



ANALYSIS OF THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD

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Abstract

The plot of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is built around a love triangle. Mrs. Ferrars who commits suicide in the beginning of the novel has had an affair with Roger Ackroyd, the richest person in King's Abbot. She poisons her alcoholic husband who she can no more stand and hopes thus to marry Roger Ackroyd, the richest person in King's Abbot. However, someone who is aware of this affair blackmails Mrs. Ferrars. Mrs. Ferrars, unable to resist guilty conscience and the pressure of the blackmail, commits suicide. It is Doctor James Shepard, the family doctor that blackmails her. At the same time with his intervention, the doctor functions just like Mrs. Ferrars and by killing Roger Ackroyd in the third corner of the triangle he condemns himself. The novel is the story of these condemnations. Yet, with a strange twist of fate, Roger Ackroyd and Mrs. Ferrars leave behind two healthy loves as they depart this life. All events in the work are shaped by the use of space, time, characters, diversions and solution. The novel takes place in a narrow space where everyone knows each other (in a mansion named Fernley Hall in King's Abbot). Space is narrow and defined within the limits of the village. The murderer makes a change in space and this change, by creating suspicion, helps in the discovery of truth. Time is very important in this work where events begin in media res. The story begins with "near past". "Past" comprises Mrs. Ferrars' death and the events related with Ackroyd. "Now" is the time dimension when the murder is solved and the murderer confesses. There are twenty-seven sections and fifteen characters. Three different incidents in the novel constitute the diversions, but the biggest diversion is that the murderer is the narrator. The discrepancy between appearance and reality complicates the plot and postpones the solution.

Keywords: Murder, characters, space, time, diversion, solution.

INTRODUCTION

The first important novel of Agatha Christie is *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. This work which was published in 1926 resonated a lot, and the fact that the least suspected character is the murderer was criticized. For in this work Agatha Christie disobeys the rules of writing detective novels. Lubbock says "In a murder story there is one person who cannot be the murderer and that is the murderer himself or herself because if we are allowed to enter the mind of the murderer, ... the secret we have to find out by ourselves will be given away by the murderer" (Lubbock, 98) Yet, in time this work was defined as a detective novel classic, and it was listed in the literary works published by the British Cultural Committee.

Man lives in space. According to Merleau Ponty, "existence" is spacial. (Ponty, 293) According to Leibniz, space "is not any state of objects but a "series" of states that allow them to follow each other. (Leibniz, 678-679) Hence, in time this "series of events" reflect change. For this reason space has an important place in Agatha Christie's novels. While the murderer tries to do away the changes s/he makes in space, the detective works in the opposite direction and tries to restore the past and thus to understand what really happened.

This novel takes place in a narrow space where everyone knows each other (in a mansion named Fernley Hall in King's Abbot) It opens with a suicide and ends with a suicide. Mrs. Ferrars, who commits suicide in the beginning of the novel has had an affair with Roger Ackroyd, the richest person in King's Abbot. She poisons her alcoholic husband she can no more stand and hopes thus to be free to marry Roger Ackroyd. However, someone who is aware of this affair blackmails Mrs.



Ferars. Mrs. Ferars, unable to resist guilty conscience and the pressure of the blackmail, commits suicide. One day before the suicide she tells everything to Ackroyd except the name of the blackmailer. Roger Ackroyd invites his close friend, Dr. James Shepard, to talk about this subject. While the two friends are talking, the footman brings the letters of the day. One of the letters is the one Mrs. Ferars wrote before her suicide; on the first page of the letter she writes that she will disclose the name of the blackmailer. After Ackroyd reads the first page, he tells the doctor that he will read the rest later by himself and refuses to read the rest despite the doctor's insistence.

At this point there are two sections, namely the section conveyed to the reader and the one kept

1. **The section kept from the reader:** The doctor, who is the blackmailer and who foresees what will happen to him has come all prepared, kills Ackroyd with the dagger he takes from the antique collection at 20:45. (Because he is the Ferars' family doctor he has easily understood that Mrs. Ferars poisoned her husband and makes a gain for a long while through blackmail.) After the doctor kills Ackroyd, he sets the dictaphone he took to repair and did not return until that day at 21:30. He places the dictaphone on the table, pulls the armchair in front of it and tells Parker, the footman, Ackroyd does not want to be disturbed. After he leaves the study, he goes to the summer house in the garden, wears the shoes of Ralph Paton, Ackroyd's stepson by his dead wife's first marriage, comes back through the window, locks the door from the inside, goes out the window, goes back to the summer house, wears his own shoes, and returns home. He leaves traces of his footsteps as he goes in and out.

2. **The section conveyed to the reader:** The doctor leaves Roger Ackroyd's study and tells Parker, the footman, Ackroyd does not wish to be disturbed and leaves through the garden gate at 21:00. (Within these ten minutes he does the things kept from the reader). At 21:20 he is at home. He receives a phone call while he is sitting with his sister, Caroline, at 22:15. On the phone is the footman who says Roger Ackroyd has been killed. The doctor tells his sister the message he received on the phone, and taking his briefcase he runs to the house of Ackroyd, but Parker says he has not made such a call. He thinks Ackroyd is busy in the study. When the doctor insists, he breaks in the study, and at 22:15 it is understood that Roger Ackroyd has really been murdered.

After this point, Flora Ackroyd, Roger Ackroyd's niece, appeals to Poirot, the famous detective, (According to Todorov, nothing bad happens to the detective. A rule of the genre gives them immunity. (Todorov, 1957) who has settled in the village of King's Abbot to spend his days of retirement peacefully and asks him to find the truth. Thus called to duty, Poirot investigates throughout the novel and uncovers the truth. This is the only murder to be solved in the novel. In other words, this is the main sequence of events.

"Space" is narrow and defined within the limits of the village. The fact that the house is in a garden and the presence of a summer house in the garden contribute directly to the discrepancy between appearance and reality and the "diversion" which makes the solution of the murder difficult. Similarly, that the study is on the ground floor and close to the stairs is important in the diversion and the solution. Space, in this novel, has to be taken into consideration both by the murderer and the detective. The success and the solution of the murder is directly linked to space. The murderer has made a change in space, this change attracted the attention of the experienced Parker footman, and he reports this change to Poirot. The doctor changes the place of the armchair in order to hide the dictaphone he has brought in his briefcase, puts it back in its place after he and Parker break the door and find Ackroyd dead. It is this change that makes Poirot suspicious and helps him in finding out the truth.

"Time" is also very important in this novel. In this work, where events begin in media res and are conveyed in an alternating order by going back to the beginning and moving toward the end, Roger Ackroyd has been killed for reasons that take place in "today"



As a result of the fact that the dictaphone rings at 21:30, forty-five minutes after Ackroyd dies, and that Geoffrey Raymond, the secretary and Major Hector Blunt who is the guest in the house both hear Ackroyd's voice on the dictaphone and think he is alive is the most important factor that absolves the doctor and delays the solution. What is more, that the murder was told the doctor over the telephone and this was verified by Caroline Shepherd, the doctor's sister, casts out the doubt regarding the doctor.

In this novel where solution depends on time, especially on the time of the murder., there are "two dimensions of time". The story begins with "near past" and develops with Poirot's taking matters into his hands. "Past" comprises Mrs. Farer's death and the events related with Ackroyd. "Now" is the time dimension when the murder is solved and the murderer confesses. Poirot's entering the picture complicates the situation for he is in a position to perceive the events in the past in the way they are told to him. For this reason, he is in a situation where he has to understand what happened in the "past" correctly and then bring forth a systematic explanation to all the events that happened in the "past" and reach the "present"

There are twenty-seven sections in the novel. They can be divided into two equal sections under the titles "what is told Poirot" (POIROT KNOWS 1-14) and "what Poirot detects" (POIROT FINDS 15-27). Right in the middle (in the fourteenth section) Poirot and the doctor who have collaborated till that point part ways. At this point, the "second book" begins. The doctor says "what is written here is the direct expression of what is told to Poirot. (30)

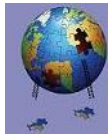
When the sequence of events that take place in the novel are listed within the past-now dimensions of time, there appears a symmetrical "pattern" as shown in the chart below.

POIROT KNOWS

- 1 IPI Suicide (Mrs. Ferars)
- 2 IPI Narration of the past
- 3 IPI Narration of the past
- 4 !PI Narration of the past
- 5 INI Murder
- 6 IPI Disclosure of an event before the murder
- 7 INI A development after the murder (Flora wants Ralph to be exonerated)
- 8 INI goose feather found (clue)
- 9 INI Flora lies
- 10 INI Inquiry after the murder
- 11 INI Information is asked about Ursula
- 12 INI Speculation about the murder
- 13 INI Poirot establishes relationship between the goose feather and narcotic
- 14 INI Poirot and the doctor part ways
- 15 INI Poirot establishes relationship between the narcotic and Miss Russel

POIROT FINDS

- 16 INI Speculation about the murder
- 17 INI Information asked about Mrs. Ferars
- 18 INI Investigation after the murder



- 19 INI Flora 'lie disclosed
- 20 INI The secret of the goose feather disclosed
- 21 INI A development after the murder
- 22 IPI an event Disclosure of an event prior to the murder
- 23 INI Solution of the murder
- 24 IPI Clarification of the past
- 25 IPI Clarification of the past
- 26 IPI Clarification of the past
- 27 INI Suicide (Doctor)

The plot of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is built around a love triangle. Mrs. Ferrars who forms one corner of the triangle has tried to unite with Roger Ackroyd by killing her husband, but with the intervention of Doctor James Shepard kills herself. At the same time with his intervention, the doctor functions just like Mrs. Ferrars and by killing Roger Ackroyd in the third corner of the triangle he condemns himself. The novel is the story of these condemnations. Yet, with a strange twist of fate, Roger Ackroyd and Mrs. Ferrars leave behind two healthy loves as they depart this life. One of these is Ursula who appears to be a servant in the house and Ralph who is Ackroyd's stepson. The other one is the love between Ackroyd's niece and his old friend, Major Blunt. The first function of all the characters in the novel is to enlarge the story of Ackroyd's death to the size of a novel. A second and more important function is related with the murder, namely the performance of the murder, the effort to solve the murder, delaying the solution of the murder, and finally to enabling the solution of the murder. There are quite a number of characters in this novel which is full of many events. Even the number of characters directly related with murder reaches fifteen. The first one is the famous detective Hercule Poirot who is in the subject position in the novel. The solution of the murder sticks with him. Roger Ackroyd, the victim, is a close friend. He constitutes the subject of the novel by being killed.

The third character, Doctor James Shepard, is a close friend of Roger Ackroyd. His function is stated above. Another close friend of Roger Ackroyd, Hector Blunt, functions as a tool in the murder. The dagger is his present to Ackroyd. Thus, he contributes to the murder indirectly. Ralph Paton, the stepson of Ackroyd who lives in the same house with him, Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd, the niece Flora Ackroyd, Geoffrey Raymond the secretary Miss Russel the housekeeper, Parker the footman, Ursula Bourne the servant, Caroline Shepard the doctor's sister, Miss Ganett and Mrs. Foillot Ursula Bourne's elder sister all function as "proof" because they are the main characters of the three unrelated events and because they play a role in the clarification of these events. The fifteenth character in this group, Charles Kent, is a stranger in this city. His function in the novel, together with characters in the proof group, is both diversion and clarification of events.

Among the relationships formed by the characters in this novel are five "secret affairs" that attract attention. Of these, the first one is the Ackroyd-Ferrars relationship which forms the basis of the murder. Ackroyd's niece, Flora Ackroyd, and his stepson Ralph Paton each has a secret affair despite the fact that Ackroyd hopes they will marry each other. Flora Ackroyd is in love with Ackroyd's close friend Hector Blunt. Ralph, on the other hand, is married to Ursula Bourne who works as a maid in the house, and he keeps this secret for his relationship with his stepfather is not very good. His wife Ursula is the sister of Mrs. Foillot who has a respectable place in the village. Ursula who is from a family that has become poor has found this position with the letter of reference her sister secured for her. The housekeeper Miss Russell, has an illegitimate son who is a drug addict. All these secret relationships make the revelation of the truth Poirot is trying to reach extremely complicated and block the solution. Furthermore, they constitute the "subplot".



All these characters are brought together within the boundaries of the Ackroyd mansion and within the framework of kinship, love, business and friendship. The victim Ackroyd is associated with two of his close friends (Dr. Shepard and Hector Blunt) through the bond of friendship. However, both relationships are ironic. While Shepard kills Ackroyd, it is Blunt who supplies the tool .ie., the dagger.

The people living in Ackroyd's place have been brought together highly systematically. Ackroyd is living in his mansion with a total of nine people: three relatives, three servants and three friends. The fact that there are fifteen people in the novel and that twelve of them are witnesses brings to mind the jury of twelve in the British legal system, and the rest are the victim, the murderer and the detective who are essential in the functioning of the jury system.

While the murder of Roger Ackroyd constitutes the "subplot", there are three more events that develop simultaneously forming "sub-series" of events. In other words, there are three more incidents or events in the same place, on the same night, at the same time the murder is thought to be committed. These incidents are not related with each other or the murder. Yet, because they take place secretly and are kept secret, they appear as if they are related with the murder. Thus, they present a more complicated picture and make the solution more difficult. These three incidents are sequentially as follows:

THE FIST INCIDENT- Miss Russel-Charles Kent Meeting

Miss Russel, the housekeeper, meets with her illegitimate son in the summer house in the garden at 21.10. She gives her cocaine-addicted son money. Her son drops the goose feather he uses to snort the cocaine on the floor. Later, this goose feather is thought to be related with the murder

THE SECOND INCIDENT- Ursula Bourne -Ralph Paton Meeting

Ursula whom everybody thinks is the maid in the mansion is actually the wife of Roger Ackroyd's stepson, Ralph Paton, but nobody knows about this marriage. Having learned Ralph is going to get engaged with his step cousin, Ursula tells Ackroyd everything, and that night she meets with Ralph in the summer house at 21:30. A piece of her starched uniform gets torn. Later, this piece of cloth is thought to be related with the murder.

THE THIRD INCIDENT- Flora Ackroyd- Parker Meeting

After the death of her father who is Ackroyd's little brother, Flora Ackroyd began to live in her uncle's house with her mother. She is hard up for money because her uncle does not give her regular allowance. That night she steals 40 Pound from the drawer in Ackroyd's room at 21:40, comes downstairs and sees Parker the footman just as she is passing by the study, and putting her hand on the door handle, she pretends to be leaving the study. She lies to Parker saying her uncle does not wish to be disturbed. Flora's lie verifies the statements of Hector Blunt and Raymond who have heard the long dead Ackroyd's voice over the dictaphone and completely absolves Doctor Shepard.

The novel characters who take place in the three independent incidents that constitute the "sub-series" of events mutually absolve and throw each other under the bus. While Flora-Parker meeting changes the hour of the murder, Flora-Ralph meeting changes the reason of the murder. The former changes the reason of the murder against Flora while the second changes it against Charles Kent giving the impression that the murder was committed for "money".

There are three important evidences concerning the murder. These are the telephone incident, Ackroyd's voice coming from the dictaphone, and the letter written to Ackroyd by Mrs. Ferars. The doctor asks a sailor who comes to his surgery on the morning of the murder and who will leave the country the next day to call him but not to talk on the phone. Thus, he acts as if he is talking with Parker, which makes him beyond suspicion. The function of the second evidence, the dictaphone, is to divert suspicion to someone else. Thanks to the voice coming from the dictaphone at 21:30, it will be believed that Roger Ackroyd was alive when the doctor is sitting at home with his sister even after a long while Ackroyd is dead. The letter which is the third evidence contains the identity of the blackmailer. Its disappearance hides the identity of the blackmailer. While Poirot reaches the points



related with these three evidences in the seventh, eighth, and eleventh sections, they are spread irregularly between the fourth and seventeenth sections.

There are three objects in this novel that are independent of each other and the murder. These are the goose feather of the Russel-Kent meeting, the starched piece of cloth of the Flora-Ralph meeting and the stolen 40 pound of the Flora-Parker meeting. Although the objects pointing at these three meetings come up in the eighth, ninth and tenth sections, these three meetings are placed irregularly between the second and twenty-second sections. Poirot plays a trick to reveal these incidents in the eleventh, fifteenth and twentieth sections. In the eleventh section he learns from the doctor's sister that a sailor came to the surgery on the morning of the murder by keeping the doctor away from the surgery with an excuse. In the fifteenth section he has Flora and Parker reenact their movements on the night of the murder. As a result of the experiment he carries out together with the doctor under the pretext that he wants to learn if Parker was lying or not, he understands whether Flora saw her uncle alive at 21:45 or not. Finally, in the twentieth section by having a false piece of news that Ralph has been caught as the murderer, he ensures that Ursula comes to him and tells everything that really happened.

To add to all of these, minor incidents related or unrelated with the murder also raise questions. Nearly every section ends with a question. These questions are answered one by one till the end of the eighteenth section. However, the order of the questions and answers do not correspond. For example, while the question asked in the fourth section is answered in the twenty-fifth, the question asked in the eighth is answered in the twelfth. In short, there is a deliberate effort to delay the solution of the murder.

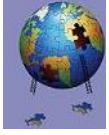
Events with disrupted sequence constitute the "diversion" due to the contradictions they present. In "appearance": Roger Ackroyd and the doctor are close friends, Ralph and Flora are in love with each other, Ursula Bourne is a maid in the house, Roger Ackroyd is alive at 21:30 and 21:45, Doctor Shepard receives a phone call informing him of the murder. In "reality": The friendship of Ackroyd and the doctor is one-sided, Ralph and Flora are in love with other people not with each other, Ursula Bourne is not the maid but the daughter-in-law, Roger Ackroyd was killed before 21:30., The phone call is not about the murder.

The biggest "diversion" in the novel is that the narrator is the murderer, and he tells the truth. It is very difficult for the murderer to narrate the murder he has committed himself objectively. Yet, the doctor-except in the section not conveyed to the reader, puts into words everything that happens objectively. An advantage of this point of view is his ignorance of the three almost simultaneous events that take place on the night of the murder. By this way, he is able to tell Poirot Miss Russel's rushing out of the library in total objectivity. Miss Russel's situation thus contributes to diversion.

Linguistics tells us human language is a system of signs. According to Ferdinand Saussure who created this axiom, a linguistic "sign" comprises a "signifier" and a "signified". Signifier is the letters on the page or the sound that bounces off in our ears, and signified is the concept that appears in our brain when we read or hear the signifier.

The relationship between these two is arbitrary. (Saussure, 28) For example, when we say "apple" the red, green or yellow juicy fruit in nature is the "signified. Signifier is the word apple which is made up of the sounds a.p.p.le. With homonymy, we immediately think of the signifier, the word apple, and the signified, the apple in nature. But with polysemy the word bank is both the financial institution and side of a river. Therefore, it is possible to separate the the signifier and the signified or to change the relationship between them. This makes possible the idea of a single signifier which could be associated with more than one signified, or vice versa, which makes ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning possible.

Similarly, in Agatha Christie's novels solution of a murder is reached by the creation of situations or events where there is more than one relationship between the signified and the signifier. First, signifier is united with the wrong signified and thus "implicit sign" is formed. Solution is when signifier is united with the correct signified and "explicit sign" is formed. For this purpose Christie diverts the



reader by making use of conflicting situations and events which we call “diversions”. “Diversion“ is uniting signifier with the wrong signified and forming “implicit signs”. Solution is forming “explicit signs” by uniting signifier with the correct signified. It is the job of the detective, Poirot, to observe the discrepancy between appearance and reality and resolve the issue.

Throughout the novel fist, some signs that reflect “appearance” (Ringing of the telephone in the doctor’s house, conveyance of the doctor’s words to the reader, Ackroyd’s voice being heard at 21:39) are formed. Next, the relationship between the “signifier” and the “signified” is disrupted, and the “signifier” (the telephone ringing and the dictaphone working) is united with the wrong “signified” (The doctor cannot be guilty, Ackroyd is alive at 21:30) forming the “implicit sign”. And then, as a result of the investigation Poirot conducts, the “implicit sign” turns into the “explicit sign” (The telephone call is fake, Ackroyd is dead at 21:30, and the voice coming from the dictaphone is prerecorded).

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