Agatha Christie: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) – From *the Crime Fiction Handbook*, Peter Messent

I turn now to a classic Golden Age detective story by Agatha Christie – who stands alongside Conan Doyle in terms of best-known British crime writing. "Golden Age" refers, by and large, to the period between the two world wars, and to British crime fiction in particular – though a good number of American authors (S. S. Van Dine, for example) wrote in a similar mode. If the term can serve to conceal the different types and varieties of detective novels being produced in the period, it is nonetheless useful. Introducing, typically, a multiple cast of suspects, it uses "the clue-puzzle" as its "central mechanism" (Knight 2003: 77). It is set generally in an enclosed space, and especially the English country house: in the case of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, "Fernly Park" (Christie 2002: 17), "une belle propriété" (133) – the words are Poirot's and translate as "a handsome property" – with formal flower beds, yew hedges, and a wooded slope offering "a splendid view over the countryside" (134). The use of such closeted settings goes together with a general avoidance of larger social and historical issues. Charles Rzepka is not alone in seeing a conservative and nostalgic impetus at work in Christie and her like, a recall of a more stable and settled pre-war world of "sprawling country estates, tidy villages, and [when the setting is urban] townhouses populated by comfortable eccentrics":

> <qu>Here was a world embodying the virtues of the vanishing gentry class and prominently featuring members of the four most ancient and honourable professions: retired military officers, local clergy, lawyers and doctors…. With its reliable evocation of order out of disorder [and] its respect for the rule of law in defence of life and property … the new genre of detection seemed tailor-made to alleviate the anxieties that lingered below the superficial complacency of British middle-class life. (Rzepka 2005: 153)

As Rzpeka's words suggest, Golden Age crime fiction was socially as well as spatially enclosed, representing a hierarchically ordered world and focusing especially on the upper middle classes. There are few professional criminals here and few members of the working class (though see below). This is a world of wealth and property – of those who have it and those who are their dependents (but who hope to share it). This is a world, too, of masters or mistresses, their households and their servants, though the latter normally play a relatively minor role in the action. Murder – for the first time "an essential part of the detective story" (Horsley 2005: 37) – is the most common crime here (most of the Sherlock Holmes stories are about theft and fraud): a crime committed for personal and private motives. Thus, on the surface at least, there is little suggestion of any fault line in the larger social system that might cause such rupture; little indication that crime might be the result of any social inequality or injustice in need of address.

To see such Golden Age fiction just as a cosy and conservative affirmation of a high-bourgeois status quo is, however, one-sided. For the very disturbances that occur, and the presence of those "anxieties" to which Rzepka refers, suggest a certain fragility to the apparently generally well-ordered social world portrayed. Gill Plain suggests that the prevalence of murder in Christie's novels works as a veiled form of socio-historical comment, a reference and response to the slaughter of war years: "in [Christie's] construction of the grievable body she offers a talisman against death's fragmentation and dissolution, a sacrifice to ameliorate the wounds of war" (2001: 53). Not everyone will be convinced by this, but undoubtedly the representation of the particular social

world Christie presents, and the forms of disruption that occur, do suggest deep and ongoing anxieties about the problems and instabilities lying beneath its apparently stable surface. Thus Horsley (following Alison Light) writes that:

> Instead of giving her readers a reassuring, defensive fiction or nostalgia for the aristocracy, Christie creates plots that are symptomatic of instability. She focuses on the disruptions of family life from within, reworking Victorian transgression in plots that turn on masks [and] mistaken identity…. She portrays a society of *strangers* in which all social exchange is theatrical and she structures her narratives to reveal sources of menace that seem inextricably bound up with the traditional social hierarchies she represents. In this reading, "containment" of crime is double edged: it allows reassuring closure but also implies that the class represented is preying on itself, and that it contains the seeds of its own destruction. (Horsley 2005: 40)

This double-edged quality is (as we have seen) not unusual in crime fiction, where a conservative politics and a critique of, and anxieties about, the current social order often run hand in glove. Undoubtedly, as R. A. York writes, "[t]hat the detective story tends to accept a conservative society is undeniable, with reference to Christie at least" (2007: 7). As I explore perhaps her most famous novel, I will show how such conservatism is, though, implicitly undermined by the anxieties about the portrayed social formations and relationships evident within the text.

Christie's work has been and is (especially in its TV versions) incredibly popular, almost certainly overshadowing that of all other crime novelists, with over two billion worldwide sales (Makinen 2010: 416). This is, in part, due to Christie's skill with the "clue-puzzle" form: her ability to keep the reader engaged as she marshals her cast of characters and presents the motives that might have led some or all of them to commit the central crime. It is due, too, to the way she has her detective, Hercule Poirot in this case, draw attention to the various clues to the case – so seeming to offer the reader equal chance to first-guess the solution (though never really doing so).

As with so much such Golden Age fiction, Christie makes playful allusion to the artificiality of the form she uses. So, in this novel the maps of the ground floor and nearby grounds of the Ackroyd dwelling (74) and of the room in which the murder occurred (110) serve, too, as reminders that this is a purely imaginary landscape. The lists of the house's inhabitants and their whereabouts, and who can vouch for them at the time of the crime (125–126), serve a similar function, nodding in the direction of a scrupulous realism that we know does not exist. There are, moreover, repeated self-reflexive references to detective fiction and its devices – murder by way of rare poisons (26–27); the kind of exotic rewards ("rubies and pearls and emeralds from grateful Royal clients") a fictional "super-detective" might expect (171). If the latter allusion is to Sherlock Holmes (see, for instance, Doyle 1981b: 34), Christie's model then becomes explicit as Dr. Sheppard, the narrator, tells how, for the first part of the investigation, "I was at Poirot's elbow the whole time. I saw what he saw…. [M]y narrative might have been that of Poirot himself. I played Watson to his Sherlock" (203–204).

This leads us straight to the cleverness of this novel (or, for some, its deceit), in Christie's putting control of the narrative in the murderer's hand. As I commented earlier, this goes against all the rules of classical detective

fiction. It also indicates Christie's own games-playing with the genre, as she tried – as on a number of other occasions too – to stretch the form beyond normally accepted limits. We have here two overlapping narratives based on entirely opposite premises and written for completely different ends. Dr. Sheppard acts as Watson to Poirot's Holmes and takes on, too, Hastings' previously role in the series. As such, he stands at Poirot's elbow, reporting all that the detective says and does, part of the investigation, "keep[ing] a written record of … [his] impressions of the case as [he] went along" (326–327) – and completing that record as the final chapter ends. He acts as a type of amanuensis for Poirot, reporting on the progress of the case and on the clues the detective thinks important (but given no access to the conclusions Poirot reaches as a result). As Sheppard says – and note the prolepsis as he alludes to knowledge that lies in the future – "Though Poirot showed me all his discoveries … he held back the vital and yet logical impressions he formed. As I came to know later, this secrecy was characteristic of him. He would throw out hints and suggestions, but beyond that he would not go" (203).

As the murderer, however, Sheppard's role is central in a different narrative, but one that he – in large part – conceals: how and why he committed the crime, and what he is consequently thinking and feeling as Poirot goes about his business. In playing the role of detective's assistant and recorder, he covers over the story of his own guilt and attempt to evade discovery – a story only Poirot himself will finally reveal (Sheppard himself never says why he blackmails Mrs. Ferrars: we rely here only on Poirot's interpretation of the possible motives). Christie's play with the telling of a narrative, and the perspectives that inform it, is subtle, and cleverly undermines the assumptions of the reader, "the seductive power of the perspectives we take for granted" (York 2007: 23). Thus, right at the end of the novel, Christie (through Sheppard) draws our attention to the gaps in his previous story, asks us – in fact – to re-read the book from a completely different angle and replace our assumption of narrative reliability with its opposite. Or rather, she asks us to see how, while a narrative may be – in one sense – reliable (for Sheppard tells no lie here), all that it omits in the interest of self-concealment renders it worthless as a record of the fullest truth. Sheppard repeats an earlier section of the narrative describing the last moments he spent with Ackroyd. This time, though, he emphasizes his past fraud:

> I am rather pleased with myself as a writer. What could be neater, for instance, than the following:
>
> "The letters were 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."
>
> All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes? (366–367)

In fact, this interlude is when he kills Ackroyd and sets up the dictaphone to provide his alibi. Christie may break the rule of trustworthy narration here but creates a tricksy and interesting novel as a result.

I turn now to Christie's conservative social vision and the countering tendencies and anxieties that (to a certain degree) undermine it. The social order Christie represents here is almost unbelievably old-fashioned. The "tiny village" (36) of King's Abbott is traditional England almost to a T. The action of the novel centers on Fernly Park, where Roger Ackroyd's murder occurs. The cast of characters is a limited one, and confined by and large to stereotype – for Christie's interest is in the puzzle, clues, and the detection process, rather than in character

and social context. Ackroyd is "more impossibly like a country squire than any country squire could really be" (17), and "hand in glove with the vicar" at the center of local community life (18). And, even though his status results from his money rather than a long-established social position (he has made his fortune as a manufacturer), it is significant that what he makes – Sheppard thinks it is "wagon wheels" (18) – belongs to a rural order that (by 1926, the date of the novel's publication) was already, in Raymond Williams' terms, pretty much residual.

Indeed, there is more than a hint of fustiness about the village society Christie describes. There are the doctor and his inquisitive and gossipy sister Caroline. The latter is, perhaps, an early try-out for Miss Marple, though Poirot's description of her "wonderful psychological insight into human nature" (173) is rather cancelled out by the silliness of her guesses and suggestions at the novel's end (304). And there are Ackroyd, his relatives, and his household – including the spend-thrift and weak-willed son-in-law, Ralph (staying, when the novel starts, in a local hotel or pub), and his house-guest, the plain-speaking though taciturn "big-game man," Major Hector Blunt, who – it is said – "has shot more wild animals in unlikely places than any man living" (51). In addition, there are the local "servants and the tradesmen," the cook, milkman, farm boy, barmaids, and "the Boots at the Three Boars" (216–217), some of whom form the "Intelligence Corps" (10) on which Caroline relies for her insights into village life. Both the Sheppard and Ackroyd households have their servants, too – seven in the latter's case, the women all dressed in "caps and aprons" (211). Ackroyd also has a secretary, Geoffrey Raymond. This cast list is both formulaic and one that speaks of a rapidly vanishing, if not vanished, English social world. Set against Lawrence's *Women in Love* (published in 1921), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), both the tone and the content of Christie's novel seem way behind their times.

I write this, though, with the benefit of historical and literary hindsight, and it is, perhaps, unfair to compare a detective novel of this type with canonic literary texts. And one cannot deny the novel's popular appeal, to which this retreat to a near-feudal version of British life may have contributed. The whole movement of the novel, too, is to restore a version of this vanishing world. Sheppard's criminal act is personal, and has little to do with any obvious flaw in the social system. His sister knows that he is "weak as water" (259). But it is Poirot, speaking in the abstract (for Sheppard does not yet know he is under suspicion), who pinpoints the reasons for his blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars: the first link in the chain that leads to Ackroyd's murder. Poirot links the "weakness" of the criminal to the greed that results when the "chance of money … open[s] at his feet" like a "gold mine" (261–262). Sheppard has earlier compared his sister's indecision as to what she chooses to tell him about a conversation with Ackroyd (before the murder) to "a roulette ball … coyly hover[ing] between two numbers" (39). This, together with his failed speculations in "a gold mine in Western Australia" (35), suggests an attraction to risk, gambling, and money (and see the repetition of "gold mine" here) that undermines his own self-representation as a rather stolid "old fogey" (98), the respectable and slightly old-fashioned representative of English village life.

It is Poirot who sees through this mask, and who restores the established order. He allows Sheppard to commit suicide, the effect of which is that the doctor's good reputation will remain (it seems) intact – so, too, no shadow will be cast on the normative patterns and assumptions of the community's life. The Ackroyd fortune goes to its proper heir (Ralph), whose personal weakness will be shored up by his bride-to-be, Ursula, a member of the

"Irish gentlefolk," brought low by poverty but unafraid to earn her living by determination and hard work (315–316) as a maid in the Ackroyd household. Flora Ackroyd (Roger's niece), a young girl of some vivacity, wit, and beauty, is freed of her financial worries, freed too to marry Blunt, the man she really loves. Village life will presumably now return to its normal rounds and routines, and England once more to its peaceful and unspoiled rural beauty (134).

But a good number of questions about this life, about its social roles and its limitations, inhabit this text, whatever their lack of explicit development. Though I describe the social system represented as near-feudal, real feudalism is in fact dead here, however much its patterns may be replicated. For it is money, not inherited social position, that drives this social world. Even the otherwise-admirable Flora steals from Ackroyd, due to her material desires ("[w]anting things") and the financial pressures under which she consequently finds herself (283). Similar pressures also affect her mother, who consequently rifles Ackroyd's desk to see what she can expect in his will, her "testamentary expectations" key to her ability to borrow money (209–210). Ackroyd himself is an honest and, in many ways, admirable man (58), who extends a generally benevolent influence over the village, with his "genial patronage to the lower orders" (37). But he uses his money as a weapon of power over his niece and stepson. Ackroyd's butler, Parker, has a record of blackmail (249–250). His son-in-law Ralph is "self-indulgent and extravagant" (42) and in debt. Money makes the world of this novel go around. Flora's "twenty thousand beautiful pounds" (138), her legacy from Ackroyd, gives her the freedom to choose her own direction in life and marry the partner of *her* choice. But a society built on mere money and the desire for its acquisition is, so the whole text suggests, deeply flawed. Christie here seems to be raising her own doubts about the fundaments (and laissez-faire economics) of post-war English life. But those doubts, and the vision that lies behind them, seem to imply a preference for an earlier social order, nearer to the feudal model – one based on fixed class relations and mutual responsibilities, and where the market was not, at least in theory, the measure of the man.

Certainly, however, the novel does present the social order it represents as flawed, with almost every member of that society playing a part, performing a misleading version of the self. Mrs. Ferrars, until her suicide, is high in the village social hierarchy (she owns one of its two important houses) but is – unsuspected – a murderess and blackmail victim. The doctor speaks as the voice of the village (see 17 and 19, for instance) but harms, not cures, its social body as blackmailer and murderer. Ackroyd's housekeeper, "a redoubtable lady called Miss Russell" (20), keeps the existence of her illegitimate and cocaine-addicted son secret, knowing that her "so very respectable" (300) reputation, and her job, will otherwise be lost. Ursula Bourne is "masquerading as a parlourmaid" (315), when in fact she belongs to a different class, her marriage to Ralph kept secret. Mrs. Ackroyd's wall of obfuscatory language hides both her own abuse of Ackroyd's hospitality and her daughter's theft (as Sheppard remarks, "words, ingeniously used, will serve to mask the ugliness of native facts," 210). Indeed, language itself, the basis of social interaction, is treated with suspicion on the book. So Blunt's deliberate, simple, and staccato way of speaking is contrasted with the artificial and deceptive world of "manners" that he now has to navigate, where he can "never remember the things one's expected to say" (137).

Christie then demolishes the basis of the social order she represents even as she gives us no alternative to it, and as she uses Poirot to set it once more to apparent rights at the book's end. But even here there are hidden doubts about its value, about what happens next. The fact that it is the charming but feckless Ralph who (even despite

the new supportive presence of Ursula) will now take on his uncle's role as the nearest thing the village has to a "country squire" is not encouraging for the future. All this, though, remains unsaid, implicit rather than explicit. And it is Christie's conservative vision that (to my mind) prevails overall, the sense of a falling-off from a simpler and more admirable time, and a utopian desire for its recovery rather than any type of real engagement with the conditions of modernity.

The one area in which Christie does seem to make such an engagement is in terms of gender roles. Ackroyd, the center of village life, is undoubtedly something of an autocrat, and a type of vacuum of authority occurs with his death. In many ways it is Poirot who temporarily fills it as he investigates, moving with certainty and taking center stage in the events that then occur. And Poirot, too, can be autocratic, with his "merciless analysis, and the ruthless power of [his] vision" (263). It is, however, his "feminine" qualities that are most noticeable as Christie implicitly questions a previous tradition of action and adventure and (to repeat from earlier) its "confident, British middle-class hero in the old [pre-war and bull-dog] mould" (Light 1991: 43). Sheppard initially takes Poirot for a "retired hairdresser" (Christie 2002: 31), using his "two immense moustaches" (32) for evidence. He represents Poirot as a somewhat comic figure with his lack of height, his "egg-shaped head, partially covered with suspiciously black hair" (32), and the "puffed-out … chest" that makes him look "ridiculously full of his own importance" (123). His "finicking habits" and narcissism (144–145) also help to feminize him, as does the way he focuses on the domestic details of the case as he looks to solve it: a chair pushed out of place, "a scrap of stiff white cambric" (131) that he recognizes, due to its ironed state, as from a maid's apron. Sharing something of the intuition of Sheppard's sister Caroline, Poirot depends, too, on his knowledge of "the psychology of a crime" (124) rather than any active physical pursuit of its perpetrator for his success.

<p>Christie here replaces (and suggests the limitations of) the stereotypical construction of male heroism, emphasizing instead the value of qualities that are traditionally feminine-coded – and usually, accordingly, denigrated rather than admired. She also, though, considers what it means to be a "lady," and lady-like, in this social world. Mrs. Ackroyd's words – spurred by her feelings about Ursula Bourne – "You can't tell who are ladies and who aren't nowadays" (212) are significant here. For, traditionally, to be a lady is – the novel implies – to be dependent on patriarchy for one's living and economic support. The authorial sympathies in this text, however, clearly go to Flora and Ursula, the young women who face the future with the most bravery, confidence, and vim. Despite Flora's crime, she is represented as otherwise honest, loyal, and capable of a freedom of expression unseen elsewhere, and finally gains both financial independence and a male partner who both appreciates and complements her. Similarly, Ursula is seen as perceptive and intelligent, much braver than Ralph, and someone who has taken a no-nonsense and hard-working response to her economic needs. There is an incipient feminist consciousness at work in this novel, even if it may be thinly developed.

It is hard, despite all I have said, to see why Christie's fiction has been quite so enormously popular, given its thinness of characterization, its relative lack of psychological insight and socio-historical depth, and a style that continually trembles on the edge of cliché: see its descriptions of pleasant young fellows (45), of sharp beady eyes (24), and of fat, smug, oily faces (64), its pointing of dramatic forefingers (341), and the like. Perhaps Christie's popularity is due to the undoubted success with which she handles the main "jig-saw puzzle" (204) of clues and their solution that make up her detective stories, and her skill in adapting the form to achieve a series

of innovative (and sometimes quite startling) effects. And it may be that the nostalgic and conservative quality of her fiction – the conjuring up in this novel, for instance, of apparently simpler and more stable times in a typically English rural setting – provides readerly reassurance and satisfaction, even despite the social anxieties and challenges her novels also implicitly pose. Whatever the reasons, though, Christie's fiction is a force to be very seriously reckoned with in any consideration of the genre.