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NARRATIVE UNRELIABILITY IN AGATHA CHRISTIE'S  
*THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD*

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I confirm that this thesis is my own work written using solely the sources and literature properly quoted and acknowledged as works cited.

27. 7. 2023, České Budějovice

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## Anotace

Tato bakalářská práce si klade za cíl analyzovat známky nespolehlivosti v románu *Vražda Rogera Ackroyda* od Agathy Christie prostřednictvím podrobného zkoumání jeho vybraných pasáží a následně určit, zda přítomnost nespolehlivého vypravěče ovlivňuje potenciál knihy na vyřešení čtenářem. Práce se skládá ze tří kapitol — první se zaměřuje na detektivní žánr, jeho definici, historii a pravidla; druhá pojednává o životě a literární činnosti Agathy Christie; a poslední se zabývá samotným románem *Vražda Rogera Ackroyda*, soustředíc se především na analýzu jeho narativní nespolehlivosti.

**Klíčová slova:** whodunnit, detektivní fikce, Agatha Christie, Vražda Rogera Ackroyda, nespolehlivý vypravěč

## **Abstract**

This bachelor's thesis aims to analyse signs of unreliability in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by close reading selected passages of the novel, subsequently determining whether the presence of an unreliable narrator influences its potential to be solved by the reader. The thesis consists of three chapters — the first focuses on the whodunnit genre, its definition, history, and rules; the second discusses the life and literary work of Agatha Christie; and the last deals with *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* itself, predominantly concentrating on the analysis of its narrative unreliability.

**Keywords:** whodunnit, detective fiction, Agatha Christie, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, unreliable narrator

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## Introduction

Throughout her six-decades-long career, English author Agatha Christie, the undisputed Queen of Crime, produced a rather impressive amount of literary work, primarily focussing on classic murder mysteries, the so-called whodunnits. In one of her most remarkable and debated novels, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, she shocked everyone by disguising the murderer behind the narrator's voice, thus essentially violating an established rule of detective fiction. Hence, the questions arise: What signs of narrative unreliability can we find hidden in the account, and how does the presence of an unreliable narrator influence the potential of the novel to be solved by the reader?

This thesis, divided into three distinct parts, deals with the following topics — the first chapter defines the term whodunnit, and subsequently discusses the history and rules of detective fiction, with emphasis on the breaking of the rules; the second chapter narrates the events of Agatha Christie's life and her literary work; and the last chapter overviews *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* as well as discusses the topic of the unreliable narrator. Finally, the majority of the thesis concentrates on the comprehensive analysis of the various signs of unreliability in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by employing the methodology of close reading selected passages of the novel.

# 1. Whodunnit

## 1.1. Definition

Within detective fiction, a whodunnit is a narrative whose central focus is uncovering the culprit's identity while providing the reader with all the clues to the case. Its purpose is to allow everyone to solve the crime before the final revelation of the perpetrator, engaging them in the same deductive process as the detective. Following a nearly identical pattern every time, the whodunnit 'subscribes to a rigidly uniform, virtually changeless combination of characters, setting, and events familiar to every reader in the English speaking world' (Grella 30). It typically begins with a small group of people gathered at a private party, during or after which they discover one of them murdered. And since the police officials are baffled and unable to proceed with the investigation, an eccentric, superiorly intelligent detective must come to the rescue. He then reconstructs the events, checks the alibi of all suspects, and inevitably arrives at the only possible explanation of who and why committed the murder.

As the form of the whodunnit is in many ways similar to every other type of detective fiction, it must employ certain unique features specific only to this version of the genre to distinguish it. The first vital element is murder, creating the central crime of every story, though always described in a contained and unemotional manner. Stereotypically, the victim will be a man or a woman, usually of high status and wealth, who at first might seem like a decent and innocent person but deep down is 'exceptionally murderable' due to their actions (Grella 41). The murderer often has a close relationship with the victim and comes from the same social circle, in many cases being the least or the most likely person to commit the act. The revelation of the



criminal's identity generally occurs at the end of the story, with the detective assembling all suspects in one room and methodically unravelling the mystery.

Another crucial component to identifying the whodunnit is its relatively restricted setting, typically a somewhat secluded luxurious country house or an otherwise enclosed space, thus also limiting the number of suspects. The suspects, being 'roughly equal in social standing, though not of the same class, family background, or profession' (Grella 39), all 'appear capable of the crime and are equipped with motives' (Knight 79). Like the victim, even these characters tend to fall into particular categories of stereotype, emerging again and again in most whodunnits, each time possessing a virtually identical set of attributes.

The last significant distinguishing trait is rational detection based on gathering material and circumstantial evidence and interrogating suspects conducted by an amateur or, at times, semi-professional detective. The writing style will be 'decidedly plain' (Knight 78) to match the analytical nature of the investigation, making the characters rather two-dimensional without much depth and elaboration. Finally, as mentioned above, the most unusual element of the whodunnit form is 'the fact that the reader is challenged to match the detective's process of identifying the murderer and must be informed of each clue that the detective sees' (Knight 79).

## **1.2. History**

The detective fiction genre is a modern phenomenon related to the establishment of detective police departments in the United Kingdom and the United States during the first half of the 19th century. Beginning in 1841 with the introduction of the character of C. Auguste Dupin in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", 'the appearance of a new and modern kind of protagonist from the mid-

nineteenth century, who has come to be called “the detective”, marks a distinction from earlier mysteries’ (Kayman 41). Followed by “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” in 1842 and “The Purloined Letter” in 1845, Poe used a narrative pattern which, by employing an anonymous narrator to describe events, avoided revealing too much of Dupin’s thinking process. This formula then ‘became the standard way of setting up the mystery game’ (Davis 29) when, nearly fifty years later, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle borrowed and further refined it by giving personality to the narrator’s voice, creating Dr. John Watson.

Between 1887 and 1927, A. C. Doyle’s consulting detective Sherlock Holmes appeared in four novels and fifty-six short stories, with almost all of them published in *The Strand Magazine*, managing to become the most renowned sleuth in the history of detective fiction. Doyle played ‘enough variation on the pattern to keep it constantly fresh’ (Kayman 48), producing some of the finest works of the genre, such as the 1902 novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Throughout his active years as a writer, i.e. the late 19th and early 20th century, the primary form of detective fiction was the short story, focusing on a single perplexing event and incorporating only a limited number of characters. However, this changed with the arrival of the so-called Golden Age in the 1920s, which introduced a new novel-length narrative, presenting the committed crime as a puzzle to be solved, the whodunnit.

During the interwar period, ‘elements that were randomly present in earlier crime fiction suddenly become a norm, like multiple suspects, and some earlier tendencies largely disappear’ (Knight 77), all due to the nature of the whodunnit. The flourishing novel overshadowed the short story form because of its greater possibilities, excelling at misleading readers and surprising them with unexpected solutions — although, over time, the little changing formula of the whodunnit made it somewhat predictable. Unlike before, when magazines publishing short stories targeted men,

women were the ones visiting lending libraries that distributed novels, thus shifting the gender of the detective fiction audience from male to predominantly female (Knight 81). Even many of the most influential authors of the Golden Age era were women, most notably Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, who, in 1930, together with other eminent British mystery writers, such as R. Austin Freeman, G. K. Chesterton, or Anthony Berkeley Cox, founded the Detection Club, ‘a supper club for highly talented people with a similar vocation who would share tips, perhaps offer suggestions to one another, try out ideas, and laugh about particularly hideous examples they had encountered’ (Davis 31), which remains active to this day.

### **1.3. Rules**

Throughout the 1920s, several members of the Detection Club and other mystery writers decided to distinguish the detective fiction genre by laying down specific rules to define the unwritten laws of a good detective story, these guidelines essentially being ‘norms of success and proved formulas’ (Dove 71) aimed at satisfying the expectations of the reading public. The first to attempt this was Carolyn Wells, already in 1913, with *The Technique of the Mystery Story*, taking a rather ‘cook-book approach’ and insisting ‘that all the clues be laid out before the reader’ (Dove 68). Next came E. M. Wrong’s introduction to 1921 *Crime and Detection* and, in 1924, R. Austin Freeman’s essay “The Art of the Detective Story”, where he ‘insists upon careful plotting as the essential feature’ (Dove 69). Four years later, in 1928, Dorothy L. Sayers published her introduction to *Great Stories of Detection, Mystery, and Horror*, while S. S. Van Dine and Ronald A. Knox produced the two most significant lists of rules — “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories” and “A Detective Story Decalogue” respectively, representing ‘a sharp turn toward strict dogma’ (Dove 69).

Van Dine perceived the whodunnit as an intellectual game with binding laws that must be honoured, emphasising, similarly to Knox, ‘clarity and unity of technique, as well as fair play’ (Knight 80). Both lists insist that the detective story be rational and scientifically oriented, without any distractions from the central plot of solving a murder, such as love interests or long descriptive passages. Among the most imperative rules belong Van Dine’s number one — ‘The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery’ (189) — and ten — ‘The culprit must turn out to be a person who has played a more or less prominent part in the story’ (191), corresponding with Knox’s commandments number eight — ‘The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader’ (196) — and one — ‘The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story’ (194). Furthermore, according to the rules, as the truth must always be apparent when rereading the whodunnit, the author should avoid using tricks, deception, and experiments which would conceal crucial information from the reader and make the revelation of the culprit’s identity an absolute shock.

Overall, by codifying the rules of detective fiction, the genre was supposed to attain respectability while remaining ‘alive and fresh, free of banality, triteness and the temptation to repeat any device that has proved successful’ (Dove 70). The strict regulations also inspired many mystery writers to find creative ways of breaking them, thus further elevating whodunnits and inventing new means of captivating and surprising readers.

## 2. Agatha Christie

### 2.1. Life

Born on 15 September 1890 into a well-off middle-class family, Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller, the youngest of three children of Clara Boehmer and Frederick Miller, grew up in Ashfield, a Victorian villa in Torquay, Devon, South West England, having a very happy and carefree childhood. Since her two siblings — sister Madge and brother Monty — were considerably older and mostly away at school, Agatha invented imaginary friends to entertain herself, spending much of her time playing with them in the garden and around the house. She was also very fond of books and listening to stories; her dear nanny had a repertoire of six that she repeated over and over, whereas her mother would make up new thrilling tales every time, some even leaving unfinished. Against her mother's wishes, Agatha taught herself to read before the age of five, and shortly after learnt how to write with the help of her father, who started homeschooling her. She became fascinated with mathematics and enjoyed solving arithmetic problems, later in life admitting that had she continued with her education, she might have actually been a mathematician instead of a writer (Christie, *Autobiography* 149).

When she was about five years old, the family got into financial difficulties and, since the cost of living was much less abroad, consequently stayed in numerous hotels in the South of France, renting out their home in England. During this time, Agatha began learning French with her new governess, a young local woman called Marie, quickly acquiring enough skills to be able to converse while simultaneously forming a true friendship. After a year of travelling through France, the family returned to Ashfield, where she started taking piano lessons and continued with her dancing classes in Torquay, both of which she thoroughly enjoyed. Not much later, their financial

situation worsened, forcing them to economise even more, and the health of Agatha's father began to deteriorate, eventually resulting in his passing away in 1901 when she was only eleven years old. This tragic event caused her mother great distress and worries, and the question of whether they could afford to remain at Ashfield arose; however, as all three children protested against selling it, they ultimately decided to stay. At the end of the following year, her sister married and moved out of the house to be with her husband, which marked the beginning of a new stage in Agatha's life, becoming her mother's closest companion.

From the age of fifteen, she boarded at a succession of girls' schools — first in Torquay, focusing on arithmetic, grammar, and composition, and then in France, where she studied a broader range of subjects, including music. While in France, she much improved in playing the piano, learning from the best teachers, and could have become a professional pianist had it not been for her extreme shyness on stage — although that taught her she had not the kind of temperament for exhibition (Christie, *Autobiography* 161). Not long after her return, due to her mother's illness, they set off for a three-month winter season in Cairo, spending most evenings attending dances and occasionally exploring Egyptian archaeological sites during the day — something seventeen-year-old Agatha did not particularly care for at that time but would be passionate about over twenty years later.

By the age of eighteen, she started taking more interest in writing, finishing her first short story in less than two days, which, according to her, was the first thing she ever wrote that showed any sign of promise (Christie, *Autobiography* 189). Subsequently, she also decided to attempt writing a novel and, on completing it, sent it to Eden Philpotts, a family friend and author, who then kindly offered constructive criticism and advice and even referred her to his literary agent. In the end, since the

book was not published, she resigned and shifted her focus back to poetry and short stories, although she did not feel satisfied with many of them. One day, as she and her sister were discussing a mystery novel they had been reading, Madge declared that in no way could Agatha ever write a detective story, prompting her to become determined that sometime in the future she would write one (Christie, *Autobiography* 207).

It was in 1912 that she met Archie Christie, a young qualified aviator who had applied to join the newly-formed Royal Flying Corps, falling madly in love and accepting his marriage proposal after only three months, the engagement eventually lasting a year and a half due to them having not enough money. They married rather abruptly on Christmas Eve in 1914, both having experienced the First World War — Agatha working as a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment in Torquay and Archie fighting in France. Following the wedding and her husband's subsequent departure, Agatha, now Christie, resumed her work at the hospital, later transferring to the dispensary, where she remained for the rest of the war, preparing for the Apothecaries Hall examination. During the leisure time dispensing provided, she conceived the idea of writing a detective novel, which had remained in her mind since the discussion with her sister a few years back (Christie, *Autobiography* 248), ultimately turning this idea into what was to become the first detective novel she ever wrote, and launching her career as a successful murder mystery writer.

In 1918, when Archie unexpectedly returned to England, having been reassigned to the Air Ministry in London, he and Agatha began searching for a flat to live in, finally settling in St. John's Wood and truly starting their married life. The following year, after the war ended, Archie decided to leave the Air Force and find a job in the City, while Agatha found out she was pregnant — giving birth to her only child, daughter Rosalind, at the beginning of August 1919. The family of three, together

with a maid and a nurse, then moved into a new unfurnished flat that Agatha took great pleasure in decorating, learning how to hang wallpaper in the process. In 1922, leaving Rosalind in the care of her mother and sister, she and Archie travelled across the dominions promoting the British Empire Exhibition, where Agatha became the first British woman to surf standing up. Once they arrived home ten months later, Agatha continued working on her writing, having considerable success, and Archie accepted a new job offer, establishing himself in the world of finance. Around this period, however, their relationship started lacking because they did not spend as much time together since Archie preferred playing golf at weekends, leaving Agatha reminiscing about how things had been throughout their early companionship (Christie, *Autobiography* 328). With 1926 came the worst year of Agatha's life — her mother died following a bad case of bronchitis, and so she was often left alone clearing out Ashfield, feeling 'a terrible sense of loneliness' (Christie, *Autobiography* 340). Her marriage, strained by the sorrow, eventually broke down when Archie confessed to having fallen in love with Nancy Neele, a fellow golfer and family acquaintance, and asked for a divorce — granted two years later.

In the autumn of 1928, travelling on the Orient Express for the first time, which had been her lifelong aspiration (Christie, *Autobiography* 351), Agatha set off for Baghdad and from there proceeded to the archaeological site at Ur, where Katharine and Leonard Woolley, who ran the dig, kindly received her and showed her around. Being invited back by them the following year, she met twenty-five-year-old Max Mallowan, Mr Woolley's assistant, with whom she spent a couple of days exploring the sites before taking an indirect journey home. As they had many things in common and understood each other, Agatha and Max soon became close, getting married, despite her initial reluctance due to their age difference, in a quiet ceremony in



Edinburgh in September 1930, only six months after their first meeting. From then on, Agatha accompanied Max on his annual archaeological expeditions to the Middle East, helping on the excavation sites and dedicating the remaining time to focusing on her writing. During the Second World War, Agatha worked about four days a week as a dispenser at University College Hospital in London, also often helping look after her grandson Mathew, born in 1943, whilst Max was posted to the Middle East, using his knowledge of Arabic to assist the war effort. By 1948, the couple had resumed their archaeological work in Nimrud, and in the subsequent twenty years, Agatha concentrated on writing and producing plays, devoting less time to plotting novels.

Having lived a long and fulfilling life, Agatha Christie Mallowan died peacefully on 12 January 1976 at her home at Winterbrook House, Wallingford, Oxfordshire, England, due to natural causes at the age of eighty-five.

## **2.2. Literary work**

With over two billion copies of her sixty-six detective novels and fourteen short story collections sold worldwide, Agatha Christie remains the best-selling novelist and detective fiction author of all time. Since the publishing of her first-ever murder mystery in 1920, she mostly maintained the standard of writing at least one novel a year, becoming very prolific as the decades went by. She established the formula of the modern whodunnit in its purest form and mastered the genre while producing many of its classics, rightfully attaining the reputation as the Queen of Crime.

It was in 1916 that she began plotting her first detective novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, immediately settling on death by poisoning, as, at that time, she was working in a dispensary. Next, she developed the characters, drawing inspiration from strangers she had seen on public transport, and then focused on the personality and

appearance of the detective, ultimately creating Hercule Poirot, a retired Belgian police officer relying on his little grey cells, whom she based on refugees living in Britain. After sorting out the sequence of events in the story, she started typing it out and eventually finished the entire book during a fortnight's holiday on Dartmoor, although in the end decided to rewrite several over-complicated chapters in the middle. It was not until 1920 that the novel got published by The Bodley Head, for the publishers she sent it to before rejected it; however, she had to change the last chapter — inventing the now classic final scene where the detective, assembling all suspects in one room, reveals which one of them committed the murder and why. 'Gathering together the archetypal features of the clue-puzzle' (Knight 82), *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* received positive reviews, with Christie being especially delighted by the one in *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, which praised her knowledge of poisons (*Autobiography* 277).

Her second novel, *The Secret Adversary*, first published in 1922, was not a detective story but an espionage thriller introducing Tommy and Tuppence, a couple that would later figure in three additional books. With the 1923 *Murder on the Links*, based on a real-life French murder case, she returned to the detective fiction genre, once again employing Hercule Poirot and his Watson, Captain Hastings, although this time using a 'high-flown, fanciful type of writing' (Christie, *Autobiography* 276), influenced by French author Gaston Leroux. Around the same period, she also received and subsequently accepted a great offer from the editor of *The Sketch* journal, who suggested that she write a series of twelve short stories featuring Poirot. Furthermore, in 1924, after submitting and publishing her fourth novel, *The Man in the Brown Suit*, she sold its serial rights to *The Evening News* newspaper for an extraordinary sum of five hundred pounds.

By 1925, she had already written five books for The Bodley Head, as required by her contract, deciding — unhappy with their treatment of her — she would not stay with them but would find a new publisher — eventually settling with William Collins, with whom she remained for the rest of her successful decades-long career. The first novel she submitted to them was *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in 1926, one of her most successful narratives to date, partly owing to the original plot twist suggested by her brother-in-law, on which she built the formula. Two years later, they published *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, a book she very much despised and was not proud of, having written it during a difficult and joyless period in her life after her mother's death — turning from an amateur into a professional in the process (Christie, *Autobiography* 348).

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Christie produced almost all of her most popular and well-known novels, being regarded as an established detective fiction writer by the end of the war. *The Murder at the Vicarage* appeared in 1930, introducing the new character of Miss Jane Marple, an elderly spinster endowed with extraordinary powers of observation, most likely developed from Dr Sheppard's sister Caroline from *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. In the 1934 *Murder on the Orient Express* and the 1939 *And Then There Were None*, she astounded readers with her explanations, 'making them acknowledge, in admiring bafflement, that the final coup was the only possible outcome of her cunning plotting' (Knight 82). Many of her stories, such as *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1935), *Death on the Nile* (1937) or *Appointment with Death* (1937), were also inspired by her time spent travelling through the Middle East. The last detective novel she wrote was the 1973 *Postern of Fate*, although *Curtain* (Poirot's last case) and *Sleeping Murder* (Miss Marple's last case), both written during the Second World War, were the last to be published — in 1975 and 1976 respectively. In addition to detective

fiction, she penned novels under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott, adapted her books, like *The Hollow*, to the stage and even wrote the world's longest-running play — *The Mousetrap* — which has been running ever since its opening in 1952.

The key to Agatha Christie's success essentially consists in the non-arbitrary selection of her culprits, who, more often than not, are the most likely to commit the murder — making her stories quite realistic. However, despite this fact, her whodunnits may still be considered too intricate to solve because she employs a number of 'block elements' (Singer 160), or riddling strategies, that obstruct seeing the simplicity of the solution. These strategies make the plot more complex as it progresses, taking a fairly straightforward murder with a clear-cut motive and an obvious suspect and turning it into a mystery with many red herrings, contradictions, or false assumptions. Ultimately confusing the reader's mind, it becomes impossible to distinguish significant clues from the unimportant ones, rendering them all irrelevant, thus producing final resolutions that are unexpected and yet the most reasonable.

### ***3. The Murder of Roger Ackroyd***

#### **3.1. Overview**

First published in June 1926, Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, an intricate detective fiction masterpiece that transformed her career, clearly demonstrates her particular genius in narrative structure and technique. Culminating in a brilliant final twist which possibly staggers even some of the most experienced whodunnit readers, this quintessential murder mystery, full of red herrings and uncertainty, manages to captivate until the very last chapter. Deeply puzzling yet surprisingly simple at its core, this novel, investigating the lives of King's Abbot's residents — the suspects — and uncovering their respective secrets, is 'all genre: not an atom of authorial personality comes between the writing and the reader' (Thompson xiv). To have a chance at solving the murder, when facing such a cunningly constructed narrative, one must keep an open mind and maintain sharp focus, remembering that even the slightest detail mentioned in a detective story carries a meaning and undoubtedly will, in some form, re-emerge later.

Moving her stock characters with mathematical precision like pieces on a Cluedo board, Christie's plotting in *Roger Ackroyd* provides constant mental stimulation, requiring the capability of rapid analysis of the ever-changing potential explanations and their validity. However, unlike in the game, where all clues serve as puzzle pieces that fit together upon accumulation, ultimately forming the complete picture, in this instance, they almost get in the way, for many of them are unrelated to the central mystery, only there to lead readers astray. Because of that, the construction of this whodunnit closely resembles the one of a riddle — 'the key to its hermeneutic structure is the block element' (Singer 170), whose identification is crucial to

connecting the dots and finding the solution. What obstructs perceiving the simple truth here is the hidden — but true — nature of the novel's narrator, who eventually proves to be wholly unreliable after exposing himself as the culprit.

Understandably, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is thus renowned precisely for the identity of the murderer and, at the same time, for the skill with which Agatha Christie executed such a challenging task. Nevertheless, for this exact reason, she also ignited quite a controversy, raising the question of whether she plays fair with her audience — since by revealing the narrator had committed the crime, she essentially broke a few fundamental rules of detective fiction. As the second part of Knox's commandment number one states, 'the criminal must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow' (194), while number nine declares that 'the stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind' (196). These codifications, however, cannot be interpreted as, and must not be confused with, strict regulations but should be viewed merely as the expectations of the public or general recommendations for inexperienced authors.

Therefore, the violation of the two rules in *Roger Ackroyd* would be problematic only if it produced negative consequences directly impacting some core aspects of the whodunnit genre, like Van Dine's rule number one — 'The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery' (189) — or number fifteen — 'The truth of the problem must at all times be apparent — provided the reader is shrewd enough to see it' (191). Yet, both of these vital genre components are preserved since Agatha Christie cleverly incorporated various signs of unreliability into the narrative, most of which will be discussed in detail throughout the following chapters.

## **3.2. Unreliable narrator**

### **3.2.1. Definition**

An unreliable narrator is one whose credibility is somewhat compromised, either by intentionally or unwittingly misleading readers, which, in numerous instances, depending on the author's objective, might go unnoticed without making anyone even slightly suspicious — ultimately resulting in an unexpected final twist. Detecting the unreliability then requires focused rereading with thorough textual analysis, searching for specific telltale signs such as inconsistency or contradiction between statements and omission of certain information, leaving holes in the narrative. Furthermore, when unreliability is present, it generally occurs in a first-person narrator who is also a character in the story, thus being 'subject to limited knowledge, personal involvement, and problematic value-schemes' (Rimmon-Kenan 106).

Essentially, any non-omniscient narrator is, to some extent, unreliable, and therefore the distinction between this incidental and actual calculated unreliability, i.e. one functioning as the writer's narrative device of choice, must be made. Intended narrative unreliability stems primarily from the employment of numerous characteristic techniques recognizable in the narration — each corresponding to a particular type of unreliable narrator — which prompt the observant reader to question and further examine the given account of events, understanding that not everything may be as it appears.

### **3.2.2. Dr Sheppard**

Regarding whodunnits, there is a general expectation that certain dramatis personae — most notably the conventional roles of the eccentric detective and his

Watson — are automatically immune to being the murderer. However, as previously stated, Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* famously defied this, revealing its narrator Dr James Sheppard as the culprit and thus proclaiming his entire narrative unreliable. Cunning in his rhetoric but otherwise pretty self-absorbed with a sense of grandiosity, he chronicles the investigation in King's Abbot, truthfully recounting the events from his point of view with the only exception of non-disclosing the one piece of crucial information that would irreversibly incriminate him. Yet, to prove his superiority, Sheppard cannot help but make several elisions and implications throughout the text, which, if detected by readers, indisputably point to his unreliability and guilt.

Employing predominantly the narrative strategy of little lapses of time that are 'nicely concealed in an ambiguous sentence' (Christie, *Autobiography* 334), the doctor achieves sufficient coherence, hence not leaving much room for questions. The technique is particularly clever since, from the very beginning, he is rather strongly associated with the police inspectors and Hercule Poirot while quietly distancing himself from the suspects, which essentially makes him appear innocent, merely eager to solve the murder of his friend. This illusion, together with the presumed narrator's immunity, would create an aura of Sheppard's trustworthiness, shielding him from ever being even considered a potential suspect, were it not for numerous incongruities that betray him.

Interestingly enough, despite all the aforementioned factors, his unreliability is actually incredibly obvious, so much so that any genuinely experienced detective fiction reader can pick up on it within a few chapters if not pages. The intricacy, however, lies in deciphering what kind of secret is behind it, for 'Dr Sheppard is performing a dual act of concealment' (Thompson 301) — besides withholding his



guilt, he is also protecting yet another piece of information connected to the investigation. Therefore, to assess the situation accurately, one must separate the role of a narrator from the character of the doctor, recognising that in spite of everything, Sheppard is unequivocally the sole possible suspect. Nevertheless, to the average audience, the unreliability becomes evident only when rereading the novel, for then they get the opportunity to admire and savour the subtle nuances of meaning, which make *Roger Ackroyd* such a remarkable work.

Lastly, in addition to providing the intratextual signs of unreliability, the doctor's narrative, divided into three distinct parts (i.e. pre-murder, investigating with Poirot, and anticipating revelation), clearly illustrates how his demeanour and attitude change over the course of the investigation, thus aiding in identifying his guilty conscience and fear of exposure. Slowly losing control, Sheppard's true character gradually shows as the novel unravels, going from a seemingly unbiased observer to a weak man who overestimates himself while foolishly underestimating the abilities of the great Hercule Poirot. In the end, having been defeated, Dr Sheppard has nothing left to do but confess, for all the clues combined inevitably point to his person as the wanted culprit.

### **3.3. Signs of unreliability**

#### **3.3.1. Premeditation**

The first — and shortest — part of Dr Sheppard's narrative describes the events of Friday the 17th of September, beginning with the death of Mrs Ferrars and concluding with the shocking murder of Roger Ackroyd. Serving as an overall introduction to the lives and relations of King's Abbot's residents, the doctor characterises each of the ten main characters, including the seven subsequent suspects:

Roger Ackroyd's adopted son Captain Ralph Paton, the butler John Parker, the housekeeper Miss Elizabeth Russell, the secretary Mr Geoffrey Raymond, the niece Miss Flora Ackroyd, her mother Mrs Ackroyd, and Major Hector Blunt. Due to Sheppard's position as the narrator, his defining features are revealed progressively throughout the novel; however, he initially portrays himself as a good-natured village physician who leads a monotonous life of everyday routine with his spinster sister Caroline.

In the previous chapters, we have already established that Dr James Sheppard is guilty of murdering Roger Ackroyd, yet, he is also responsible for committing an earlier crime — blackmailing Mrs Ferrars, which ultimately lead to her suicide. Unsurprisingly, these two acts are tightly intertwined, for the former is a direct consequence of the latter. As a practised doctor, Sheppard recognised the symptoms of arsenic poisoning after Mr Ashley Ferrars died but, realising it must have been at the hands of the deceased's wife, chose to conceal the facts in order to blackmail her. Then, a year later, remorseful and desperate, Mrs Ferrars takes her own life by overdosing on veronal, thus setting in motion a chain reaction which eventually results in Sheppard's exposure.

The below-analysed opening part of the narrative naturally reflects the growing anxiety Dr Sheppard experiences and, more importantly, foreshadows the elaborate scheme he cunningly concocted to, hopefully, evade all responsibility. First, he enters the stage of apprehension, contemplating whether his secret blackmailing affair might come to the surface. We can detect such signs of uneasiness when he returns home immediately after examining the body of the late Mrs Ferrars, not confident about the intentionality of her overdose:

To tell the truth, I was considerably upset and worried. I am not going to pretend that at that moment I foresaw the events of the next few weeks. I emphatically did not do so. But my instinct told me that there were stirring times ahead. (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 1)

While it is entirely understandable, even appropriate, that any man in his situation should feel upset, the rest of the statement and emotions expressed through it do not quite make sense — until we learn about the full extent of his involvement. Although for a general practitioner, encountering both natural and unnatural death, either by accident or intentional means, might not be very common, such incidents must inevitably occur during the course of his career. Thus, reacting with worry and attaching a certain sense of premonition to someone's passing away seems rather excessive, especially considering the rational nature of the profession. Accordingly, we can logically interpret Sheppard's feelings solely when considering his fear of Mrs Ferrars having left an explanatory letter. A similar, perhaps slightly more ambiguous passage appears a few pages later when Sheppard recalls last seeing Mrs Ferrars earnestly talking to Ralph Paton:

I think I can safely say that it was at this moment that a foreboding of the future first swept over me. Nothing tangible as yet—but a vague premonition of the way things were setting. That earnest *tete-à-tete* between Ralph Paton and Mrs Ferrars the day before struck me disagreeably. (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 11)

It is imperative to note that up to this point, the doctor has only discussed the possibility of Mrs Ferrars's suicide — induced by the guilt over poisoning her husband — but has never mentioned anything else related to her except for her forthcoming engagement to Roger Ackroyd. In this context, conversing with her prospective stepson

does not seem even vaguely out of place and, therefore, ought not to be any cause for alarm to Sheppard. Consequently, from this comment, we may infer a couple of things about him: one, he knows more than he discloses, and two, the information he is hiding concerns either one or both of the said pair. However, since we already have complete knowledge of his wrongdoings, it is not difficult to recognise that he suspects Mrs Ferrars confided in Paton, dreading the thought of being exposed.

The second stage Dr Sheppard enters throughout his introductory narrative — execution of his plan — incorporates two separate phases: first, the murder of Roger Ackroyd itself, and subsequently, framing Ralph Paton for it. Due to the intimate relationship between Ackroyd and Mrs Ferrars, Sheppard decides to take precautions, convinced she confessed everything before overdosing — his motive for murder is thus merely to suppress the blackmail and maintain a favourable reputation. In an attempt to avoid suspicion and mislead investigators, he not only ingeniously modifies a dictaphone to make determining the accurate time of death impossible but also produces false clues, one of them being planting fabricated evidence at the crime scene to incriminate Ralph Paton. Having selected him because of his constant money difficulties, which put a strain on the relationship with his adoptive father, and somewhat unusual behaviour during the previous twenty-four hours, Sheppard manipulates readers by insinuating several times that Paton might be up to something. The final indirect imputation comes after Roger Ackroyd privately reveals to Dr Sheppard that Mrs Ferrars did, in fact, confide in him about the blackmailing matters and its circumstances, although leaving out a specific name:

Suddenly before my eyes there arose the picture of Ralph Paton and Mrs Ferrars side by side. Their heads so close together. I felt a momentary throb of anxiety.

Supposing—oh! but surely that was impossible. I remembered the frankness of Ralph's greeting that very afternoon. Absurd! (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 40)

Reflecting on the same exact situation as described in the preceding excerpt, Sheppard uses its ambiguity to pursue his personal agenda, persuading readers to return and re-evaluate the meaning while strengthening his credibility since anyone unaware of the narrative unreliability will most likely accept this newly-introduced explanation as reasonable — believing Ralph Paton to be the blackmailer. Furthermore, the sense of bewilderment combined with raw emotions, conveyed through the abrupt shift from concern to denial, adds intensity to the doctor's statement, creating an air of sincerity. Therefore, feeling secure in his pseudo-trustworthy persona, Dr Sheppard smoothly transitions to executing the premeditated murder. Having been requested to attend dinner at Ackroyd's house, he comes prepared, carrying 'a very handy little weapon of his own' (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 297); however, whilst inspecting the drawing-room for something that has made a particular sound, he conveniently stumbles upon a different object much more suitable for his purpose:

At once I recognized the sound I had heard. It was this same table lid being shut down gently and carefully. I repeated the action once or twice for my own satisfaction. Then I lifted the lid to scrutinize the contents more closely. I was still bending over the open silver table when Flora Ackroyd came into the room. (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 31–32)

Presumably, if anyone were to read this extract without having prior knowledge of the narrator's unreliability, they would not detect one of the absolutely crucial pieces of evidence that the novel provides, dismissing it immediately; yet, it partially holds the key to incriminating Sheppard later on. Since we do not receive a detailed

description of the examined contents, we cannot directly assess the significance of the situation correctly — although a shrewd reader might notice a suspicious gap between two sentences. This interlude occurs between stating he ‘lifted the lid to scrutinize the contents more closely’ and informing us he ‘was still bending over the open silver table when Flora Ackroyd came into the room’, representing Sheppard’s well-known technique of time lapses. Pretty inconspicuous at first but blatant after rumination, this blank interval constitutes a moment during which he obtains a dagger subsequently used for murdering Roger Ackroyd in his study — that we only discover was in the silver table a few pages later. Thus, it is of paramount importance to vividly remember the statement’s peculiar lapse of time and afterwards employ it to establish the doctor’s guilt. By analogy, Dr Sheppard naturally withholds information at the time of the murder:

The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. I could think of nothing. With a shake of the head I passed out and closed the door behind me. (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 44)

Having urged Ackroyd to read a letter from Mrs Ferrars containing the name of her blackmailer — in the hope of either justifying his actions or perhaps using the curiosity as a disguise — but ultimately failing, he sees the execution of his murderous plan as a last resort to dispose of the imminent danger. The time lapse between remarking ‘the letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine’ and announcing that ‘it was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread’ provides Sheppard with just enough space to omit the incriminating details without significantly

affecting the overall textual coherence. However, during the unaccounted-for ten minutes, he fatally stabs Ackroyd, places the timed dictaphone by a window, and pulls out an armchair in front to conceal it. Nevertheless, supposing readers stay oblivious to the gap, there can be detected one more sign of unreliability within Dr Sheppard's statement — the phrase 'I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone'. This comment, especially the part about leaving anything undone, does not correspond well with the context of the given situation, creating an impression of intrigue, thus raising the question of whether the doctor has genuinely mentioned everything. Finally, to bring his intricate scheme to a successful conclusion, Sheppard cunningly presents us with an ostensibly sudden incident, which he, in fact, has carefully scheduled:

I ran down the stairs and took up the receiver.

'What?' I said. '*What?* Certainly, I'll come at once.'

I ran upstairs, caught up my bag, and stuffed a few extra dressings into it.

'Parker telephoning,' I shouted to Caroline, 'from Fernly. They've just found Roger Ackroyd murdered'. (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 46)

This seemingly standard telephone call made to Sheppard shortly after his committing of the murder might not at first attract much attention — at least until we observe that he only provides us with his side of the conversation. While he is not lying about receiving a call — for Agatha Christie herself declared he always writes 'nothing but the truth, though not the whole truth' (*Autobiography* 334) — he cannot disclose the caller's side simply because he has orchestrated the entire exchange himself, exclusively as a justification for being the first to arrive at the crime scene and retrieving the dictaphone, thus securing his alibi.

### **3.3.2. Investigation**

The second, middle part of Dr Sheppard's narrative describes the events of the subsequent three days, beginning with the discovery of the murdered Roger Ackroyd on Friday evening and concluding with the following Monday night. Serving as a straightforward narration of what precisely occurs, the doctor chronicles the entire investigation, including all the evidence and puzzling details, as presented to Hercule Poirot. At this stage in the novel, Sheppard detaches from other potential persons of interest by enthusiastically collaborating with the renowned private detective, even assuming the position of Poirot's assistant. However, unbeknownst to the doctor, each of the seven suspects is protecting a secret of their own, which not only complicates the investigation for the official investigators but also occasionally confuses the culprit himself.

Having identified and analysed the arguably most well-known and conspicuous signs of Sheppard's unreliability in the previous chapter, manifested by cunning lapses of time and insinuations, we may now proceed with dissecting his behaviour throughout the investigative process, where his unreliability is demonstrated principally via subtle changes in attitude in certain situations and somewhat questionable reactions. Following the arranged telephone call that Sheppard declares came from Parker, the doctor immediately hurries to Roger Ackroyd's house to retrieve the dictaphone he planted after committing the murder. Upon arrival, putting on a brilliantly convincing performance, he sharply demands of the butler to see Ackroyd's corpse — becoming seemingly perplexed when Parker resolutely disavows ever making such a call. However, discovering the deceased shortly afterwards, Sheppard comments on the situation as follows:



Ackroyd was sitting as I had left him in the armchair before the fire.

(...)

Parker hurried away, still wiping his perspiring brow.

I did what little had to be done. I was careful not to disturb the position of the body, and not to handle the dagger at all. No object was to be attained by moving it. (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 50)

Due to the covertly ambiguous nature of the above statement, we can interpret it in two completely different fashions — one protects Dr Sheppard's facade, while the other exposes his responsibility. At first, we might naturally presume he, as a medical professional, is assessing the objective circumstances and simply stating the necessary facts for visualising the situation, this viewpoint being supported by the presence of rational language. Nevertheless, at second glance, the unmistakable analogy with one of the antecedent excerpts (of Sheppard leaving Ackroyd's study) becomes evident, thus transforming the phrase 'I did what little had to be done' from the act of performing a practical medical examination into the act of stealthily obtaining and concealing incriminating evidence — the dictaphone — as well as pushing the armchair back to its original position. Thereafter, he obligingly cooperates with the local inspector, even voluntarily surrendering essential information, such as knowing about the existence of the blackmailing affair:

I took an instant decision.

'I'm rather glad you've brought the matter up,' I said. 'I've been trying to decide whether to make a clean breast of things or not. I'd already practically decided to tell you everything, but I was going to wait for a favourable opportunity. You might as well have it now.'

And then and there I narrated the whole events of the evening as I have set them down here. (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 64–65)

First and foremost, it is all-important to mention that Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* initially represents Dr Sheppard's manuscript as intended to show 'the history of one of Poirot's failures' (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 296), in which the doctor carefully documents his experiences to conform to his narrative of being innocent. Having previously analysed the part of his account dealing with the events leading up to Roger Ackroyd's murder, we recognise that there are numerous instances proving Sheppard's unreliability. Consequently, the above declaration might be considered unreliable solely because it states he 'narrated the whole events of the evening as he has set them down [in the book]'. However, regardless of our earlier findings, since the statement expresses Sheppard's momentary hesitation over disclosing complete information, it necessarily confirms his desire to conceal a secret, whatever that might be. Therefore, when he confesses he 'has been trying to decide whether to make a clean breast of things', he ultimately means he has been pondering whether such admission might incriminate him and, furthermore, how to convey that day's happenings without confessing his guilt. Interestingly enough, the doctor also apprises the inspector of the mysterious disappearance of the letter from Mrs Ferrars, thus establishing the true motive for murder.

Now collaborating with the authorities, Sheppard feels perfectly secure — having successfully managed to frame Ralph Paton, who has since become the prime suspect — and one step ahead, as he is learning about the latest developments first-hand whilst being capable of somewhat influencing the further course of the investigation. The confidence entrusted in him combined with his position as the narrator may perhaps evoke a certain sense of his trustworthiness, but, on the other hand, since he chooses

the narrative role on his own, his need to observe Poirot's progress might also indicate his persistent fear of exposure. However, in classic Hercule Poirot fashion, the seasoned detective, whom nothing escapes, effortlessly sees right through him, reminding the doctor that, eventually, every little secret finds its way out:

‘You will find, M. le docteur, if you have much to do with cases of this kind, that they all resemble each other in one thing.’

‘What is that?’ I asked curiously.

‘Everyone concerned in them has something to hide.’

‘Have I?’ I asked, smiling.

Poirot looked at me attentively.

‘I think you have,’ he said quietly.

‘But—’

‘Have you told me everything known to you about this young man Paton?’ He smiled as I grew red. ‘Oh! do not fear. I will not press you. I shall learn it in good time.’ (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 87)

This extract clearly establishes Dr Sheppard's concealment of a particular secret — both by its acknowledgement by Poirot and the doctor's growing red — while conclusively confirming it concerns Ralph Paton. As already mentioned in the chapter on Dr Sheppard, he is withholding not only his guilt over Roger Ackroyd's murder but also information of paramount importance to the investigation — the fact that he is shielding Ralph Paton from the police by having placed him in a mental health nursing facility. It is precisely this secret that Hercule Poirot alludes to in the exchange with the doctor, leaving him utterly bewildered. Profoundly puzzled and slightly threatened by the detective's peculiar methods, whilst being incompetent to comprehend his

deductions, Sheppard constantly minimises the extraordinary, inexplicable and seemingly irrelevant details, such as the drawn-out grandfather chair and telephone call, hoping to divert Poirot's attention elsewhere:

'My friend,' said Poirot gravely, 'I do not know. But I will tell you this: I believe that when we find the explanation of that telephone call we shall find the explanation of the murder.'

'You said something like that before, I remember,' I observed, looking at him curiously.

Poirot nodded.

'I always come back to it,' he said seriously.

'It seems to me utterly irrelevant,' I declared. (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 144)

Understanding the critical significance of these little peculiarities, Dr Sheppard logically wishes to avoid anyone's concentrating on them, for their explanation inevitably leads to his involvement. However, even when presuming his innocence and evaluating the conversation with fresh eyes, the dismissal of any piece of information during a murder investigation feels rather strange, casting a shadow of doubt on the genuineness of the individual's motives.

Nevertheless, Sheppard seems completely oblivious to the fact that such comments might actually compel the arousal of Poirot's suspicion, appearing genuinely surprised after learning about his queries:

'Did Poirot ask you any more questions?' I inquired.

'Only about the patients you had that morning.'

'The patients?' I demanded, unbelievably.

‘Yes, your surgery patients. How many and who they were.’ (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 140)

Despite not providing any straightforward signs of Sheppard’s unreliability, this excerpt clearly demonstrates Poirot’s ulterior interest in the doctor’s affairs. And although, subsequently, we are led to believe that the detective’s sole objective was acquiring information on Miss Elizabeth Russell, Roger Ackroyd’s housekeeper, who is among the potential suspects, his actual intentions were entirely different. Since if he had truly desired to know details about the housekeeper, he would have asked Sheppard directly instead of cunningly speaking to his sister Caroline. Furthermore, the following passage corroborates the hypothesis that Hercule Poirot secretly suspects our narrator of murdering Roger Ackroyd, for he declares:

‘You wish to see the affair, not as the family doctor sees it, but with the eye of a detective who knows and cares for no one—to whom they are all strangers and all equally liable to suspicion.’

(...)

‘So I give you, then, a little lecture. The first thing is to get a clear history of what happened that evening—always bearing in mind that the person who speaks may be lying.’ (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 156)

Rather than speaking to Dr Sheppard, this passage appears to be Poirot’s appeal to the readers, encouraging them to forget everything they have read and assumed up to this point and reconstruct the whole investigation once again, this time bearing in mind that a statement can be accepted only if verified by another independent person.

### 3.3.3. Revelation

The third — and final — part of Dr Sheppard's narrative describes the events of the subsequent five days leading up to the grand resolution, beginning with the summons from Mrs Ackroyd on Tuesday morning and concluding with the astonishing revelation of our narrator's guilt and unreliability on the evening of Friday the 24th of September. Serving as the ultimate elucidation of the murder mystery, the doctor faithfully documents the statement of each person of interest, who all contribute their own little piece of knowledge or discovery, thus explaining numerous of the previously puzzling incidents and facts; however, only the renowned Hercule Poirot can arrange those pieces into their correct place — thereby forming the complete picture of what precisely transpired during the fateful day. At this stage in the novel, having discovered all obtainable material evidence, Poirot's and Sheppard's paths diverge, both pursuing their individual affairs, and while the doctor still hears of everything the other is doing, the detective does not take him into his confidence beforehand. Additionally, throughout this closing narrative, it becomes increasingly evident that, despite maintaining his friendly demeanour, Poirot is closing in on Sheppard, whom we, at last, view as somewhat of a suspect (although he is never officially acknowledged as such).

As already mentioned, the novel's remaining fourteen chapters, which constitute the part of the narrative we are now dealing with, principally concentrate on uncovering the secrets safeguarded by the seven potential suspects: Mrs Ackroyd, Geoffrey Raymond, John Parker, Major Blunt, Flora Ackroyd, Miss Russell, and Dr Sheppard, in this order. The secretary, Mr Geoffrey Raymond, and Major Hector Blunt are revealed to have been concealing fairly innocuous information: having been in debt before inheriting five hundred pounds after Ackroyd's murder and the love for Miss Flora Ackroyd, respectively. Mrs Ackroyd confesses to searching for Roger Ackroyd's

will prior to his death and leaving the silver table, from which the murder weapon was obtained, open. Miss Elizabeth Russell concedes that she has a son, whom she went to meet that evening, while the butler, John Parker, admits to blackmailing his previous master. Miss Flora Ackroyd is made to confess to having stolen money from her uncle and lying about speaking to him, a fact that irreversibly complicates the investigation. And finally, Dr Sheppard is exposed as having placed Captain Ralph Paton in a medical facility to hide him from the police, for otherwise, Paton would have been immediately arrested, considering the amount of evidence against him and his lack of actual alibi.

However, despite concealing these secrets throughout the entire investigation, the police inspectors have ever genuinely regarded only one individual as a person of interest — the missing Captain Ralph Paton. And rightfully so, since Dr Sheppard has carefully planted evidence to support such a claim, having thought out his scheme thoroughly. Nevertheless, the residents of King's Abbot, having known Paton for many years, refuse to accept such an explanation, arguing that committing an act like murder is not in his nature. Although Hercule Poirot, whilst holding the same opinion, bases his reasoning on entirely different foundations — the existence of three separate motives, which he deems are almost too many. Still, always attempting to see all possibilities, the detective proposes the following rationale:

‘Let us take a man—a very ordinary man. A man with no idea of murder in his heart. There is in him somewhere a strain of weakness—deep down. It has so far never been called into play. Perhaps it never will be—and if so he will go to his grave honoured and respected by everyone. But let us suppose that something occurs. He is in difficulties—or perhaps not that even. He may stumble by accident on a secret—a secret involving life or death to someone. And his first impulse will be to speak out—to do his duty as an honest citizen.

And then the strain of weakness tells. Here is a chance of money—a great amount of money. He wants money—he desires it—and it is so easy. He has to do nothing for it—just keep silence. That is the beginning.’ (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 211–212)

This seemingly straightforward account, illustrating the chain of events ultimately resulting in Roger Ackroyd’s murder, might easily match Ralph Paton’s situation, having been described both as a man of an inherent moral weakness that leads him to make flawed choices and as always being in financial difficulties. However, when we properly concentrate on the overall tone of the excerpt as well as the precise words used, the whole meaning instantly becomes ambiguous, and the circumstances become applicable to more than one person — due to Poirot’s avoidance of mentioning a specific name. Therefore, by highlighting the aspects of the deeply hidden strain of weakness (that Caroline constantly refers to), the desire to remain respected and reputable in the eyes of the public, and the initial instinct of a medical practitioner to report factual conclusions, we get the clear picture of Dr Sheppard.

Having previously commented on the various secrets revealed during the course of the investigation, we shall now dissect the one which essentially affected everyone’s perspective on the development of the events — Flora Ackroyd’s confession that she did not, in fact, say goodnight to her uncle at quarter to ten on the night of the murder. This startling, unfortunate discovery alters the estimated time of Ackroyd’s demise, moving it backwards to half past nine, thus causing the considerable inconvenience of having to re-determine alibis. Nevertheless, it also enables Poirot to test his theory of Sheppard’s guilt, remarking afterwards:

‘The inspector was surprised—but you—you were not.’



‘I never dreamed of her being the thief,’ I expostulated.

‘That—perhaps no. But I was watching your face and you were not—like Inspector Raglan—startled and incredulous.’

I thought for a minute or two.

‘Perhaps you are right,’ I said at last. ‘All along I’ve felt that Flora was keeping back something—so the truth, when it came, was subconsciously expected.’

(Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 236–237)

By admitting to purposefully observing Sheppard’s reactions, Poirot almost literally professes his suspicion of the narrator, prompting him to conceive a suitable justification on the spot. Accordingly, the doctor takes ‘a minute or two’ to carefully think about how to reply in such a manner so as not to arouse further distrust in the detective, despite having been conscious of Flora’s lie the whole time.

With the conclusion of the investigation in sight, Dr Sheppard becomes increasingly more complacent and careless, appearing incredibly oblivious to the possibility of Poirot’s ever questioning his trustworthiness. Therefore, regardless of his not understanding the detective’s methods and consequently not being capable of correctly evaluating whether he is close to finding out the whole truth or not, Sheppard recklessly underestimates Poirot’s deductive abilities and little grey cells while foolishly overestimating his own alleged genius — to the point of deliberately informing Poirot of having written a manuscript concerning the recent happenings:

‘Well, as a matter of fact, I’ve read some of Captain Hasting’s narratives, and I thought, why not try my hand at something of the same kind. Seemed a pity not to—unique opportunity—probably the only time I’ll be mixed up with anything of this kind.’

I felt myself getting hotter and hotter, and more and more incoherent, as I floundered through the above speech.

(...)

‘But this is magnificent—you have then written down your impressions of the case as you went along?’

I nodded.

‘*Epatant!*’ cried Poirot. ‘Let me see them—this instant.’

I was not quite prepared for such a sudden demand. I racked my brains to remember certain details. (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 265)

This statement, as so many others before, can be understood in two distinct ways, depending on what kind of emotions we choose to believe Sheppard is experiencing. Firstly, we may view his growing incoherence and floundering as signs of tremendous excitement, generated by Poirot’s interest in reviewing the narrative, and the subsequent effort to remember particular details as a desire not to offend him with any inappropriate remarks about his person. But secondly, we might interpret his increased body temperature and struggles with articulation as signs of great nervousness induced by Poirot’s sudden demand to read his work, which could presumably reveal Sheppard’s unreliability — hence our narrator might be momentarily doubting his literary abilities. In each case, the doctor is eager to hear the detective’s opinion, inquiring:

‘What do you really think of the stuff?’ I asked nervously.

(...)

‘A very meticulous and accurate account,’ he said kindly. ‘You have recorded all the facts faithfully and exactly—though you have shown yourself becomingly reticent as to your own share in them.’

‘And it has helped you?’

‘Yes. I may say that it has helped me considerably.’ (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 266)

As discussed before, Dr Sheppard always writes nothing but the truth, though not the whole truth — and the above extract corroborates this when Hercule Poirot notes that despite documenting all facts accurately, Sheppard has failed to elaborate on his actual role in everything. Nevertheless, rather than focusing on the presence of evidence already known to him, it is precisely the omission of crucial information that aids in confirming Poirot’s suspicion of the doctor. Therefore, prepared for the final revelation, the detective — in his classic fashion — gathers all suspects at his residence; this time, however, instead of unravelling the mystery together with presenting the solution, he simply states the obvious: Ralph Paton, although innocent, cannot provide a sufficient alibi for the night of the murder, thus, ‘to save Captain Paton the real criminal must confess’ (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 280), before finally threatening that ‘tomorrow the truth goes to Inspector Raglan’ (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 281).

Directly afterwards Poirot’s forewarning, Dr Sheppard makes the following manuscript entry:

I was puzzled. For the first time I was absolutely at sea as to Poirot’s meaning. For a moment I was inclined to think that the scene I had just witnessed was a gigantic piece of bombast—that he had been what he called ‘playing the comedy’ with a view to making himself interesting and important. But, in spite

of myself, I was forced to believe in an underlying reality. There had been real menace in his words—a certain indisputable sincerity. But I still believed him to be on entirely the wrong track. (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 282)

Ultimately defeated, this statement illustrates one of Sheppard's last desperate efforts to preserve his inevitably-crumbling fake persona, created solely for the purpose of retaining an honourable public image. In an attempt to salvage the hopeless situation, the doctor pretends to be clueless, with just a hint of bitterness and arrogance in his tone, unreservedly disparaging Hercule Poirot's intentions and knowledge. Holding onto the facade, he incredulously requests that Poirot elucidate the events of the previous week, thus prompting the detective to commence his exhaustive narration, shortly concluding with the following explanation:

'Let us recapitulate—now that all is clear. A person who was at the Three Boars earlier that day, a person who knew Ackroyd well enough to know that he had purchased a dictaphone, a person who was of a mechanical turn of mind, who had the opportunity to take the dagger from the silver table before miss Flora arrived, who had with him a receptacle suitable for hiding the dictaphone—such as a black bag—and who had the study to himself for a few minutes after the crime was discovered while Parker was telephoning for the police. In fact—*Dr Sheppard!*' (Christie, *Roger Ackroyd* 290–291)

Having already confirmed the existence of narrative signs of Dr Sheppard's unreliability, such as lapses of time, we must now, as the final step to genuinely prove Sheppard's guilt, meticulously analyse each piece of circumstantial evidence from Poirot's explanation, demonstrating that his deductions are based on actual clues presented to us in the text. However, considering the fundamental characteristics of the

whodunnit genre, such as the reader having an equal opportunity with the detective for solving the crime and having all evidence introduced, there is no doubt that if we retrace our steps, noting every clue Poirot finds, we will reach the same conclusion.

### **3.4. The art of *Roger Ackroyd***

Unlike conventional whodunnits, where the readers expect to determine the correct solution just by the accumulation and further clarification of evidence, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* provides a more complex literary experience, compelling its audience to actively participate in the investigative process — demonstrating that even a detective novel might potentially be a multi-layered text if only the reader is willing to search for hidden double meanings and ambiguities.

## Conclusion

The thesis analysed the existence of various signs of narrative unreliability in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in order to determine whether the presence of an unreliable narrator somehow influences the novel's potential of being solved by readers.

First, we defined the term whodunnit, commenting on each of the fundamental aspects of the genre, most importantly the readers' engagement in the identical deductive process as the detective while also being provided with the complete evidence. Furthermore, we briefly mentioned the history of detective fiction as well as the birth of the aforementioned whodunnit, subsequently moving on to the rules of detective fiction, which essentially serve as guidelines for writers and do not always have to be adhered to. However, some of them are paramount for the whodunnit genre and thus must be abided by.

Henceforward, we summarised the characteristic features of Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and its deserved glory, shedding light on the controversy over its breaking of the rules and further elaborating on the narrative unreliability and its source — Dr James Sheppard. Afterwards, we meticulously analysed numerous passages manifesting signs of unreliability, discussing their possible interpretations and significance to the overall story. The predominant technique employed by the narrator to conceal his guilt was the omission of crucial information since otherwise, the novel would lose its purpose. The main categories of signs of unreliability we observed were: cunning lapses of time, which allowed omitting information without significantly affecting the textual coherence, insinuations and ambiguous language, questionable

reactions as well as subtle changes in attitude, and minimising of the seemingly irrelevant details.

In conclusion, we determined that despite forming an obstacle, the presence of an unreliable narrator in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* does not necessarily prevent readers from solving the mystery.

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