

Unique Detective of Agatha Christie in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

Kalyan Das, Pramathesh Barua College, Gauripur, Dhubri, Assam

Article Received: 08/05/2022, Article Accepted: 28/06/2022, Published online: 28/06/2022

DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.2.63

Abstract:

Detective Fiction is extremely stereotypical (Van Dine, 1928). It follows a certain structure. This paper shows how within this structure Agatha Christie creates horizontal differences in her *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (Christie, 1926). In this way her detective fiction becomes unique. She takes radical departures in her construction of the narrative. This paper unfolds those aspects of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* like that of the use of the friend of the detective and the nature of the narrator to highlight the unique position that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* holds in the tradition of detective fiction

Keywords: mystery novel, narrator, crime, punishment

1. Introduction: A mystery or detective novel presents a crime, often a murder committed early in the narrative. The scene of crime presents an impossible situation. The central character in the narrative plays the role of a detective. The detective identifies variety of suspects with different motives. The detective collects evidence, interviews the suspects and solves the mystery. This process is however made difficult by the presence of red herrings. A significant volume of irrelevant information provides digression. The clues are presented

in such a way that the reader must have access to all the information that the detective has. The detective is often accompanied by a confidante. The author also makes use of stereotypical characters like a butler, a maid or a cook, a housekeeper etc. Finally when the resolution occurs, the detective gathers all the relevant people and reveals a startling resolution. He or she explains everything rationally to everybody and to the readers. This is followed by restoration of social status quo. Thus the criminal is either arrested or punished at the end of the novel.

2. The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd adheres to many of the conventions of mystery/detective novel. The crime of Roger Ackroyd's murder occurs in Chapter 4 of the novel. The crime is committed in the impossible circumstance of a room locked from inside. Secret relationship between Ralph Paton and Ursula Bourne, and between Miss Russel and Charles Kent provides misdirection. Irrelevant data like the schemes of Flora Acroyd to steal money and of John Parker's past history as a blackmailer steer the reader's focus to various directions. Red herring is presented in the form of Ralph Paton and Charles Kent, both of whom are seen near Fernly Park around the time of Roger Ackroyd's death. All these make *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* a conventional mystery novel.

However, on three grounds, Agatha Christie violates the set norms for detective fiction. Her first radical departure is her

presentation of the criminal narrator. By becoming the murderer himself, the narrator fundamentally becomes what Wayne C Booth (1961) calls an unreliable narrator. Dr Sheppard does not reveal the whole truth in the course of the novel. Therefore the Chapter 26, where the truth is revealed is named *And Nothing But The Truth*. At the very first page of the novel, Dr Sheppard says "To tell the truth I was considerably upset and worried." This statement might mean that Dr Sheppard is genuinely worried about the death of Mrs Ferrars. At the same time, the criminal narrator might be worried that he would not be able to blackmail Mrs Ferrars any more. This makes *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* idiosyncratic.

The presentation of Dr Sheppard as the confidante of the detective is another distinguishing feature of the novel. The tradition of mystery novels presents a detective's friend who is often a teacher or a doctor. The friend facilitates minute observation. But in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the murderer himself plays the role of "Watson to his Sherlock." (Chapter 14) Poirot's Hastings is finally revealed to be the murderer. The same man plays the role of the assistant detective and criminal. This makes the novel special.

The most important distinguishing feature of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is its departure from conventional ending. At the end of a mystery novel the detective restores the penal standard of the society. But in this novel, Poirot presents an incomplete resolution. In the assembly of suspects in Chapter 24 Poirot does not reveal the name of the criminal. He later gives Dr Sheppard "the chance of another way out" possibly taking recourse to veronal. Christie breaks the rule of bringing the culprit to justice. All these make *The*

Murder of Roger Ackroyd an unforgettable creation of Agatha Christie.

3. Narrator

Narrative perception is the originality of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Detective fiction often uses a first person narrator (Booth, 1961), who is an associate of the detective. In a 'whodunit' exposure, the reader forms their judgement based on this reliable narrator. But the first person narrator in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* proves to be an unreliable narrator. The narrative is presented in such a way that the criminal murderer becomes the author of his own crime. Dr Sheppard slips in narrative deception to present only half truths.

The first person narrator describes things in such a way that every statement seems to have two meanings. At the beginning of the novel, Dr Sheppard says:

"To tell the truth.....I was considerably upset and worried."

At one level it means that Dr Sheppard is genuinely upset for Mr Ferrars sudden demise. But at another level it means that his source of income is gone or Mrs Ferrars has told somebody about the blackmailing, and for this he is upset and worried. The first person narrative provides Dr Sheppard ample opportunity to use this device. While speaking about Ralph Paton, Dr Sheppard writes:

"Could I do anything with the boy? I thought I could."

The reader realizes that his deeper meaning is not actually to help Ralph Paton. He is rather considering ways to frame Ralph as the murderer. As Dr Sheppard leaves the study of Roger Ackroyd he wonders:

“I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering If there was anything I had left undone.”

The reader realizes that he is not thinking about doing his best to comfort Ackroyd before leaving. Rather, he is wondering if the murder has been well executed or not.

The first person narrator continuously makes double edged statements (Thompson, 2013). Still the narrator is able to win the trust of the reader. Dr Sheppard builds up this trust by first presenting a reliable account of facts. At the beginning he mentions dates and time in exact terms. He quotes date of Mrs Ferrars' death and exact times of his visit to Fernly Park. He also presents an authentic description of King's Abbot, its inhabitants and their lives. Once the narrator establishes his reliability, he presents a version of the crime which shields him.

Omission and concealment are abundant in the narrative of Dr Sheppard. He does not inform the police about the blackmailing part. The police get to know about it first through Parker. He eludes the mention of the Dictaphone. He makes no mention of his visit to the Three Boars until Flora refers to this visit. As a narrator Dr Sheppard conceals a great amount of facts. This makes him an unreliable narrator.

However, Hercule Poirot finally demolishes this narrative deception. Poirot's alternative narrative overpowers the unreliable one. Thus Christie has presented multiple narrative perspectives in her novel. The reliable one finally leaves its mark on the readers' imagination.

4. Red herrings

The *whodunit* nature of a detective novel necessitates a rational scrutiny of the

events. But hurdles in the form of red herrings often try to derail this process. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* also abounds in false trails and misleading clues. A great volume of data is presented in the form of incidents and sub plots that are unrelated to the actual crime.

Miss Flora Ackroyd's lie that she has talked to Roger Ackroyd at quarter to ten starts the trail of misleading data. She later confesses that she has not been to the study that evening. She has actually gone to her uncle's bedroom to steal money.

Charles Kent, whom Dr Sheppard meets that evening, plays the role of an important red herring. This unknown person arrives at Fernly Park around the time the murder is committed. The police and Hercule Poirot have to invest a great deal of time and energy to unearth the reason of his presence there. It is later revealed that Charles Kent is the illegitimate child of Miss Elizabeth Russel and he has been to the summer house only to meet his mother.

Ursula Bourne is another person who visits the summer house that evening. She has been dismissed from her job that afternoon itself by Roger Ackroyd. She has also given notice that she would leave Fernly Park within a few days. This makes her one of the suspects for the murder. But later she reveals that she is married to Ralph Paton and claims her husband's innocence. This removes her from the list of suspects.

The main red herring is that all the evidence squarely point towards Roger Ackroyd's stepson Ralph Paton. He has strained relationship with his step father Roger Ackroyd. He has been staying separately at the village inn Three Boars. He is seen roaming near Fernly Park around the time of Roger Ackroyd's murder. He

goes missing after the murder of his step father. He is also to get great financial benefit because of Roger Ackroyd's death. But Poirot reveals that Dr Sheppard has tried his best to plant all the evidence against Ralph Paton.

However, the greatest of all the red herrings is the narrator of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. The narrator presents only half truths to the reader. The reader is taken for a ride and they are sold out at every stage in the reading of the narrative. But this trail of concealments is brought to an end by Hercule Poirot. Hence Poirot is presented as the cerebral superhuman who solves the puzzle of red herrings at the end of the novel.

5. Conclusion

Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* departs from the conventional ending of a Golden Age of detective story (Todorov, 1966). This is because in this novel Poirot presents an incomplete solution. He prefers not to name the criminal at all. Only after the other characters exit the scene of assembly, the readers learn the true solution. It is revealed that the narrator is actually the murderer. This twist is followed by Poirot's decision that he would provide a way out for Dr Sheppard. He hints at suicide by an overdose of veronal. Poirot wants to do this to avoid embarrassing Dr Sheppard's sister. Caroline would be greatly shocked to hear about Dr Sheppard's criminality. Therefore he avoids revealing the name of the murderer to other characters. In other words, Poirot plans to preserve the doctor's reputation by allowing him a dignified exit.

Poirot's suggestion of veronal overdose is his 'life for a life' justice for Mr Ferrars death. This is Poirot's poetic justice to expunge a remorseless doctor. Dr Sheppard has been a blackmailer and

murderer. He can also be accused of abatement to suicide. Poirot's suggestion for Dr Sheppard's suicide is his effort to remove this threat to the society.

However, Poirot's decision to avoid public shame and disgrace to Dr Sheppard remains an issue of debate. This act of Poirot can be interpreted as his effort to preserve the reputation of the profession of doctors. A public knowledge of Dr Sheppard's crime would have made people lose their trust on doctors. This would have been harmful to the social status quo. Popular literature often respects the social order or conventions. Thus the profession of a physician should remain untarnished. For this reason, Christie chooses this particular ending. This twist at the end also reveals how the readers are taken for a ride by the narration of the doctor's subjectivity. Dr Sheppard has presented a unidirectional narrative. But the final twist brings a new narrative based on truths. This demolishes the subjective narrative of the criminal narrator. In this way, the ending of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* becomes a unique narrative in the convention of detective fiction.

References

- Booth, Wayne C. (1961). *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P.
- Christie, Agatha. (1926). *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Collins
- Thompson, Laura. (2013). *Introduction to The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Harper Collins Publishers
- Todorov, Tzvetan. (1966). *The Typology of Detective Fiction*. Crime and Media. Routledge.
- Van Dine, S S. (1928) *Twenty Rule for Writing Detective Stories*. The American Magazine.

How to cite this article?

Kalyan Das “ Unique Detective of Agatha Christie in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd”, Research Journal Of English(RJOE)7 (2), PP: 470-474,2022, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.2.63>