymes. Writers incorporate their own thoughts, concern for reality, and keen observation into their works, which suggests that the initial purpose of nursery rhymes is not as simple or childish as it may seem on the surface (Zhao, 2014).

## 5. Conclusion

The German philosopher Walter Benjamin praised the folktale as the highest form of narrative, “The folktale, which remains to this day the first teacher of the child, as it was once the first teacher of mankind, has always lived secretly in stories. The first true storyteller was, and continues to be, the folktale teller. Wherever good advice is valuable, it is in the folktale, and wherever help is most needed, the helping hand of the folktale is the nearest” (Zipes & Liu, 2019). To build a discourse system and academic system of Chinese story poetics, we need to excavate and interpret the poetic expressions and spirit of poetics in ancient and contemporary folktales (Lin, 2023); to rewrite folktales, it is necessary to use story poetics to interpret them (Liu, 2020). The vitality of folk literature lies in creative transformation rather than static preservation. The construction of Chinese story poetics needs to be rooted in the local gene pool, but also fully absorb the rewriting experience of Western folk literature. Agatha Christie’s practice of rewriting Western nursery rhymes, though orig-

inated from the Western literary tradition, has formed a deep spiritual resonance with Chinese narrative culture. Therefore, taking Agatha's rewriting of nursery rhymes as a reference, it helps to provide a path reference for the modernization and transformation of China's folk literature and to reflect on one's own conception of the story poetics.

First of all, in terms of cross-category and cross-media adaptation, on the one hand, on the basis of borrowing folk literature, it can be integrated into popular literature, popular literature and other diverse categories to promote cross-border integration of different categories; on the other hand, traditional folktales, as a valuable resource, should be actively utilized by adapting them into animation, movies, games and other forms, so as to make them more in line with the contemporary audience's aesthetic habits and consumption mode. Secondly, in the reconstruction and subversive adaptation of folk literature, attempts can be made to break the inherent patterns of traditional narratives, integrate modern values, excavate the archetypal values in myths, legends, or folktales, and graft contemporary spiritual demands, so as to realize the resonance between traditional motifs and modernity. Finally, from the perspective of the reader, the reader's participation and acceptance should be emphasized. In the process of rewriting Chinese folk literature, creators can utilize suspense elements such as traditional riddles, proverbs, or folktales, and design interactive narrative structures to attract readers to actively participate in interpreting the stories.

Looking ahead, Chinese story poetics needs to explore traditional cultural resources in depth, interpret folktales, myths, nursery rhymes and other diverse folklore resources from the perspective of storytelling poetics, utilize and rewrite them, and stimulate the contemporary cultural interpretive power and influence of folk literature.

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