

Agatha Christie's Poirot. "The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb" Review

AgathaChristies Poirot brings life to a short story by Agatha Christie in "the adventure of the egyptian tomb", first published in 1923.¹ The television adaptation captures the intense early twentieth century fascination with Egyptology, especially in the aftermath of the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922.² This episode presents Egypt and the wider Mediterranean as spaces of mystery, superstition, imperial ambition, and psychological tension. This review examines how the episode depicts Egypt and the Mediterranean world, and how those depictions reflect both narrative demands and the cultural attitudes of Britain.

Although much of the narrative unfolds in England, Egypt dominates the atmosphere of the episode. The mediterranean functions as a liminal zone between the rational west and imagined ancient world of secrets and curses. Steamship travel, telegrams and archeological expeditions evoke imperial mobility and British global reach. Egypt itself is presented symbolically rather than socially, the desert is vast and silent, the tomb is claustrophobic and shadowed. This representation heightens suspense, transforming Egypt into a gothic landscape suited to mystery fiction.

Central to the episode is the trope of the "mummy's curse". Following several deaths linked to the opening of a newly discovered tomb, rumors circulate that an ancient curse has been unleashed. This narrative device closely mirrors public reactions to the supposed "curse" surrounding Tutankhamun's tomb after the death of lord Carnarvon in 1923.³ Newspapers at the time sensationalised the idea of supernatural retribution, reinforcing western fascination with ancient Egypt as mystical and dangerous. The episode reflects this atmosphere, drawing on contemporary anxieties to intensify dramatic tension.

The Mediterranean world is depicted as exotic and timeless. Golden artefacts, hieroglyphic walls, and sweeping desert imagery contribute to a romanticized aesthetic. Such imagery aligns with what Edward said later termed "orientalism", the western constructed of the east as mysterious, irrational and fundamentally different.⁴ Egypt in this episode is less a modern nation than an ancient civilization frozen in time. The Mediterranean becomes a theatrical backdrop, reinforcing ideas of distance rather than cultural complexity.

Importantly Egyptian voices remain largely absent. The narrative centres on British archeologists and European elites, reflecting Britain's imperial presence in Egypt during the early twentieth century. As historians such as Donald Malcolm Reid have demonstrated, archeology in this period was deeply entwined with imperial power structures.⁵ excavation symbolised not only scientific discovery but also control over cultural heritage. In this episode, archeology is portrayed as adventurous and prestigious, yet the deaths associated with the tomb critique the arrogance of disturbing ancient sites for personal gain.

The Mediterranean climate also contributes to the mood of instability. Heat, isolation, and unfamiliar surroundings intensify fear among the characters, Egypt is depicted as physically

¹ Agatha Christie, 'The Adventure of the Egyptian tomb', in Poirot Investigates 1924.

² Nicholas Reeves, *The Complete Tutankhamun: The King, the Tomb, the Royal Treasure*, 1990. p.14-20.

³ Dominic Monsterrat, *Akhnetan: History, Fantasy and Ancient Egypt*, 2000. p.179-182.

⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978. p1-28.

⁵ Donald Malcome Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I*, 2002. p.187-210.

oppressive and psychologically unsettling. This portrayal shows the broader British traditions on how foreign landscapes destabilize European protagonists.⁶ However, this episode dies piroet, Christie's rational detective rejects the idea of a curse and exposes human greed and manipulation as the true cause of death.

This is crucial to understanding the depiction of Egypt. While the setting initially appears mystical and threatening, the final explanation deserts rationally and modern investigative logic. The Mediterranean is revealed not as initially dangerous but as a stage where human ambition unfolds. Fear is manufactured and superstition is exploited. Poirot's method restores order, reinforcing enlightenment values over gothic fantasy.

From a modern perspective, this episode's portrayal of Egypt can appear dated. Contemporary audiences are more understanding of the problematic aspects of colonial archeology and orientalist imagery. The reduction of Egypt to a mysterious backdrop risks stereotypes. Yet as a product of the early twentieth century, Christie's story reflects genuine cultural preoccupations. This period was marked by both fascination with antiquity and anxiety about morality following the first world war.⁷ Ancient Egypt, with its monumental tombs and funerary rituals, symbolised endurance across many years, contrasting with the fragility of modern life.

This adaptation enhances this atmosphere through lighting, costume, and set design. Tomb interiors are dim and enclosed, emphasising claustrophobia and death. Exterior desert scenes highlight isolation and scale. While these choices reinforce exoticism, they also serve the detective genres' need for suspense. Egypt functions less as a realistic setting than as a psychological landscape.

Furthermore, the episode reflects British anxieties about science, modernity and limits of human knowledge. The early 1920s were marked by rapid technological change alongside lingering trauma from the first world war. Archeology, often presented as a triumph of modern science, also uncovered reminders of morality in the form of tombs and preserved bodies. As Nicholas Reeves notes, the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb was framed not only as a scholarly achievement but as a media spectacle that blurred science and sensationalism.⁸ The episode Capturing this duality the excavation was once rational and methodical, yet surrounded by rumors of supernatural vengeance. This tension mirrors what Jay Winter identifies as a broader cultural preoccupation with death and commemoration in post war Europe.⁹ Egypt with its elaborate burial practices and monumental architecture, became a symbolic site through which British society processed grief and uncertainty. The Mediterranean setting is not just an exotic decoration but it becomes a cultural mirror reflecting on the British struggle to have scientific progress with spiritual doubt. Poirot's logical explanation, the narrative reassures viewers that reason can still impose order from chaos, even in landscapes with ancient mystery

⁶ John M. Maackenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*, 1995. p.54-76

⁷ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, 1995. p.78-102

⁸ Reeves, *The complete Tutankhamun*, p.60-65.

⁹ Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p.54-79.

In conclusion, “ The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb” presents the Mediterranean as both alluring and unsettling. Egypt is depicted through a lens shaped by imperial attitudes, popular journalism and gothic convention. Yet the episode does not fully endorse superstition, instead it exposes the human motives beneath the myth. As entertainment it succeeds in creating atmosphere and an intriguing story. As a cultural atefact, it reveals how Britain imagined Egypt as romanticised, mysterious and showed by ancient power.

Bibliography

Agatha Christie, '*The Adventure of the Egyptian tomb*', in *Poirot Investigates* 1924.

John M. Maackenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*, 1995. P.54-76

Dominic Monsterrat, *Akhnetan: History, Fantasy and Ancient Egypt*, 2000. P.179-182.

Nicholas Reeves, *The Complete Tutankhamun: The King, the Tomb, the Royal Treasure*, 1990. P.14-20.

Reeves, *The complete Tutankhamun*, p.60-65.

Donald Malcome Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I*, 2002. P.187-210.

Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978. P1-28.

Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, 1995. p.78-102

Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p.54-79.