NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD

Crime fiction has been a remarkable genre in Western literature since early 19th century. This sort of stories often revolves around a mysterious crime that the police were unable to explain, and that can only be solved by a particularly witty detective. Some earlier examples include Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), *The Purloined Letter* (1844) and, Doyle’s legendary Sherlock Holmes, who made his first appearance in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). However, later on in the 20th century, Agatha Christie took the detective fiction scene by storm and became one of the most important names in the field. Christie, as well as other thriller authors, employed an unreliable narrator in some of her stories, including *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926).

A well-written and memorable detective story often includes an unpredictable plot twist that leaves the reader puzzled, unable to process the unfolding actions. It is not surprising that Agatha Christie mastered this skill, writing award-winning, unique and bewildering crime fiction. However, some critics believed that she was bending the rules of narration and even misleading her audience. According to Merzah and Abbas (2020), the early 20th century readership was likely to trust the narrator because of the lengthy tradition, dating back to the Sherlock Holmes stories, in which the speaker, Dr. Watson, is the most credible character. The trust between narrator and reader was, thus, broken in Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* as the speaker, Dr. Sheppard, was revealed as the criminal in the final chapter of the book.

It is noteworthy to mention that the unreliable narrator is not necessarily one that lies; it could also be one that deliberately omits significant information from the reader. In the novel, Dr. Sheppard is presented at first as a genuine, supportive and compassionate person. It is not until the very last few pages that the reader discovers that he had been the culprit all along. The audience is not only shocked, but even betrayed, as they have been deceived throughout the entire story. The whole narration now becomes vague, and the reader doesn’t know what, or rather who to believe, as it has been recounted by the criminal himself. However, Merzah and Abbas (2020) argue that Dr. Sheppard, as Poirot points out, is neither a criminal nor a sociopath; he is simply a desperate individual suffering from a "strain of weakness" (1926).

Gutkowski (2011) argues that through omissions, ambiguities, inaccurate amounts of information, and deliberate misunderstanding between "report" and "novel," the narrator breaks Grice’s maxims of quantity, quality, manner, and relation*,* and leads the audience to a mistaken conclusion. In fact, Dr. Sheppard never lies in the story, but rather avoids answering questions that might lead him to disclose his whereabouts during the 10 minutes after he murdered Mr. Ackroyd. What particularly aids him is his social status; he is a respected, obliging family friend that helps Detective Poirot and, hence, distances himself from the accusations.

Nevertheless, Poirot, much like any undefeatable detective in crime fiction, comes to the right conclusion and exposes the identity of the murderer in front of the victim’s friends and family. Sareri and Maria (2018) claim that “the narrator Dr.Sheppard creates a conflict by continuously lying and deceiving, but that does not affect the judgment of Poirot, as he reveals in the end that he knew who the culprit was, but lacked evidence”. Furthermore, Häljestam (2016) argues that “The domination of the narrative is of course an active choice from the author, which in turn enables the self-conscious narrator to deceive the reader”. As Sheppard uses the first personal pronoun “I” to tell the story, he is automatically removed from the reader’s list of suspects. This is one of Christie’s main techniques to manipulate her audience and disorient them. Alexander (2006) reinstates this argument: “this makes him a character who is closer to the reader than all others; 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 realize is that the narration starts directly after the murder, therefore, the narrator’s lack of mentioning of his own actions at the time is plausible.

Another aspect that the unreliable narrator omits is his own guilt and inner thoughts. Schaik (2015) claims that a narrator’s most personal thoughts reveal their “true nature”. He continues saying that, in Dr. Sheppard’s case, he simply expresses his dislike for some characters. Sheppard plainly paraphrases other characters’ statement or directly quotes them. Nonetheless, he never comments on any of Poirot’s findings to solve the case or even discloses anything about his emotions and feelings. His lack of involvement, even within the scope of his own private thoughts, should’ve been an indicator of his culpability to the meticulousreader. The omission of sentiments is based on the fact that he cannot expose his guilt and regret to the ignorant audience.

To sum up, Christie employs a previously uncommon narrative technique that breaks the traditional and accepted norms of a detective story. She creates an unreliable narrator that can only be spotted when contrasted with a reliable one, Hercule Poirot. Christie’s genius lies in the consistency of her narration,which enables her to fool her audience and give them a false sense of understanding and security.