

Elements of crime writing: Text overview - *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

This resource is an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of crime. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of the genre. There are some brief comments on how some elements of the genre can be linked to the text, although teachers and students may well think of other relevant ideas. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead, we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd announces its status as a crime writing text by its title. However, the crime that actually propels the narrative is not the one alluded to in the title, but one that predates the events of the novel and is entangled with it.

That event is the death of Mr Ferrars which occurred the year before the murder of Ackroyd. The novel, narrated by the village doctor, James Sheppard, opens with information about another death, that of Mrs Ferrars, whom it transpires poisoned her brute of a husband and a year later committed suicide apparently as a result of her remorse. As the story progresses the reader learns that, for the past year, she had been blackmailed by an unknown individual and in her final moments had written to Ackroyd, the man she hoped to marry, revealing the name of the criminal. Ackroyd reveals all of this to Sheppard just as the letter exposing the blackmailer arrives. However, when he is left alone in his study with the letter, Ackroyd is murdered and all those left in the household fall under the suspicious eye of the brilliant Belgian detective, Poirot, who adopts Sheppard (a substitute for his friend and stooge Hastings), in order to unmask the assailant.

Following a pattern popular in much crime writing fiction, the investigation reveals that almost all of those present have something to hide, whether a criminal or moral indiscretion, and could therefore potentially be the killer. Each in their turn come under the scrutinizing gaze of both reader and detective before the real murderer, the novel's narrator, is shockingly exposed. Sheppard is also indirectly responsible for Mrs Ferrars's death, having discovered her crime and ruthlessly blackmailed her driving her to suicide. Interestingly, though, although Sheppard and Mrs Ferrars are paralleled as murderers, while she

suffered from remorse, he feels none. This text contains murder, blackmail and deceit, a Private Detective, investigation, mystery and ultimately the solving of the crimes. In that sense, it clearly belongs in the crime writing genre and is written by an author who was judged by the Crime Writers' Association in 2013 as the greatest crime writer.

Criminal and immoral behaviour

The text does not focus on just a single crime. Christie foregrounds a plethora of immoral behaviours which the characters are eager to keep hidden: Ralph Paton is engaged to Flora and yet has married Ursula Bourne, the housemaid, who is significantly below his social standing; the butler, Parker, has blackmailed his former employer, a crime for which he would be instantly dismissed; Elizabeth Russell is hiding an illegitimate son who is a drug user and has aspirations to marry Ackroyd that defy her social station as housekeeper; Flora has stolen forty pounds from Ackroyd's room. Moreover, very few of those who are living under Ackroyd's roof and off the wealthy industrialist's financial munificence, express any real sorrow at his passing. They are far more concerned with how they might benefit from his will and hiding their own unsavoury secrets from those investigating his death, than bringing the real criminal to justice. Even Ackroyd is not immune to immoral behaviour: his reaction to Mrs Ferrars' confession is unsympathetic – even though she clearly loves him, and he behaves in a money grubbing fashion to his relatives so they continually feel beholden to him, even forcing the engagement between Ralph and Flora against their wishes. However, the central crime is that of Dr Sheppard who is not only “the scoundrel who drove [Mrs Ferrars] to death”, but the individual who betrays and murders a man who places immense trust in him. The very fact that Sheppard is a doctor, a social position that affords him access to people's homes, in an age when the local doctor was a family friend and intimate, and who is tasked with the role of preserving life, makes his murderous actions all the more heinous and shocking.

The role of the detective

Although the police are called in to investigate, Inspector Raglan proves humorously inept. In keeping with an element of crime writing established by Conan Doyle in the *Sherlock Holmes* stories it is the private investigator, not the trained police force, who is presented as the more skilled in solving crimes. It is left to Poirot and his “little grey cells” to discern the truth. In a similar manner to Holmes, who could be regarded as his predecessor, Poirot focuses on and sifts the facts, drawing the reader's attention to the salient details that will expose the criminal. He asks his audience (and Christie asks her readers) to consider four central questions: Who called Dr Sheppard to inform him of the murder? Who moved the chair in the study? Whose boot prints lie on the window sill? Who the ring belongs to that is discovered in the pond? Assuming a logical, methodical approach of questioning each individual in turn, Poirot is able to discern the perpetrator: “It was rather like a jigsaw puzzle to which everyone contributed his own little piece of knowledge or discovery. But their task ended

there. To Poirot alone belongs the renown of fitting those pieces into their correct place.”

However, there are other detectives present in the narrative. Caroline, Sheppard’s sister, is ever alert to gossip and adept at working out some truths, such as the fact that Mrs Ferrars had not taken an accidental overdose at all, and she is able to provide Poirot with essential information. Likewise, for much of the narrative, we assume Sheppard is taking on the role of helpful sidekick as he claims, “I played Watson to his Sherlock.” The reader is also asked to assume the role of detective as each suspect comes under Poirot’s scrutiny and each suspect’s confession is forced from them.

Machinations and manipulation

The text also portrays the cunning and manipulative nature of the criminal mind. Sheppard manoeuvres all those around him (including the reader), insinuating himself into a position of trust, ensuring through his use of the most advanced technology in the form of a dictaphone (a fact that may have fascinated contemporary readers) that Ackroyd appears alive when the opposite is true, and arranging his own alibi through a cleverly timed telephone call. His intelligence and manipulation of the situation make him a formidable adversary to Poirot thus preventing his early detection and maintaining the novel’s suspense. It is also important to note how Christie uses Sheppard as a writer and narrator to control the narrative. Sheppard had intended to write his story for publication “as the history of one of Poirot’s failures”.

Structure and suspense

The novel’s fast-paced structure, whereby a new revelation is exposed in each of the 27 short chapters, creates a sense of momentum that drives the narrative forward in a manner that was highly popular at the time Christie was writing (the 1920s and 30s were regarded as the golden age of Detective Fiction). What propels the novel is our desire to discover who has murdered Roger Ackroyd, a revelation that is delayed until the final chapter to ensure that the thrilling tension expected from this genre is maintained. The structure of the novel is also typical of the crime genre: a crime is discovered, each suspect is investigated, a trial or show down occurs, the criminal is exposed and brought to justice. Sheppard’s claim that he will commit suicide (“so let it be veronal” – a particularly apt means of his own eradication given the fact that this was also the chosen method of the first murderer, Mrs Ferrars) brings about a form of justice and satisfying resolution: the criminals are punished and made to suffer for their crimes.

The most compelling technique Christie uses to create suspense is the use of the unreliable first person perspective. We assume that as a doctor, seemingly trusted by Poirot to aid his investigation and one of the only characters who was apparently not in the house at the time of the murder, Sheppard is a trustworthy speaker. His voice is calm and seemingly unassuming. However, he

omits central facts and rather than faithfully recording information actually intends to manipulate his readers. In the final chapter he congratulates himself on his own cleverness. In the main part of the narrative, his perspective prevents us from suspecting him, which thus makes his exposure, at the end of chapter 25, all the more shocking and exciting.

Trials and inquests

Although there is no legal trial for the murderer, Poirot does create a sense of theatrical denouement in setting up his own mock trial scene, where he gathers together all the suspects and reiterates the facts of the case in a lengthy speech that is reminiscent of a lawyer. He reveals the mysterious whereabouts of Ralph Paton and the nature of his relationship with Ursula Bourne before finally announcing “I know the murderer of Mr Ackroyd is in this room now.” The very fact that he refuses to reveal who this is, but simply warns them that “Tomorrow the truth goes to Inspector Raglan”, builds suspense to a pinnacle as the expected revelation is yet again delayed. However, this trial does provide a sense of satisfaction for the reader that all loose ends have been logically explained and the deceitful nature of all those involved justly exposed so there is a sense of moral restoration. In fact, Christie’s dedication at the start of the novel makes this inquest a central part of the novel’s structure when she describes it as “an orthodox detective story, murder, inquest and suspicion falling on everyone in turn!”

Setting

Like many of Christie’s novels, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is centred upon wealthy, middle and upper class characters, which was perhaps what made her novels more shocking at the time of writing (1926) given that her readers would have assumed the majority of murders in this era were perpetrated by those in the lower echelons of society. She creates the bucolic setting of Kings Abbot where Poirot has chosen to retire and “grow marrows” in peace. This harmonious small town is thus disrupted by murder – an event that is beyond Kings Abbot’s experience and results in a sense of disorder and suspicion within the community. However, in exposing the criminal and bringing him to justice, Christie re-establishes a sense of social normality and order that restores morality. She makes it clear that good will always triumph over evil and that justice will prevail, a key expectation of crime writing.

The other striking feature of the setting is Fernly Park, a location that symbolises Ackroyd’s wealth and status in the community, and is an apt scene for murder. Ackroyd is murdered in his study, and according to Sheppard was supposedly alive at 9.30pm and speaking to a man thus making the murderer an individual whom he knew and one likely to have been a member of the house. What Christie creates here is a kind of “locked room mystery” – a sub-genre of Crime Writing that can be seen in stories such as Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. This fact is then emphasised by the use of illustrations that make the visual layout of both the house and study explicit to the reader. This creates a

further sense of mystery as it seems impossible that anyone would be able to get in and out of the room without detection by those in the house and grounds. The impossibility of the crime adds to both the suspense and our final impression of the brilliance of Poirot's detection.