



Reading the Treacherous Watson: Genre Betrayal and Unreliable Narration

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the deceptive architecture orchestrated by an unreliable narrator who neither has a distorted worldview nor engages in absolute falsehoods. The narrator of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) is designed to test the faith of the reader in accepted conventions of the genre of detective fiction. As such, the paper argues that Sheppard's unreliability is a powerful narrative self-positioning that operates through the careful curation of narrated facts and omissions, tonal performance, and the exploitation of genre conventions, culminating in a betrayal of genre. Sheppard assumes the "Watson" role and receives the trust associated with the narrator-chronicler/sidekick role of the detective figure. The deception successfully traps the reader not just through Sheppard's narrative but also through the reader's trust that the narrator-chronicler figure, who is prominently active in the story of the investigation, cannot be the author of the story of the crime.

Keywords:

Unreliable Narrator, Detective Fiction, Genre Convention, Narrative Omission, Crime Fiction.

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INTRODUCTION

The entire plot twist of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) is orchestrated on the central paradox – a narrator is both the criminal and the chronicler of the narrative. Dr James Sheppard never really lies to the reader. He does not explicitly state a falsehood, and yet is one of the most powerfully deceptive, unreliable narrators because he completely dupes the reader into unquestioningly trusting his point of view, especially during the first reading of the novel.

Wayne C. Booth first coined the concept of an unreliable narrator in *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), decades after Dr James Sheppard twisted the foundation of trust between the narrator and the reader such that "the reader is in some sense damaged by it" (Cannings 133). As 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...It is most often a matter of what James calls inconstancy; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him (158-159).

As a result, the accounts of these narrators cannot be fully trusted as they possess distinct characteristics which set them apart from conventional narrators. There is a doubtful perception that plagues their viewpoint, as it is often distorted or reflects a limited understanding of reality. The narrators may also suffer from cognitive impairments like hallucinations, memory loss, delusions, etc. Deception and manipulation are used to intentionally mislead the reader by the omission of facts or misrepresentation of the same, which James Phelan had termed as "misinterpreting and underinterpreting; misevaluating and underevaluating; and misreporting and underreporting" (98).



Sheppard's unreliability, however, has a layered mechanism. He is not delusional or fallible. Neither is he biased nor naïve. Instead, he is an actively observant character and almost pedantically precise – his narration appears calm, intelligent and almost entirely truthful. There is no distorted worldview to create any suspicion in the mind of the reader. Rather, the narration reads almost like a chronicle drafted by Watson for Sherlock. The deception lies in the very architecture of what he chooses to narrate and is therefore structural. The strategy of the criminal-narrator violates the commandment proposed by Ronald Knox in his preface titled "Decalogue of Detective-Fiction" (1929), where he clearly emphasised that the criminal should never be anyone whose thoughts have been accessible for the reader to follow.

This paper thereby aims to scrutinise Sheppard's deceptive narrative to decode the strategy the narrator uses to subvert the established pattern of the trustworthy Watson stereotype in a detective novel. It operates through some interlocking mechanisms – a shrewd grammatical omission that is opaque even under scrutiny; a tonal performance of calm, passive reporting that disguises guilt as competence; a borrowed Watson stereotype that is thoroughly mutilated; and a deceptive self-positioning that lures the reader into the trap of unreliable narration. These mechanisms intertwine to undermine the reader's faith in literary conventions of fixed patterns and genre expectations, resulting in genre betrayal.

ANALYZING THE STRATEGIES OF DECEPTION

Christie's novel opens with the murder of the wealthy Roger Ackroyd. He was discovered dead in his estate by Dr Sheppard and Parker. The setting is a traditional Christie device, where the story of the crime is set in a large, wealthy upper-class household with many servants, family members, and witnesses, serving as part of "the aspects of the 'who-will-get-the-money-when-the-head-of-the-family-is-gone' motif"



(Kyzlinková 116). The story of the investigation is then led by the famous detective Hercule Poirot, and Dr Sheppard becomes his chronicler and assistant in solving the crime.

In detective fiction, the reader is tasked with reaching the successful conclusion of the investigation through their own logic. At the same time, the author is responsible for astonishing the reader with an ending that is both unexpected and possible. Emanuela Gutkowski emphasises that "... the trick lies in the capability of the author to create, through a "cunning" narrator, a deviation from the reader's expectations" (51). Robert Barnard, in *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (1980), had categorised seven types of strategies that she uses to deceive her readers – the withdrawal of authorial presence, sympathetic point of view, the narrator or assistant being the criminal, the love triangle twist, repeating tropes of popular literature, use of stock characters and narrative diversion.

The first strategy is that of the withdrawal of the authorial presence. Christie believed in suppressing all traces of the author in her work and remaining an absent figure; she lets her readers infer the author's presence through the novels. Barnard declares that her highest deception is in "compulsive hiding of personality and opinions... obsessive reticence" (60). This glacial detachment treats her characters impartially, creating misconceptions in the reader's mind and leading the reader to forget that the authorial presence, in its obvious absence, could be a major hint of deception. Instead, this aloofness leads the reader to fall prey to the narrator, whose perspective fills the void left by the lack of authorial presence. This relationship is aided by the second tactic of using a sympathetic point of view. The reader in these novels sees the situation directly from Sheppard's viewpoint, without any alternative focus. He fits perfectly in the Watson type stereotype of the Detective's sidekick who chronicles the journey and is unfailingly loyal. Thus, the narrative becomes a platform for the narrator-criminal to



don the role of the investigator's aid, immediately shifting him away from the ring of suspicion. As Barnard writes,

It is at the beginning of a book that the reader is least wary: because the whole investigation starts off from this donnee, the initiator is exempt from suspicion ...We are fooled because Christie has worked her favourite piece of legerdemain—she has persuaded us right from the beginning to see the situation the wrong way up (62).

Sheppard is thereby the doctor who discovers and examines the body with full authority. Furthermore, his report is trusted even by the detective Poirot, which puts him in a unique position of power to navigate the situation. Furthermore, the narrator, or the detective's assistant, being the actual criminal, is the third tactic she uses. Sheppard plays his detective assistant role to the optimum level by noting down facts in order, investigating on Poirot's behalf and helping him orchestrate traps for the other suspects. It is almost a sinister game he plays all the while declaring that he "was at Poirot's elbow the whole time... played Watson to his Sherlock" (163). The fourth strategy, called the eternal triangle, is described by Emma Lathen in Agatha Christie: *First Lady of Crime*. Marriage or a non-platonic relationship is an important part of this pattern, in which one party is slighted by the other. The plot retains its suspense despite the repetitive trope only because of the unreliable narrator. The Murder of Roger Ackroyd has a triangle in the past between Mr and Mrs Ferrars and Mr Ackroyd, which actually acts as an important link to Ackroyd's death. The unreliable narration works to hide the truth that Mrs Ferrars had actually murdered her husband, thereby hiding the identity of the blackmailer from the reader.

Her fifth strategy is based on borrowing tropes and predictable relation structures from popular literature such that "she could rely on a certain response to certain stimuli, and using that response as a way of leading the reader up an enticingly familiar garden



path" (Barnard 68). There is a well-used pattern of the weak character of the stepson who supposedly murders his stepfather for inheritance and escapes. Then there is the trope of Ms Russell's estranged illegitimate son, the butler with a history of blackmail, etc. The use of stock characters is the sixth strategy, which includes Major Hector Blunt and the village busybody Caroline Sheppard. The seventh and one the most powerful deceptive strategies is the deception by diversion used to plant red herrings. Often termed to be a conjuration trick in itself, Christie succeeds by "diverting the reader's attention from the matter of real importance by focusing his attention on some irrelevancy elsewhere" (Barnard 69). The actual clues are there, but the narrator focuses on another aspect, which leads readers of detective fiction, who are used to remaining alert for dead-end red herrings, to fall prey to this strategy. The actual clue is something almost trivial, or even parts of the *mise-en-scène*, like the doctor carrying a black bag, a young, wealthy man with two pairs of similar shoes, and something as unimportant as a chair being pushed out of its place. The black bag itself is the deception, where at first, Sheppard carries a weapon and also the shoes, which he had stolen from Ralph to implicate him in the murder. Later, he carries away the Dictaphone after the discovery of the murder. The chair, out of place, revealed that Ackroyd had died long ago, and the illusion of him speaking was created by the Dictaphone hidden behind it. Thus, these strategies of deception are successfully employed by the unreliable narration of the narrator-criminal.



THE MECHANISMS OF SHEPPARD'S DECEPTIVE NARRATION

Dr James Sheppard is a reticent narrator who, like the author, withholds his personal opinions from his record, which, as Poirot remarks, keeps his "personality in the background" (266). Sheppard hides his flaws to make himself seem like a justified authority to narrate the events correctly. He strongly presents his record as a "straightforward narrative" (163) and thereby as absolutely true.

There are, however, some interesting instances that disrupt the narrator's reliable façade. First is the sense of wariness that Sheppard nurtures against his own sister, Caroline. She is the village's gossip and an amateur detective, nosy and relentless. She unsettles her brother not because she is suspicious of him but because of her intimate knowledge of his habits, psyche and character. This allows inconsistencies to appear in his narrative that strain his control over the process of Poirot's investigation. She is vocal about a weakness in her brother's character in her conversation with Poirot, which is one of the vital links that allude to a darker persona of the respected village doctor. Next is the juxtaposition of the foil character against the narrator. Ralph Paton, Ackroyd's stepson and a major suspect, is Sheppard's foil. Both share a similar character weakness that becomes apparent as Sheppard's true persona unravels. However, Paton makes the right choice, whereas Sheppard chooses to entangle himself in greed, blackmail and then murder to save himself. Finally, the seventh strategy is used again to divert the reader's attention during the party. In the midst of a game, Caroline deduces through gossip that Ralph Paton was probably hiding in Cranchester, and immediately Sheppard knocks "down the rack that held the pieces" (194). This is a natural reaction of shock because he had supposedly hidden Paton in Cranchester to help Ralph escape inquiry. In reality, this was done to make him appear more of a suspect. These instances highlight the duality of Sheppard's character and the narrative



slips that occur as his unreliable narration progresses.

The entire deceptive architecture, however, can be analysed around some pillars: Omission, Tonal Performance, Genre Stereotype, and Narrative Self-Positioning. The first pillar is Christie's central principle in creating Sheppard: he never makes a false statement. He narrates misleading truths and incomplete aspects and is strategically silent about what to reveal and which facts to omit. However, he does not engage in absolute lies.

This is best understood through one of this novel's highly quoted lines: "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" (35). For the first-time reader, the quoted line is a simple transition in the narration: the doctor leaves his friend at a specific time, and until then the letter had remained unread. The depiction is not suspicious; it feels genuine. Only after the criminal is revealed does the entire meaning of the narration change. Sheppard had narrated the specific time because in that very gap, he had murdered Ackroyd. This is a confession, essentially, engraved in the grammar of an alibi. There are no lies in this sentence. Sheppard genuinely left the room, and until then, the letter was truthfully unread by Ackroyd because by then Ackroyd was already dead. The sentence exploits the referential gap between the reader's assumption about what the narration implies and what it technically states. This is an omission of the real actions in that few minutes' interval, not by concealment but through inference.

This technique is used by Sheppard again, especially after the discovery of the murder.

As he narrates,

I did what little had to be done... careful not to disturb ... the body, and not to handle the dagger ... Ackroyd had clearly been dead some little time. (50)

The official, exaggerated manner of carefulness he depicts is like that of a police



inspector examining the body. He assumes the authority to send Parker out to call the police and to decide the best course of action. From the narrator's perspective, his actions can be seen as those of a responsible doctor who inspected the body without disturbing the evidence. The murderer's viewpoint alludes to immediately hiding the Dictaphone in his black bag and pushing the displaced chair back to its place. The Dictaphone was the tool used to manufacture the illusion that Ackroyd was alive after Sheppard had left. Rearranging the chair's position was intended to misdirect attention from the room's true geometry, which would have revealed that the changes were not routine. Both these devices are physical portrayals of omission. They are portrayed by the narrator and then reported as a performance. Something similar occurs when he gives an organised description of Ackroyd's death, stating with an assurance that the murderer stood behind Ackroyd while stabbing him, clearly acknowledging that the "blow was quite unexpected ... died without knowing who his assailant was" (67). This confident observation is thought to be based on his examination that the characters in the narrative, as well as the reader, accept. All the while, the narrator-criminal knows more than everyone; for what he states as probability was the truth, and his surety was more because he was party to it rather than his medical skills. He omits that truth. The reader, meanwhile, accepts the narration as a doctor's report, and it is the reader's inference which actually fuels the deception.

The tonal performance camouflages the architecture of omission. The narrator's voice is almost bureaucratically calm, passive and flat. It does not resemble a criminal confessing his crime but feels like the report of a country doctor recounting strange happenings in the village. The flat tone is a powerful performance that sets a deceptive trap. The genre convention, as another factor, also enters this situation. Detective Fiction has various conventions and trains its readers to associate guilt with visible cues such as nervousness, restlessness, and evasiveness. Sheppard's narration does not offer



these tell. His tone is particularly passive and flat as he describes blackmail, murder, the backgrounds of the suspects, the progression of Poirot's investigation, and even Caroline's gossip. There is a glaring absence of emotional turbulence in his narration, which associates itself with reliability in the mind of the reader because of the convention of the genre of detective fiction and the Watson stereotype. The tonal performance is an extension of the role he borrows – the trustworthy sidekick of the detective, like Hastings was to Poirot, and Watson was to Holmes. In the absence of Hastings, Sheppard appears to be the perfect candidate to slip into the place of the chronicler who offers his help to Poirot in solving the murder case. This results in the reader extending the trust in such conventions to Sheppard and is the perfect example of genre exploitation. The trust does not grow due to Sheppard's actions but rather through the transfer of the trust earned by other narrator-chroniclers who were in a similar structure in this genre. The performance is a well-designed trap where Sheppard assists Poirot by providing detailed facts about the situation, accompanying him on interviews, etc and this aid in itself is misdirection because genre convention emphasises that the guilty do not volunteer in an investigation against their own interest. Instead, his service to Poirot is the most audacious attribute of his tonal performance, aided by genre convention – in effect deflecting the suspicion from him cleanly. Thus, the genre expectation of an innocent chronicler, a Watson-type figure, is dismantled in plain sight but camouflaged by the unreliable narration shrouded in a flat tonal performance.

The final pillar is the narrator's self-positioning. The moment Poirot reveals his knowledge of the truth, the game is over, and Sheppard's relationship with his own narration alters completely. He addresses the reader directly, with the clear understanding that he has been caught narrating his actions during the ten-minute gap. His revelation transforms the narration up to this point into a well-designed



demonstration of craft. He is not just confessing. Instead, he is annotating his own deception, highlighting the punctuation he chose not to include as the precise point where he diverted the reader's attention and wrapped his deception. Immediately, the novel's narrative takes two distinct planes of understanding, almost splitting into two different books with the same words – the first is the innocent account of the investigation by the village doctor, helping the detective pursue the murderer of his friend. The second is the carefully designed narrative of the murderer systematically sabotaging the investigation so it never reaches the proper conclusion. As such, the final portion of the novel has a triple function. It is first and foremost a confession as Sheppard openly admits to committing the murder. It is also an exhibition of his craft, as it explains the methods used to engineer the same murder and hide it, with evident pride. Lastly, it is also a draft resembling a suicide note where Sheppard records his intention of ensuring that Caroline does not suffer through the ordeal of exposure by overdosing himself. Even to the end, Sheppard allows his voice to persist with vanity by arranging his own death with absolute narrative control.

CONCLUSION

Sheppard, as an unreliable narrator, does not distort reality. Rather, he is selective in his narration. He carefully curates it. As such, selecting what to narrate is in itself an art of deception, highlighting that even without uttering lies, a narrator can be dishonest and unreliable. Furthermore, Sheppard's narration is a critical study of the art of reading in itself, for it punishes trust and rewards suspicion; thereby making the reader complicit in their own deception. The trick of the deception has its foundation not on Sheppard's lies but rather on the trust of the reader that the narrator/investigator/chronicler of the story of investigation cannot be the author of the story of crime.

Sheppard's curation is in itself a method. There is a precision with which he exploits the



grammar of omission by laying gaps which are camouflaged by tone and genre conventions. They do not require him to state falsehoods to operate as pillars of unreliability, for they only require the reader's ordinary and reasonable trust in the role of the narrator-chronicler in detective fiction, which is transferred from similar structural conventions of this genre. A reader does not expect Watson to be treacherous, and this is where the narrative gambles to dupe the reader. As such, this genre betrayal orchestrated in this novel is not that of evidence or clue but of the faith of the reader, which is tested by the deceptive architecture of Sheppard's narration.

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