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Unreliable Narrators: Agatha Christie's 'Murder of Roger Ackroyd' and Other Examples

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Abstract— *This paper examines the literary concept of an unreliable narrator and how it is used to create suspense and tension in crime and thriller books. The report begins with an explanation of the term "unreliable narrator" and its origins before delving into the many varieties of unreliable narrators outlined by William Riggan in his book "Picaros, Mad Men, Nafs, and Clowns: The Unreliable First-person Narrator." The article then looks at Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and Agatha Christie's "The Murder of Roger Ackroyd" as examples of how an unreliable narrator is used in literature, particularly in detective fiction. The key arguments offered include the various forms of unreliable narrators, the use of an unreliable narrator to build suspense and plot twists, and the implications of an unreliable narrator on reader trust and participation. According to the paper, using an unreliable narrator is a powerful storytelling tactic that challenges readers' assumptions and perceptions of narrative and character and is a technique that has been increasing in use and popularity now.*

Keywords— ***Agatha Christie, Detective Fiction, Storytelling, Suspense, Unreliable Narrators***

I. UNRELIABLE NARRATORS

Wayne C. Booth coined the term "unreliable narrator" in his 1961 book "The Rhetoric of Fiction." In order for a narrator to be unreliable, the story must be told in the first person. And, because accounts of events and stories in first person are frequently faulty and biassed, one can say that all narrators in first-person are untrustworthy by definition. However, Booth rationalizes that in order for a narrator to depict unreliability, they must either misinterpret, misvalue, underreport, misreport, or under-evaluate. This could be intentionally or due to a misunderstanding, and we see it used in a variety of ways in crime and thriller novels.

William Riggan discusses the various techniques unreliable narrators work in fiction in Picaros, Mad Men, Clowns and Nafs: The Unreliable First-person Narrator: The Picaro (in which the narrator brags/exaggerates), The Madman (in which the narrator suffers from mental trauma and presents an unclear viewpoint), The Clown (in which thenarrator does not take things sincerely and thus experiment with orthodox storytelling practices), The Naf (in which the narrator has a childlike outlook), and the Liar are the different types of narrators.

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," written in 1843, is one of the earliest examples of an untrustworthy narrator (the Madman type) in detective fiction. The narrator confesses to a murder but offers a confused and unstable version of the events leadingup to the crime. In this story, the untrustworthy narrator adds to the tension and confusion, making it impossible for the reader to determine the truth.

The Liar is the most intriguing form of unreliable narrator described by Riggan. A liar narrator intentionally lies about events or withholds essential information from the reader. Dr. James Sheppard, the narrator of Agatha Christie's The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, is a prominent example of this. Although Christie's novel was published in 1926, long before the term "unreliable narrator" was invented, there's no disagreeing that this detective fiction employs an unreliable narrator to heighten anticipation.

II. MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD BY AGATHA CHRISTIE - STUDY OF UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

The narrator of The Murder of Roger Ackroyd is Dr. James Sheppard. As an effect, zealous mystery booklovers, both now and in the 1900s, would be prone to believe him. There is a long tradition in detective novels, dating back to the Sherlock Holmes stories (recounted by the reliable Dr. Watson), where the narrator is the most reliable character—the detective's right-hand man. Agatha Christie, on the other hand, challenges readers' beliefs about narrative and mystery novel norms in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, as it is revealed in the final pages of the book that Dr. Sheppard is the murderer. Sheppard is an unusual character: despite being the book's narrator, readers learn comparatively less about him (the "twist ending" is based on readers not knowing too much about him, after all). Sheppard is a doctor who looks to be dependable, trustworthy, and likeable—hence, we presume, Poirot's apparent friendship with him. In retrospect, Christie reveals that Dr. Sheppard is a pathetic, despairing man who, as an outcome of his disastrous investing and wish to save face, blackmails Mrs. Ferrars and isthen compelled to murder his buddy Roger Ackroyd to keep himself hidden.

A well-written and memorable detective story frequently contains an unexpected plot twist that leaves the reader perplexed, unable to grasp the emerging events. It's no surprise that Agatha Christie perfected this skill by creating award-winning, one-of-a-kind, and perplexing crime fiction. Some critics, however, believed she was breaking the rules of narration and even misleading her audience. According to Merzah and Abbas (2020), readers in the early twentieth century were likely to accept the narrator because of a long history stretching back to the Sherlock Holmes stories, in which the speaker, Dr. Watson, is the most trustworthy figure. In Christie's The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, the trust between narrator and reader was thus destroyed when the speaker, Dr. Sheppard, was revealed as the murderer in the final chapter of the novel.

It is worth noting that the unreliable narrator does not necessarily lie; instead, he or she may purposefully withhold important information from the reader. Dr. Sheppard is initially portrayed in the text as a sincere, supportive, and sympathetic individual. It is not until the very last few pages that the reader realises he has been the culprit the entire time. The audience is astonished, but also betrayed, because they have been duped throughout the story. The entire narration has now grown hazy, and the reader is unsure what to believe, or rather who to believe, as it has been recounted by the criminal himself. Merzah and Abbas (2020) believe that, as Poirot points out, Dr. Sheppard is not a criminal nor a sociopath; he is merely a desperate person suffering from a "strain of weakness" (1926).

Gutkowski (2011) contends that the narrator violates Grice's maxims of quantity, quality, manner, and relation by omissions, ambiguities, wrong amounts of material, and willful misunderstanding between "report" and "novel," leading the listener to an incorrect conclusion. In truth, Dr. Sheppard never lies in the account, preferring to avoid answering inquiries that would lead him to reveal his location during the 10 minutes following Mr. Ackroyd's murder. What helps him the most is his social standing; he is a respected, accommodating family friend who assists Detective Poirot and therefore separates himself from the charges.

Nonetheless, Poirot, like any unbeatable detective in crime fiction, comes to the correct conclusion and reveals the murderer's identity in front of the victim's friends and family. According to Sareri and Maria (2018), "the narrator Dr.Sheppard creates a conflict by constantly lying and deceiving, but this does not affect Poirot's judgement, as he reveals in the end that he knew who the culprit was, but lacked evidence." Furthermore, Häljestam (2016) claims that "the author's active choice to dominate the narrative allows the self-conscious narrator to deceive the reader." Sheppard is automatically removed from the reader's list of suspects since he employs the first personal pronoun "I" to recount the story. This is one of Christie's primary strategies for manipulating and disorienting her audience. According to Alexander (2006), "this brings him closer to the reader than any other character; his actions are fully described, and everything the reader sees or hears is only what Sheppard himself could see or hear." What the reader fails to appreciate is that the narration begins immediately after the murder, therefore the narrator's failure to disclose his own activities at the time is understandable.

Another factor omitted by the untrustworthy storyteller is his own shame and inner thoughts. According to Schaik (2015), a narrator's "true nature" is revealed by their most personal ideas. He goes on to add that in Dr. Sheppard's situation, he is just expressing his hatred for certain personalities. Sheppard simply paraphrases or quotes other characters' statements. Nonetheless, he never comments on any of Poirot's findings in order to solve the case, nor does he reveal anything about his emotions and feelings. His lack of involvement, even within the confines of his own private thoughts, should have signalled his guilt to the astute reader. The lack of

sentiments is due to his inability to convey his guilt and regret to the uneducated audience.

Christie adopts an unusual storytelling method that deviates from the typical and accepted norms of a detective story. She produces an unreliable narrator who is only discernible when juxtaposed with a trustworthy one, Hercule Poirot. Christie's brilliance resides in the continuity of her narration, which allows her to deceive her audience and give them a false sense of security.

III. OTHER EXAMPLES OF UNRELIABLE NARRATOR TECHNIQUE

Since the introduction of the literary technique of an untrustworthy narrator, it has been used by a number of other thriller and detective fiction authors. Christie has employed the untrustworthy narrator approach in other works as well. These are some examples: "Endless Night" - Although not a classic detective story, this work does have an untrustworthy narrator in the shape of the protagonist, Michael Rogers. Rogers is not a detective, but he finds himself in a complex and perilous scenario, and his mental state eventually reveals itself to be less stable than first appears. "The Big Four" – Captain Arthur Hastings serves as the narrator in this novel, but his trustworthiness is thrown into doubt when it is discovered that he has been drugged and exploited by a criminal organisation known as the Big Four. As well as "Curtain" - The narrator of this novel is Hercule Poirot, Christie's most famous detective. However, it is later revealed thatPoirot is dying of a terminal illness and has manipulated events to bring the case to a close.

This unreliable narrator literary device has grown in popularity in recent years, allowing authors to create complicated and multi-layered narratives that challenge readers' beliefs and views of reality. "Gone Girl" by Gillian Flynn is an example of how the unreliable narrator technique has been employed to generate fascinating and thought-provoking works of fiction in recent years. Amy Dunne, the narrator of this psychological thriller, goes missing on the day of her fifth wedding anniversary. As the story progresses, it becomes evident that Amy is not a trustworthy narrator and that she has been manipulating events in order to cast suspicion on her husband; "The Girl onthe Train" by Paula Hawkins - Rachel, the narrator of this gripping story, becomes captivated with a couple she observes from the train on her everyday commute. Rachel's untrustworthy narration is caused by her alcoholism and memory loss, which create gaps in her understanding of the events she describes; "American Psycho" by BretEaston Ellis - Patrick Bateman, a wealthy investment banker who is also a serial killer, is the narrator of this controversial novel. The narrator of "Fight Club" by Chuck Palahniuk is never named, but he suffers from dissociative identity disorder and creates an alter ego named Tyler Durden. The narrator's unreliability is caused by his shattered sense of self and inability to distinguish between fact and fantasy. ; as well as J.D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye" - Holden Caulfield is the narrator of this classic novel, a teenage lad who gets expelled from his prep school and spends several days roaming around New York City. Because Holden is emotionally unstable and has a distorted perception of the people and events around him, his narration is untrustworthy.

IV. CONCLUSION

Overall, the use of unreliable narrators in detective fiction can be an effective tool for writers to build suspense, challenge readers, and add complexity to the mystery. However, writers must use the technique effectively and not rely on it as a gimmick, as it is easy to overuse or misuse the technique to the detriment of the story.

However, the increasing use of the unreliable narrator technique in detective fiction has not made it any less enjoyable, as it can still be an effective way to create suspense and engage readers. Nonetheless, some readers may find the overuse of this technique tiresome or predictable, especially if it is used in a gimmicky or contrived manner. Finally, the success of the untrustworthy narrator approach is determined by how it is used within the context of the story. When employed correctly, it can add depth and complexity to a story, resulting in a more rewarding reading experience. When employed incorrectly or extensively, though, it can detract from the tale and leavereaders unhappy. In short, while the use of untrustworthy narrators is becoming more widespread in contemporary detective fiction, it is not necessarily a bad thing if done correctly and adds value to the plot.

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