

ISSN: 0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

BI-MONTHLY REFEREED AND INDEXED, OPEN ACCESS E-JOURNAL

*The Criterion*



October 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-5

*5th Year of Open Access*



Editor-In-Chief  
Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor  
Mrs. Madhuri Bite

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

## Decoding the Role of the Reader in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*: A Study in Popular Culture

**Jennifer Monteiro**  
Assistant Professor,  
University of Delhi.

“From all such visions,  
Unreal, absurd, phantasmagorical,  
We naturally wish to be preserved...”

-Julian Symons

The role of the reader has been of utmost relevance since the Reader's Response theory, which foregrounded the role of the reader in the reading of a literary text. The theory propounded through the works of exponents like Stanley Fish, Barthes, Holland and Iser theorises that the subjective thoughts and renderings of the reader helps in obtaining more relevant meaning to the work than the text itself. In 1989, Wolfgang Iser in the preface to his work *Prospecting*- a collection of critical and theoretical essays opines:

If a literary text does something to its readers, it also simultaneously reveals something about them. Thus literature turns into a divining rod, locating our dispositions, desires, inclinations, and eventually our overall makeup. The question arises as to why we need this particular medium. Questions of this kind point to a literary anthropology that is both an underpinning and an offshoot of reader-response criticism.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this paper thus is to argue against the jaded notion that popular fiction works on a set of given formulas by which it becomes successful each time. It is required to understand that formula is an important component of any popular fiction but one cannot negate the role of the reader in such a reading. The reader's response is vital in making the text interesting and in keeping alive the concept of thrill and suspense of the work. In order to elaborate the contention of this proposition, I would like to study the Detective fiction genre and in particular read Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. It caught the public imagination in the twentieth century and on the publication of *Curtain* Hercule Poirot became the only fictional character to be honoured in *The New York Times* of 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1975, which said "Hercule Poirot Dead, Famed Belgian Detective." (Gupta 4) According to critic Mayhem Parva, in the times that Christie was writing there was no way of making her novels popular overnight. This was the age when no one knew of a television or promoting a book and its author. The concept of paperback editions too had not been introduced; therefore the books could not be made available for the masses at affordable prices. The only way these novels found their path to fame, was through the circulating libraries that promoted readership of these 'not-so-serious' but entertaining novels during the inter-war years in Great Britain.

In order to make the refutation against the given notion of 'formula fiction', another name for Detective fictions, it is necessary to ground the perception. The Russian Formalist had as if anticipated this genre of writing, however the Formalists advocated the importance of 'form' over 'content' for all literary work. Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale* had instituted formulas based on the narrative technique of most of the Folk tales he took into account. He theorised that most of the folk tales functioned according to a basic set of

<sup>1</sup> <https://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/iser/>

formulas which slight deviations. It was later on that John G. Cawelti in his *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula stories as Art and Popular Culture* derives the patterns of the formula by which most of the spy/detective novels were being written and accounts for the entertainment provided by the repetitive and predictable structure of crime fiction. In the same book he writes, “The classical detective story begins with an unsolved crime and moves toward the elucidation of its mystery. As Poe, discovered in his two stories, the mystery may centre upon the identity and motive of the criminal as in the case of “Rue Morgue,” or, with the criminal and his purposed known, the problem may be to determine the means or to establish clear evidence of the criminal’s deed, as in the case of “The Purloined Letter...” (Cawelti 1)

The novel that this paper will elucidate upon also seems to fit the paradigm of Cawelti’s essay. Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* intrigues the reader by constantly shifting the reader’s attention from one character to another, thus keeping the confusion and suspicion alive. Like Poirot the detective, Christie too hides vital truths or information from her readers. Even Dr. Shepherd in the novel says, “Everyone has something to hide...” (Christie 133) The climax of the novel is thus build over several speculations until the real criminal is discovered by the detective. Cawelti in his essay also states that:

As indicated earlier, the reader has been forced to follow the action from the confused and limited point of view of the narrator. From this point of view investigation leads only to obfuscation. But when the solution is announced, though technically the point of view does not change, in actuality we see the action from the detective’s perspective. As he explains the situation, what had seemed chaotic and confused is revealed as clear and logical... (Cawelti 4)

The interest of the readers is not only drawn to the ‘why’ or ‘who’ of the plot but also to the ‘how’. It is here that the contention of this paper becomes relevant. The detective or crime fiction does not only work because of the formulas prescribed, although it may be said that it a stipulated form of fiction trains the reader’s mind to predict, but that does not for once leave the reader’s response redundant. In the novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Christie too has followed the rules of the game, even in tricking the reader each time she played fair. Nilanjana Gupta in her ‘Introduction’ to the critical essays of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, says,

While all genres have their own conventions and both readers and authors abide by them, the detective story, at least the so called Golden Age detective story, became notorious for spelling out the rules. These are:

- I. The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.
- II. All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
- III. No more than one secret room or passage is allowable.
- IV. No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.
- V. No Chinaman must figure in the story.
- VI. No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
- VII. The detective must not himself commit the crime.
- VIII. The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for inspection of the reader.

- IX. The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind, his intelligence must be slightly, below that of the average reader.
- X. Twin brothers, and doubles generally must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them. (Gupta 102-103)

Though these rules seem rigid, Christie definitely flouted many of them but not defiantly. She worked around them only to be technically correct and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is a good example of this. These set of rules clearly undermines the reader's role in reading the text. In the novel though Christie has substituted "the Watson" with the narrator- murderer Dr. Sheppard as Poirot addresses him, "'You must have indeed been sent from the good God to replace my friend Hastings,...I observe that you do not quit my side...'" (Christie 130), but she does not assume the reader in a privileged position. Dr. Sheppard's intelligence does not count to be below the average reader's; in fact in most places he might just seem to supersede. There is pattern that can be deduced from the novel which shows that what Poirot is to Dr. Sheppard, Christie is to her readers. This equation is appropriate because just like James, the reader too is, from the beginning, under the impression that the facts related to the crime are well known to both- Poirot in Dr. Sheppard's case and Christie in the case of the reader. However, it is only toward the end that Dr. Sheppard finds out that he had misread Poirot's calculations despite the evidence being open known to both. The trick lay in the interpretation of the evidence. In this novel however, Dr. Sheppard's position cannot be equated to the role of the reader. The reader can take up a role which surpasses the position of Dr. Sheppard's and predict the murderer much before the revelation. This can be inferred from various episodes in the novel, for instance when Flora wants Dr. Sheppard to accompany her to Poirot so that she could request him to investigate the murder of her uncle, it is then that the reader can rather grow suspicious of Dr. Sheppard when he discourages her with a lie saying, "And that's why you want to go to Hercule Poirot? Isn't it better to leave things as they are? The police don't suspect Ralph in the least, remember. They're working on quite another track." (Christie 101) However it is evident that not much later he indirectly tries to incriminate Ralph and it is only toward the end that Poirot reveals that he had found out that Ralph was in the hiding on Dr. Sheppard's advice. There is another interesting fact very early in the novel that may assist an intelligent reader to make a conjecture about the Murderer: in chapter 4, Dr. Sheppard returns home after meeting Roger Ackroyd and makes up "a slightly fictitious account of the evening" to satisfy her. Only a little later the phone rings and Dr. Sheppard who answers the call informs his sister Caroline saying, "'Parker Telephoning ... they have just found Roger Ackroyd murdered.'" (Christie 65) Christie muddles up with basic facts in the next chapter, when Dr. Sheppard hurriedly asks Parker "'What's the matter with you, Parker? If, as you say, your master has been murdered-' A gasp broke from Parker. 'The master? Murdered? Impossible, sir!'" (Christie 67) It is in such episodes where Christie leaves loose ends untied for a curious and intelligent reader to see through the gaps. The reading then no longer remains to discover the identity of the murderer but to find out the methodology adopted to investigate the crime.

In the end of the novel, Christie makes an exceptional conclusion in which she exposes the murderer Dr. Sheppard only to the readers and Poirot. This is an interesting ending which can be interpreted as Poirot and Christie discovering Dr. Sheppard as their 'Other' whom they find impossible to expose and kill but allow disappearing into the oblivion. This reading is established especially in the beginning of the last chapter in which Dr. Sheppard writes, "Five A.M. I am very tired-but I have finished my task. My arm aches from writing..." (Christie 365) which may echo Christie's own thoughts. Here the author blurs the lines that distinguish the writer-character-reader identity. This is what creates thrill and accounts for attracting

mass reading of such texts. The formulas by which detective or crime fictions are written are not necessarily the cause behind the popularity of the genre; rather what lets the reader be hooked onto such forms of writing is to derivation of pleasure and satisfaction gained in deducing the identity of the murder from beneath the layers of deception that the author has set for him/her. It is not always according to the theories proposed by Cawelti and critics alike who believe that the ending of the text in which the detective reveals his *modus operandi* accounts for the popularity of the book, since it makes clear and logical for the reader what earlier seemed chaotic and confusing. This theory negates the response of the reader completely because it has stereotyped the reader and assumed that each reader has trained his/her mind to the conventional formulas of reading a detective fiction. If such were the case, there would not be a need for the authors to re-invent their narrative techniques, spring surprises in the plot or work around the formulas and create exceptions to the rule.

This drives the point that although Detective fiction- a form of popular culture is understood to be an off shoot of what once the Russian Formalists had advocated, yet it can also be read as a text that greatly depends on the notions and theories of reader's response.

### Works Cited:

- Cawelti, John G. "The Formula of the Classical Detective Story" in *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1976. Print.
- Christie, Agatha. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. UK: Harpercollins, 2002. Print.
- Gupta, Nilanjana. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Delhi: Worldview, 2002. Print.
- <https://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/iser/>. Web. 4 April, 2014.