

# The Narration in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

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June 24, 2022

**Abstract:** The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Agatha Christie's famous work, is known in the world of mystery fiction for its unique narrative technique and startling plot. The report is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to the novel and the author, as well as the definition of unreliable narration. The second chapter focuses on the concrete performance and function of unreliable narration in the novel. The third chapter reflects some controversies about the novel and my conclusion.

**Key words:** Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Unreliable narration, Unreliable narrator.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Agatha Christie and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

Agatha Christie is a famous British mystery novelist from the last century. Because of her great achievements in literature, she was awarded the crown of “Queen of Crime” by the Queen of England. In 1926, with its ingenious narrative and unexpected ending, her most famous novel, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, was published, catching the attention of the world rapidly and extremely shaking the mystery fiction industry. From the perspective of Dr. Sheppard, the novel tells the story that “I” discovered the murder of my friend Roger and assisted detective Poirot to uncover the truth through continuous investigation. To the reader's shock, however, it turned out that “I”, the least suspected person, was the real culprit, thus the manuscript that had been used as an example of Poirot's failure to deal with the case became my confession.

## **1.2 Unreliable Narration and narrator**

Apparently, the Murder of Roger Ackroyd utilizes a unique kind of narrative -- unreliable narration, because “I” was an unreliable narrator as a murderer, and it pioneered the narrative trick of mystery novels. An unreliable narrator is a narrator whose credibility is compromised, (Frey, 1931) whereas an unreliable narrative is literally an expression told and recorded by an unreliable narrator. Created the term in 1961 by Wayne C. Booth in “The Rhetoric of Fiction”, he distinguished reliable narrators from unreliable narrators based on whether they violated or conformed to general norms and values, which had been refined continually by scholars such as William Riggan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, and James Phelan. Booth writes, “I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not.” (Booth, 1961)

## **Chapter 2 Narrative art in the novel**

It is a novel worth reading at least a second time, and it will make you feel completely different. Eager to get the truth directly or through self-reasoning, during our first reading we will intensely believe and rely heavily on his narrative details, unconsciously filtering out unreasonable information, but when the mystery comes to light, reviewing the story will reveal apparent omissions, inconsistencies, and redundancy, as the deeply entrenched preconceptions in the beginning that the narrator will record the progress of the case genuinely and unreservedly leads us to selectively omit this critical information.

### **2.1 First-person narrative perspective**

First of all, what are the advantages of a first-person narrative perspective? “I” can help the author or characters convey their thoughts and feelings, describe their inner activities, reinforce the sense of reality and intimacy of the article, and is a person who has a variety of relationships with other characters, playing a significant role in explaining and witnessing the events.

But what happens if these features are used in reverse? In our traditional perception, for one thing, as a character in a novel who is closest to the perspective of the reader, “I” is the

bridge connecting the plot of the novel and readers' emotion. For another, in classic detective novels, the mode of cooperation of detective and assistant, such as the impeccable partnership between Holmes and Watson, has also left a deep impression and a profound influence on our thought inertia. This kind of narration greatly facilitates the narrator to express personal emotions and preferences, and may even build up a deliberate subjective illusion, or intentionally present information that could certainly be misinterpreted through their identity.

In our experience, hero or protagonist always has the largest scenes, but as the narrator of this novel, Dr. Sheppard present from beginning to end, whose appearance time is even earlier than the detective two chapters, means that the first two chapters with a mixture of half-truths by an unreliable narrative, have already started unobtrusively to instill and lay down the emotional tone and stance to the events to us, extremely assisting him to win the reader's trust in the following narration, as when a lie is mixed in with the truth, people believe it without a shadow of doubt.

## **2.2 Different logical interpretations of the same expression**

Agatha's triumph in this novel is that she seems to deceive you with a narrative trick, but in fact she's already told you the truth in an ambiguous expression with two different logical interpretations. For instance, in the second chapter of the novel, *"I think I can safely say that it was at this moment that a foreboding of the future first swept over me... That earnest tête-à-tête between Ralph Paton and Mrs. Ferrars the day before struck me disagreeably."* The "foreboding" here can be understood as an unfortunate indication for Roger that "I", as a benevolent country doctor on a moral and just stand, foresaw his lamentable death soon after, which might have something to do with his son Ralph Paton, but actually it also can be interpreted as a series of encounters for "myself" that as an evil and greedy murderer, "I" was afraid that my extortion to Mrs. Ferrars would be exposed to Ralph Paton, resulting in having to kill Roger and ultimately being discovered and accused by detective Poirot.

Another example is in the fifth chapter of the novel, *"I did what little had to be done. I was careful not to disturb the position of the body, and..."* The little things that had to be done can be understood as the behavior of maintaining the current situation of the scene in the next sentence, or the two sentences can be regarded as referring to two different things, and the former refers to a thing concealed by the narrator, which turned out later that I secretly hid the

dictaphone, critical evidence of my murder.

### 2.3 Concealment and clue hint in narration

**Clues to inconsistencies in character:** Sheppard paints a very contradictory picture of the butler Parker's image. The most striking contrast is in chapter four. When Sheppard first met him, he wrote "*The door was opened with admirable promptitude by Parker, the butler. I stepped into the big square hall and Parker relieved me of my overcoat*", whereas when he came out of Roger's room, he wrote "*He looked embarrassed, and it occurred to me that he might have been listening at the door. What a fat, smug, oily face the man had, and surely there was something decidedly shifty in his eye.*" Psychologically, Sheppard was not hostile to the butler when he met him for the first time. However, as soon as walking out of the room after killing somebody, Sheppard immediately saw him first, panicked and afraid of being found out by him with a guilty conscience, so that subconsciously he attempted to draw readers' attention to Parker, making his image as ugly and suspicious as possible.

**Clues to the gaps in time:** Narrative is a double temporal sequence. There is the time of the thing told and the time of the narrative. This duality not only renders possible all the temporal distortions that are commonplace in narratives. (Genette, 1983) Non-linear time order is frequently used to complicate plot structure, set suspense and expand dramatic tension of the story. (Du, 2019) The story process of the whole novel seems to be orderly, and the timelines of all suspects are recorded in detail, while Sheppard's own storyline and actions are deliberately separated, scattered and confused in the narration of the unreliable narrator. Chapter four tells the time when Dr. Sheppard left Roger's room, and the time when he arrived at the front door of Fernly Park emerges after the police officer's questioning in chapter five, and it is not until chapter eight in the process of communicating the case with Poirot that the real time needed between the front door and the room is revealed. What is more interesting is that the appearance of the time of Sheppard's action is not straightly directed at him, but as the confirmation of the time of other suspects, which excellently shifts the focus of contradiction. If these were put together, the attentive reader would definitely discover a gap of five minutes or more, while his actions are narrated separately, making it problematic for the reader to contemplate his timeline and doubt it.

**Clues to ambiguity in the expression:** For some unreasonable words, deeds and

emotion of the narrator himself, he made vague statements without logic, concealing the motive of the behavior, such as “for some reasons” and “vague foreboding”. In chapter four, he wrote, “No,” *I cried impulsively, “read it now.” ... But for some reason, obscure to myself, I continued to urge him.* Dr. Sheppard, who had been gentle in his own description, suddenly for no reason compelled Roger to read the letter in his presence without any explanation, because out of pity and ridicule to the dying people, Sheppard wanted Roger to finish reading this letter to realize the truth of Mrs. Ferrars’s death before being killed.

Coincidentally, when he referred to coming into a legacy in chapter three, he wrote, “*But I was foolish—and worse than foolish—greedy. I risked the substance for the shadow*”, implying that he was a failed speculator, but he did not explain where the money came from and the source of funds for the current life, because it is directly related to the cause of the whole event and his murder motive.

### **Chapter 3 Controversy and conclusion**

One of the sources of the novel's controversy is that someone considers it violates S. S. Van Dine 's *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories*, which states that the detective himself, or one of the official investigators, should never turn out to be the culprit, so it is shameful to use the deception of narrative trick to accomplish the task of shocking the reader. Having said that, in the novel, Poirot never dispelled his suspicions to Dr Sheppard and never officially acknowledged him as his assistant, hence he never adequately exposed the progress of the case to Sheppard and subsequently shunned him to investigate it alone. Agatha, in particular, had given an evident hint by introducing a new assistant role rather than Hastings, the acquainted gold partner as usual. Therefore, it is the preconceived self-suggestion and perspective that leads us to overlook the skepticism and wariness of Poirot's words and behaviors.

Although there are some controversies, it does not in any way diminish the novel's significant position in the world of reasoning, nor does it prevent it from establishing a new genre of reasoning. Instead of passively accepting the information brought by the author, the artistic technique of unreliable narration requires us to take the initiative to think and judge the illogical and unreasonable expression, altering the thinking inertia and breaking the

routine. To some extent, unreliable narration in the novel eschews the common structure of mystery novels, that is, the boring and straightforward narration from occurrence to investigation, reasoning to finding out the truth, enhancing the interaction and competition between the author and readers.

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