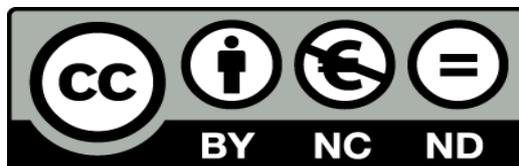




# UNIVERSIDAD DE LA RIOJA

## TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

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| <b>Relying on the unreliable. Narrative Strategies in crime literature. Agatha Christie's <i>The murder of Roger Ackroyd</i></b> |
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**Relying on the unreliable. Narrative Strategies in crime literature. Agatha Christie's *The murder of Roger Ackroyd***, trabajo fin de grado de Andrea Ramírez Ortega, dirigido por Carlos Villar Flor (publicado por la Universidad de La Rioja), se difunde bajo una Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial-SinObraDerivada 3.0 Unported. Permisos que vayan más allá de lo cubierto por esta licencia pueden solicitarse a los titulares del copyright.

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**Trabajo de Fin de Grado**

**- RELYING ON THE UNRELIABLE -  
NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN CRIME  
LITERATURE. AGATHA CHRISTIE'S  
*THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD***

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>1. Introduction</b> .....  | 1  |
| <b>2. Objectives and methodology</b> .....                              | 3  |
| <b>3. The detective novel in the English tradition</b> .....            | 5  |
| <b>4. Theoretical approach</b>  |    |
| 4.1. The participants in the narrative communicative situation.....     | 11 |
| 4.2. Surprise vs. suspense .....  | 17 |
| 4.3. The narrative entity: unreliable narrations.....                   | 21 |
| <b>5. Relying on the unreliable: <i>The Murder of Roger Ackroyd</i></b> |    |
| 5.1. Introduction: the narrator and the murderer. ....                  | 29 |
| 5.2. Narrative techniques   |    |
| 5.2.1. Language .....   | 33 |
| 5.2.2. Ellipsis.....  | 39 |
| 5.2.3. Changes and slips in the narrator's discourse .....              | 43 |
| 5.2.4. Opposition of two methods of reaching the truth.....             | 49 |
| <b>6. Conclusions</b> .....   | 51 |
| <b>7. References</b> .....  | 53 |

**ABSTRACT:** In Agatha Christie's novels nothing is what it seems to be, the limits between reality and fiction are blurring and surreal. The main purpose of this paper is to conduct an analysis of the particular figure of the narrator in the British mystery writer's acclaimed novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and the subtle narratological techniques by means of which a special narrator-reader connection is created. This interrelation allows us to enter a parallel dimension where deductions, details and misleading pathways play a starring role.

**KEY WORDS:** narrator — strategy — logic — (un)reliability — deceive — technique — reader — detective — mystery.

**RESUMEN:** En las novelas de Agatha Christie nada es lo que parece, las fronteras entre realidad y ficción son tan imperceptibles como surrealistas. El propósito de este trabajo es llevar a cabo un análisis de la peculiar figura del narrador en la aclamada novela de la escritora británica *El Asesinato de Roger Ackroyd*, así como las sutiles técnicas narratológicas mediante las cuales se crea una conexión especial narrador-lector. Esta interrelación nos permite entrar en una dimensión paralela donde las deducciones, los detalles y el engaño juegan un papel protagonista.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** narrador — estrategia — lógica — (des)confianza — engaño — técnica — lector — detective — misterio.

Poor old Ackroyd [...] His nervousness that night was interesting psychologically. He knew danger was close at hand. And he never suspected *me* (CHRISTIE 2006: 309)<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

A "free author" essay I was assigned in the first year of my undergraduate studies gave me the opportunity to start reading the mystery genre, which almost immediately introduced me into the enormous and fascinating literary output of the worldwide acclaimed "Queen of Crime", the British writer Agatha Christie (1890-1976). "The Perfect Crime in *Ten Little Indians*" was the title of my first essay in English, and the key that opened the door to a different literary universe full of possibilities and interpretations.

The mystery novel is a vaguely defined genre, but at the same time it is considered one of the most widely read and acclaimed by the readership. For its themes, setting, characters and especially for the awaited outcome that makes readers remain in suspense, eager to turn the page, detective novels tend to occupy the top positions in the list of the most read genres, principally for leisure and entertainment purposes.

However, what do we expect from this kind of fiction? On most of the occasions, the answer is taken for granted; a mystery novel has to make us enjoy from a plot half way between the complex and the obvious, which makes us doubt about each of the "suspects", and most decisively, the ending has to be as tremendous as unexpected.

At the same time, we tend to pay so much importance to trying to find out the so-called *who* that the issue of *how* we are told the story might be moved into the background. It is precisely here when the figure of the narrator starts to play a crucial role. In detective literature this narrative entity not only tells the story under a particular perspective, but also literary authors tend to use it as a narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this work, each reference to the main novel is taken from the following edition: edition: Christie, Agatha. 2006 (1926), *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Harper Collins Publishers. London. Pagination will be shown parenthetically in the text.

device to increase suspense, playing with his viewpoint, his relation with the rest of the character, his grade of detachment towards the story *he*<sup>2</sup> is telling and, among many others, his reliability. Therefore, there is a tendency for readers to be disposed to fully rely on him, to believe the story he is going to tell us, since we assume that this apparently "omniscient" voice is as uninformed as we are, and that he will be a kind of "guide" along with whom we will discover the truth, step by step, no one being more advanced than the other.

But what would happen if we suddenly realized that this voice, in whom we have placed our trust, turns out to be the murderer, and all he has told us is a big lie? How can it be possible that we have been deceived all along the reading?

These were the questions I asked myself when I read this novel for the first time. Bearing these premises in mind, I took on the challenge of giving a little "twist" to this general conception of considering the end of a mystery novel as its most accomplished part.

During this last year of my undergraduate studies I have been given a Research Initiation Grant to work at the Modern Philology Department at the University of La Rioja, and this fruitful experience has given me the opportunity to get immersed into the world of literary research, particularly into the relationships between detective literature and cinema. This experience has also allowed me to read several detective stories by different authors and expand my previous knowledge on Agatha Christie's fiction.

From the extensive list of novels and short story collections our British author has written throughout her life, I have chosen *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* for the materialization of this paper since, although it is not Christie's first novel, it is considered by numerous critics such as Stanley and Benstock as "the best and most powerful her books" (1989: 73). Besides, it is the novel that launched Christie's career as mystery writer.

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<sup>2</sup> For standardisation reasons, and to be coherent with the plot of the novel, throughout this essay I will use the pronoun "he" to refer to the narrator.

## 2. Objectives and methodology

The main objective of this essay is to conduct an analysis of the narrative voice in the novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, a classic example of unreliable narration, paying particular attention to the narrative strategies the author subtly employs to induce this false sense of trust that recreates a game between the narrator and the reader based on deception and a witty use of language. This essay is also intended to elucidate that the greatness and mastery of a detective novel does not exclusively lie on the resolution of the final enigma, but, conversely, that there is a coexistence of narrative devices such as the dual psychology of a set of characters who are guilty and innocent at the same time, clues and details whose importance increases as pages are turned, (un)reliable narrative voices, an atmosphere both trivial and intriguing that make the reading process an enriching and entertaining literary experience, and the novel, a piece of art in itself.

The methodology I am going to use in this paper is both theoretical and practical, based on the narratological discipline. This methodology is going to allow me, in the first place, to make a theoretical approach to three of the most influential narratological trends of the last century, making a comparative analysis of their contributions to the field of unreliable narrators.

Consequently, this paper is divided into three main parts. In the first one, a general introduction to the detective novel is carried out, dealing with its historical evolution, gradual acquisition of status and "reputation", some of the most representative characteristics of the genre, and finally the controversial issue of rereading a mystery novel once the surprise ending has been revealed<sup>3</sup>. The second part, as previously mentioned, provides my analysis with a theoretical perspective that establishes the basis of the last point to be discussed: the application of these narrative theories to the narrator in the novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Finally, the third part will be devoted to an interpretative analysis of the main narrative strategies that are used to mislead the reader and to introduce suspense.

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<sup>3</sup> For this first part, I start from some of the conclusions and findings I have reached during the time I spent as a research grant holder.

### 3. The detective novel in the English tradition

In *The Agatha Christie Companion*, Russell H. Fitzgibbon provides an accurate definition of the concept of “detective story”. For him “it involves the presentation of a puzzle (make a mental translation to “crime”) and the subsequent solution (substitute here the detection of the criminal and the relevant circumstances associated with the crime)” (FITZGIBBON 1980: 1). In his explanation, he also points out that the detective story is not necessarily related to the horror story or the gothic tale, thus rejecting its broad association with the supernatural world and fantastical creatures such as vampires, witches, ghosts, etc.

In general terms, the detective novel reflects a kind of interactive literature, in which the reader tries to discover the murderer’s identity by means of a trial-mistake game. It also encourages an intellectual challenge between the author and the reader, who keeps his eagerness alive till the end of the book. From a narratological point of view, the detective novel offers the peculiarity of having a plot that is “constructed” as the detective advances in the reconstruction of events.

Since the 1960s the presumed barriers between ‘high’ and ‘low’ literature have been progressively dismantled. If only- at first- as indicators of great many readers’ needs and anxieties, crime texts were increasingly seen as worthy of close analysis, and by now there are thousands of carefully argued, well-researched, elegantly written studies of the crime genre available and awaiting further comment. (PRIESTMAN 2012: 1)

There are many leading literary figures who, throughout their careers, have been giving shape to this detective and suspense genre, both in literature and in cinema, and they have managed to make it the one that most cleverly plays with the addressee’s psychological horror and cognitive behaviour by arousing latent and strong emotions and stirring up their anxiety and curiosity.

One of the great literary figures of the genre of suspense is the British playwright and novelist Agatha Christie (1890-1976). Critics categorically agree when considering her literary output as a constant invitation to the guessing game

and the logic exercise, always starting from the premise that we are all potential murderers. The clues are in the text.

As Priestman points out in his edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, “like any new development, the emergence of the crime literary genre has a specific history, any given intersection of which is likely to reveal different terminologies as well as different critical preoccupations” (PRIESTMAN 2012: i).

For Fitzgibbon, it was Edgar Allan Poe<sup>4</sup> the only one who can fairly be called the father of the modern detective story. In fact, the word “detective” had not yet been coined when Poe wrote the first of his *tales of ratiocination*, as he called them. Poe’s stories established the main pillars of the detective story formula that would be influential for almost a century thereafter: the fictional character he created, Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin was the first “detective” as such in English literature, undoubtedly a worthy forerunner of Holmes, Poirot and many others. Fitzgibbon argues that Poe also introduced the device of the “idiot friend”, establishing the basis of a crucial type of narrator that will become almost essential in crime literature: a kind of narrator-witness, precursor of Dr. Watson and Hastings. Finally, “The Murder in the Rue Morgue” was the first story of the type known as “locked-room mysteries”.<sup>5</sup>

However, critics seem to agree in considering the coming of age of the detective story in the creation of Sherlock Holmes by Arthur Conan Doyle in the later 1880s and the early 1890s. As Fitzgibbon observes, it was inevitable that the illustrious popularity of Doyle and his creation would encourage finer writing in the detective-story genre. In this “post-Holmes” period, the English writer Gilbert K. Chesterton (1874-1936) acquired great popularity with his detective short stories, and his great contribution, the minute, unassuming Catholic priest Father Brown. “The little father was unorthodox in his violation of the canons of detective-construction of that day, but he quickly caught the fancy of the public” (FITZGIBBON 1980: 7).

When Holmes was followed by Father Brown, the first Golden Age of Detection, centred in the short story, began. This period ended in 1914, and while

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<sup>4</sup> The five stories by which Poe (1809-1849) confirmed his paternity over the new literary form were “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Gold Bug” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842), “Thou Art the Man” (1844) and “The Purloined Letter” (1845) (FITZGIBBON 1980: 3).

<sup>5</sup> One of the best known novels belonging to this literary genre was “The Mystery of the Yellow Room”, written by the French author Gaston Leroux in 1908.

short stories about detectives have continued to be written in large numbers, the second Golden Age, beginning in the late 1920s and lasting until 1939, centred on the novel, the narrative form which has been dominant ever since. This period also enjoyed the presence of the three “Queens of Crime”, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957), and Margery Allingham (1904-1966), thus establishing a female presence in crime writing, to date exceeded only in romantic and historical novels; and the growth of detective fiction in other countries, particularly the United States of America.

Once the continuity with some adjacent forms such as the thriller, spy novel and police procedural was eventually established, the peculiar historical specificity of the mystery detective whodunit<sup>6</sup> stood out in sharper relief – stimulating new kinds of investigation into the question of why should a rigid formula should have come into being when how it did, and remained so enduringly popular. (PRIESTMAN 2012; i-ii)

This literary genre brought about a fervent development, usually in defiance of its own theoretical principles. Such is the case of women and black detectives during the 1980s and 1990s, gender, sexual race, and social class issues were increasingly taken into great consideration until they became the basis and fundamental elements of filmic and televisual iconography, lying at the heart of the mass media entertainment and information.

This brief theoretical-historical approach of the mystery novel would not be wholly concluded without having a brief description of the main characteristics that build up the genre<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, characters in mystery novels necessarily tend to be typecast under two main sets of psychological traits: the villain and the hero. The villain is described as a complete stranger to the reader, which is actually a necessary step to carry out since he conspires against the world that the hero (usually the detective) is trying to defend.

On the other hand, the hero's behaviour is justified by the fact that he reacts to a previous assault; he has a motif, in defence of a *status quo* that can represent any

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<sup>6</sup> An illiterate form of ‘who did it?’. A crime story closely akin to the thriller, the detective story and the roman policier, and often synonymous with these terms (CUDDON 1999: 984).

<sup>7</sup> The characteristics I propose have been made up by a generalisation process. It should be taken into account that the mystery genre does not respond to a particular *formula*, but rather each mystery novel has its own peculiarities that make it different from the rest.

kind of situation that the reader finds more convenient. Likewise, it is also justified by his essential professional skills: if the subverted world must be saved from skilful conspirators, they have to be beaten in their own game.

In classical detective stories, irreversibility of evil was an increasing tendency; there was (apparently) no turning back and the impossibility of forgiveness was explicitly suggested.<sup>8</sup> Then in some cases, justice had to prevail over everything and punishment was final and irrevocable, as the *only* possible way out. Thus, mystery novels tend to have their own morality, and in fact, it is the author's privilege to decide what is right and what is wrong.

When dealing with the atmosphere and the setting of the mystery plots, I have chosen Christie's novels as representatives of the genre. In her novels there is a tendency to locate the crime in enclosed spaces, where no one can enter or leave, so that the number of suspects is limited from the beginning. As a consequence, the stereotypical identification between mystery novels and scary and macabre settings is left behind, to introduce an everyday and quotidian scenario that gives free way to infinite ways of committing the perfect crime.

Finally, with "the ending issue" I am referring to the controversy about re-reading a detective novel once one knows beforehand how the enigma is eventually solved, and consequently, the murderer's identity. If a mystery novel is read just for pleasure, entertainment or evasion, it is true that the end of the *puzzle*, usually located on the last pages, represents the climactic moment and the accomplishment of our initial expectations. When we close a book we usually think "I like it" or "I don't like it at all", or rather "I already expected that end, or "it has utterly surprised me", but apparently the reading process is finished, there is no place for further interpretations.

I was one of those who thought like that until I read *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. When I reached the final point of the novel, I felt both so cheated and so fascinated than I re-read the novel to be aware of the *lies* the narrator had conveyed, and which have generated this mixture of frustration and admiration towards Christie's clever way of writing, which I have wanted to materialise in this essay.

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<sup>8</sup> Father Brown's stories represent an exception to this rule.

Accordingly, the experience of re-reading a mystery novel starting from this sense of distrust towards the narrator, and this awareness of the murderer's identity, has allowed me to extract several subtle details, clues, puns, changes of tone, etc. that would have passed wholly unnoticed if I hadn't taken up this challenge. In fact, it is difficult to explain the bizarre emotions that arose when you read the same mystery novel twice, or even three times, and you became more and more aware of your "victim" role in the reading process and so, a sort of satisfactory and pleasurable sensation emerges when you eventually understand the way and the reasons why you have been misled.

As a conclusion, we can say that the detective novel does not end with the design of a more or less intricate plot that poses a riddle to be solved by the detective. Over the years the mystery novel has greatly evolved to a wide variety of complicated narrative forms in which solving the mystery and the logic game gives way to many other apparently hidden aspects in which the originality and uniqueness of this literary genre lies.

#### 4. Theoretical approach

The following section is intended to carry out a theoretical approach of the most influential narratological trends in the twentieth century, thus establishing the essential principles of my analysis to the narrator in Christie's novel.

The first part of this theoretical approach will provide a general overview of the main participants in narrative communication, paying a particular emphasis on the figures of the implied author, the implied reader and the narrator, and how these three narrative entities contribute to the intrigue and implicit sense in the novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. After this, I will also analyse the main points of (dis)agreement among these theorists concerning the role of unreliable narrators, how they consider them as decisive factors in narrative fiction and the most relevant characteristics that define unreliability in narrative fiction. The difference between surprise and suspense in narrative theory will be eventually discussed as well as its relevance in detective fiction.

##### 4.1. *The participants in the narrative communication situation*

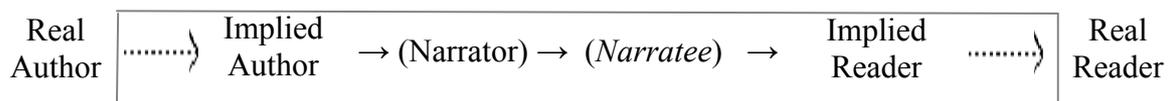


Figure 1: *Diagram of the participants in the narrative communication situation.* (CHATMAN 1993: 151)

In his book *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (1993), the American literary critic Seymour Chatman<sup>9</sup> finds out this diagram reflecting the main participants involved in the literary communication process: the Real Author, the Implied Author, the Narrator, the Narratee, the Implied Reader and finally the Real Reader.

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<sup>9</sup> Seymour Chatman (1928- ), Professor of Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. Among his works are *A Theory of English Meter*, *An Introduction to Poetic Language*, and *The Later Style of Henry James*.

As shown, the figure of the narrator occupies the central position in this literary procedure, whereas the real author and the real reader are left outside it, as if they were separated from the fictional dimension that it represents.

First, regarding the definition, interpretation and role of two of the most essential participants, the author and the narrator, Chatman's approach represents an accurate and semiotic interpretation of the distinction:

Unlike the narrator, the implied author can tell us nothing. He, or better, it has no voice, no direct means of communicating. It instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices, by all means it has chosen to let us learn. (CHATMAN 1993: 148)

Even without this, he gives a particular emphasis to asserting that the narrative voice of a literary work cannot be identified with the author. All readers should know that this figure comes from the internal information of the literary work itself.

Another third element is what the literary scholar Wayne Booth (1921-2005) coined as the "implied author" in his work *The Rhetoric Of Fiction* (1961). According to him, the implied author is an anthropomorphic entity, often designated as "the author's second self", representing the governing consciousness of the work as a whole, the source of the norms embodied in the work. Booth's literary theory marked a decisive step forward in the traditional author's commitments when strictly following objectivity, neutrality and lack of reaction towards their materials<sup>10</sup>.

In contrast, Booth underlined the unavoidable and also necessary subjectivity of the author when facing a text, thus providing a critical approach to the distinction between reader and implied author.

As the real author writes, he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal "man in general", but an implied version of "himself" that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works. [...] It is clear that the picture the reader gets of his presence is one of the author's most important effects. However impersonal he may try to be, his reader will inevitably

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<sup>10</sup> This general conception goes back to both Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) in the French Realistic tradition and the Anglo-American sphere, particularly with Henry James (1843-1916).

construct a picture of the [author] who writes in this manner- and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values". (BOOTH 1961: 70-71)

Thus, the author is *implied* in the sense that it represents a reader-made reconstruction, taking the narration as the starting point. "He is not the narrator but rather the principle that invented the narrator, along with everything else in the narrative, that stacked the cards in this particular way" (CHATMAN 1993: 148).

Conversely, and as Chatman himself explains, only the implied author and implied reader are essential to a narrative, whereas the narrator and the narratee theoretically represent optional entities. The real author and real reader are outside the narrative transaction as such, although, obviously, they are indispensable to it in an ultimate practical sense (adapted from CHATMAN 1993: 151).

In *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1999), the literary critic Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan also gives her own interpretation of Chatman's diagram, asserting that of the six participants enumerated in this diagram two are left outside the narrative transaction proper: the real author and his equally real counterpart, the real reader. In the text, they are "represented" by substitute agents. In like manner, contrasting the narrator who can only be defined as the narrative voice or just "speaker" in a text, the implied author remains voiceless and silent and is constructed by the reader from the rest of the components of a text. Notwithstanding, she supplements Chatman's theory by proving that, like the implied author, the implied reader is also a construct, just as the former differs from both real reader and narratee (RIMMON-KENAN 1999: 87).

But, what is the difference between the implied author and the real one? As Rimmon-Kenan points out, the relation between these two entities is admitted to be of great psychological complexity. As a result, she proposes the theory of considering the implied author as far superior in intelligence and moral standards to the actual men and women who are real authors (87). Likewise, in a fictional work a real author may embody ideas, beliefs, emotions even opposed to those he has in real life, so whereas the flesh-and-blood author is subject to the vicissitudes of real life, the implied author of a particular work is conceived as a stable entity, ideally consistent with itself within the work.

Equally, she conceives the notion of *implied reader* as a kind of projected image, construct, or as a metonymic characterization of the text. For her the reader's role is even more important in literary communication than the implied author's, since it represents the key element in the production of the text's meaning, in making sense of the content or reconstructing it as a world. Thus, according to her "the story is abstracted by the reader, and characters are constructed by the reader from various indications dispersed along the text-continuum" (RIMMON-KENAN 1999: 119).

However, two are the main points of disagreement between Rimmon-Kenan and Chatman in their understanding of this dichotomy between implied author - real author. I agree with R. Kennan that the weak point in Chatman's narrative theory is affirming that when a narrator and a narratee are absent, communication is confined to the implied author and the implied reader. According to her, if the implied author is only a construct, if it has apparently neither voice nor direct means of communication, then it is highly contradictory to assign it the addresser's role in the communication situation. Following this line, she claims that the notion of the implied author must be "de-personified" and best considered as a set of implicit norms, rather than as a speaker or a voice (88). Certainly and unlike Chatman, she postulates that the implied author cannot literally be a participant in the narrative communicative situation and that these narrative entities should be excluded from the literary process.

The second main objection R. Kennan makes to Chatman's diagram revolves around how he approaches the distinction between narrator and narratee:<sup>11</sup>

Like the implied author, the implied reader is always present. And just as there may or may not be a narrator, there may or may not be a narratee [...]  
The situation of the narratee is parallel to that of the narrator; he ranges from a fully characterized individual to "no one" (CHATMAN 1993: 150-51).

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11 The concept of narratee was defined by Professor Gerald Prince as "the audience (of one or more than one) that the narrator in a given narrative addresses". (PRINCE 1971: 117). Rimmon-Kenan also contributed to the development of the term by saying that the narratee is "the agent which is at the very last implicitly addressed by the narrator" (RIMMON-KENAN 1999: 89). Susana Onega and García Landa gave a different approach to the term in their book *Narratology*, since they consider the narratee as one of the elements in the narrating situation, necessarily located at the same diegetic level: that is, he does not merge a priori with the reader (even an implied reader) any more than the narrator necessarily merges with the author (ONEGA and GARCÍA LANDA 1996: 186).

Thus, unlike Chatman's consideration of the narrator and the narratee as optional entities, one of the principles of her theory is based on the understanding and interpretation of the two figures as constitutive factors of narrative communication, not just optional ones, as happened with the other crucial participants: the real author and the real reader. Consequently, I totally agree when she says that "there is always a teller in the tale, at least in the sense that any utterance or record of an utterance presupposes someone who has uttered it" (88).

Once the broader differences between the main participants of narrative communication have been concisely outlined, it is remarkable to see how they directly influence the design and sense of a mystery novel.

As mentioned in previous sections, the reader plays a crucial role in the interpretation of a mystery novel, since, from the first page he inadvertently signs a sort of "contract" by which he becomes part of the game, of the enigma that will take him through the narrator's voice to the murderer's identity. This textual dependence on the role of the reader as the "creator of meaning", is already explained by the German theorist Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007):

It must be pointed out that a text can only come to life when it is read, and if it is to be examined, it must therefore be studied through the eyes of the reader. Involvement of the reader or spectator as accomplices or collaborators is essential in the curious situation of artistic communication. (ISER 1993: 4)

In a similar way, the text is no longer a narrative tool that must be analysed in isolation, just as the literary product of a particular author, but a "system of reconstruction-inviting structures rather than as an autonomous object" (RIMMON-KENAN 1999: 119). This reconstructive nature of texts is not only applicable to Christie's literary output but also to the entire genre of detective fiction, since the reader's participation and response are required for a proper understanding and fulfilment of the message, to keep alive the game between the author and the reader.

To finish with this section, I have gathered the main general aspects concerning the definition of both the implied author and the implied reader,

keeping in mind their relevance when understanding *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

First, the implied author makes reference to the way readers reconstruct the real author's image as a kind of abstraction during the reading process. Accordingly, readers here obtain an indeterminate image of Agatha Christie mainly focused on the thoughts, values, doctrines and ideologies she is transmitting through her fiction. Thus, judging by her literary output, Christie appears to be an enigmatic, witty, ironical and creative woman, very concerned about the great significance and power of details. She also demonstrates to be an advocate of intuition rather than of pure reason and a great supporter of the fact that good must prevail over evil and justice over immorality.

On the other hand, the implied reader makes reference to the psychological process by which the real author imagines and constructs an abstract image and a general profile of those who will be future readers of his or her work. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* this concept of the implied reader has a particularly interesting role, since once the novel has been read we realize that Christie wrote this story being wholly aware of the fact that readers will be deceived at the end, that *hopefully* they will experience this sense of surprise and unexpectedness of events. She wrote her novel for a specific collective who would be willing to accept the challenge of relying on the narrator's telling of the story till the eventual truth discovery. That is precisely the essence and the charm of the novel, how we probably fit in the notion of the implied reader that Christie formed herself when she wrote her novel.

#### 4.2. *Suspense and surprise*

If a bunch of guys are playing poker and suddenly a bomb goes off under the table, that's a surprise. It's not what the viewer expects. If, however, the viewer knows the bomb is there from the start, and watches the timer ticking down toward zero while the men play on, oblivious, that's suspense. (ALFRED HITCHCOCK <sup>12</sup>)

Whereas suspense can be defined as “a state of uncertainty, anticipation and curiosity as to the outcome of a story or play, or any kind of narrative in verse and prose”, the concept of surprise is usually attributed to the ending of a work, representing the twist in the tail of a story; a sudden and unexpected turn of fortune or action (adapted from CUDDON 1998: 882-883).

The distinction between suspense and surprise has been part of the object of study of narratologists from long ago. As appreciable in the proposed definitions, suspense lies in open connection with this state of uncertainty, tension and anxiety, in some cases unbearable, usually accompanied by a mixture of pain and pleasure that comes with the reader during the course of the work and keeps us alive, alert and expectant. This state of suspense is often achieved by foreshadowing what will happen and by a witty use of the tragic irony.

One of the most essential narrative techniques that authors tend to use, both in literature and in cinema, for achieving this sense of tension or suspense is mainly based on letting the reader know more than any one character knows, so that we can see trouble coming a long way off.

Another strategy that Rimmon-Kenan points out when recreating suspense and surprise in a literary work is that of using analepses and prolepses to play with the reader's supposed knowledge of the action. In this way, analepses are frequently used to provide information necessary to the reader, whereas prolepses tend to arouse the reader's expectations (RIMMON-KENAN 1993: 119).

The Dutch theorist Mieke Bal (1949- ) deeply developed the notion of suspense arguing that “suspense is the effect of the procedures by which the

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<sup>12</sup> *About Suspense and Surprise*, taken from an interview between the French film director Francois Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock. Available at: [http://olympia.osd.wednet.edu/media/olympia/activities/drama\\_club/hitchcockinterview.pdf](http://olympia.osd.wednet.edu/media/olympia/activities/drama_club/hitchcockinterview.pdf) (accessed on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014)

reader or the character is made to ask questions which are only answered later” (BAL 2009: 163). She agrees with Rimmon-Kenan’s theory of analepses and prolepses on how they generate a sense of suspense in the reading process, and argues that “suspense can be generated by the announcement of something that will occur later, or by temporary silence concerning information which is needed” (BAL 2009: 164). So, both critics remark on the importance of providing the reader with a particular amount of information at the crucial moment he considers it necessary, either to complement what he already knows about the story, to see if his expectations are on the right track, or actually to deconstruct the mental schemes he had built along the reading process. This eventually leads the reader to this expected state of suspense and after all surprise.

In Bal’s definition of suspense both this anticipation of information and the temporary silence needed to generate it manipulates and distorts the image presented to the reader given, according to her, by the focalizer:

The focalizer’s image can be limited. This is the case when characters ‘know’ more than the focalizer [...] it is also possible for the focalizer to falsify an image [...] In such case, the characters also ‘know’ more than the reader. The focalizer can also be in possession of information which the characters do not know [...] then the reader, along with the focalizer, knows more than the character. (BAL 2009:164)

Bal argues then that the focalizer represents the crucial entity in determining how the reader can receive an image that is as complete or incomplete, even more complete or less complete than the image the characters have of themselves. Bal complements her theory by establishing four forms in which suspense can be manifested in narrative, bearing in mind the readers’ and characters’ knowledge on the basis of information provided through the focalizer:

Reader – character – (riddle, detective story, search)  
 Reader + character – (threat)  
 Reader – character + (secret)  
 Reader + character + (no suspense) (BAL 2009: 165)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The symbols /-/ and /+/ stand for the relationship between the entities represented in the diagram and the amount of knowledge they possess in relation to the story. Thus the author uses /-/ to indicate a limited awareness of the events, whereas /+/ implies a full one.

She applies and interprets this classification concerning the role suspense plays in mystery fiction. She claims that the opening situation in almost every detective novel lies in raising a question, usually “who did it?”, and it is possible that neither the reader nor the character knows the answer. There is also a chance that the reader already knows, but the character contrarily does not, and the other way around, since, conversely, it can also be the case that the reader does not know the answer and the characters do. This last option is the one we find in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, in which Christie has created a major character who tells readers the way he perceives his story, pretending to enjoy the same degree of knowledge that the reader, but eventually confessing his *involvement* and detachment in the story and his whole awareness of the succession of events.

However, as Bal points out, “the key question is not what the answer to the initial question will be but whether the character will discover it for itself in time. This is the suspense that lies at the root of a threat” (BAL 2009: 164). In fact, as happens with Christie’s novel, the truth may be similarly exposed in the form of a puzzle, if the information is revealed but is not marked as data. As shows the third step, the answer can also be gradually revealed in various phases and by means of several focalizers, each one according to its own (secret) knowledge. The last step in Bal’s taxonomy is the inexistence of suspense when, at the end, the reader and the character are equally informed of the answer.

Finally, in accordance with Chatman, suspense and surprise are complementary, nor contradictory. The two can work together in narratives in complex ways: a chain of events may start out as a surprise, work into a pattern of suspense, and then end with a “twist”, that is, the frustration of the expected result, another surprise (CHATMAN 1993: 60).

### 4.3. *The narrative entity: unreliable narrations*

Concerning the relationship between the reader and the narrator, I agree with Chatman's assertion that the presence of the narrator is derived from the readership's feeling that there is a demonstrable, possible and tangible communication. If the reader feels that he is being told something, the assumption that there is someone who is telling that just arouses.

In narrative discourse, homodiegetic narrators tend to be studied with little suspicion, since throughout their speech they run the risk of being wrong, of hiding crucial events for the development of the story, of interpreting other characters' behaviour in a subjective way, etc. They usually tend to be influenced and biased by their feelings, and consequently, tend to make up the truth and eventually deceive themselves or the readers.

In many cases, the decision to make use of an unreliable narrative voice represents a rhetorical device intentionally exploited by the author. More specifically, narrative theorists like Booth or Chatman agree in considering these unreliable narrators a purely reader's strategy for making sense of a text, so the role of the reader is crucial when it comes to "detect" this kind of narrator.

Unreliable narrators are often used in detective novels and thrillers, especially when writers and film directors want to generate a sudden an unexpected reaction in readers/viewers, usually by a final and impressive plot-twist. In literature, one effective way of achieving that outcome is by leading the reader to blindly trust in what the narrator is telling.

Thus, when using unreliable "voices" in both literature and cinema, there is a tendency to reveal the truth and consequently, the *trick*, when the story is about to reach its near end, to increase the suspenseful and dramatic effect and to force us to reconsider the perspective we have been given throughout the story. There are even several occasions on which the narrator's unreliability is never completely revealed but only hinted at, leaving readers to wonder how much the narrator should be trusted and how the story should be interpreted.

The term unreliable narrator was coined by W. Booth, who related this notion of unreliability with the already explained concept of implied author:

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 [...] Unreliable narrators thus differ markedly depending on how far and in what direction they depart from their author's norms [...] Some narrators are placed as far "away" from author and reader as possible, in respect to every virtue except a kind of interesting vitality. (BOOTH 1961: 159)

According to Booth, then, if the reader discovers unreliability as encoded by the implied author for the purpose of provoking irony, he will experience "a narrative distance between the narrator and the implied author, and a secret communion will take place between the latter and the reader behind the narrator's back" (adapted from BOOTH 1961: 300).

Chatman's research on unreliability and the definition he proposes in his book (1993) add some nuances to Booth's conception, since the American literary critic includes in his definition the notion of "sincerity" and the idea of having a different set of moral values between narrator and implied author:

What makes a narrator unreliable is that his values diverge strikingly from that of the implied author's; that is, the rest of the narrative, the norm of the work, conflicts with the narrator's presentation, and we become suspicious of his sincerity or competence to tell the "true version". The unreliable narrator is at virtual odds with the implied author; otherwise his unreliability could not emerge. (CHATMAN 1993: 149)

He continues his theory on unreliability by saying that in "unreliable narration" the narrator's account is at odds with the implied reader's surmises about the story's real intentions (233). According to him, readers conclude by reading out, between the lines, that the events and existents could not have been "like that", and so we hold the narrator suspect.

One of the most remarkable points in Chatman's theory is how he takes his initial diagram representing the participants in narrative communication and uses it to indicate the distinctive by-path of unreliable narration:

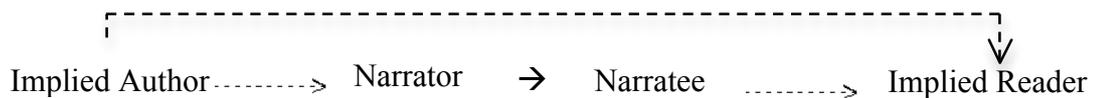


Figure 2: *Participants in unreliable narration.*  
(CHATMAN 1993: 233)

Thus, the solid arrow between narrator and narratee implies direct communication between entities whereas the broken ones indicate indirect or inferential contact. Conversely, and as Chatman explains, “the two paths for the broken lines correspond to whether or not the narrator is reliable. If he is, the narrative act takes place solely down the main central axis. If not, there are two messages, one credible and the other not” (CHATMAN 1993: 234).

Rimmon-Kenan shares Booth’s main point in her theory of unreliability, paying particular attention to this value-scheme that coexists between the narrator and the implied author. Thus, she argues that the narrator’s moral values are considered questionable if they do not tally with those of the implied author, whereas if the implied author does share the narrator’s values then the latter is reliable. Bearing this (lack of) compatibility of moral values between the two narrative entities, her distinction concerning narrative reliability is the following:

A reliable narrator is one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth. An unreliable narrator, on the other hand, is one whose rendering of the story and / or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect (RIMMON-KENAN 1999: 100).

The question R. Kennan proposes in her book is open to discussion: “how can the reader know whether he is supposed to trust or distrust the narrator’s account?” (100). How can the reader be sure that the voice he is listening to is actually untrustworthy, and so eventually avoid this kind of paranoia he is being exposed to? In the following lines I will collect the main features that characterise unreliable narrators and that can help readers to identify them.

According to Chatman, the narrator's unreliability may stem from cupidity, cretinism, gullibility, psychological and moral obtuseness, perplexity, lack of information and instability (CHATMAN 1993: 233).

Contrarily, for Rimmon-Kenan, the main sources of unreliability are the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme. She exemplifies her theory by adding that a young narrator would be a clear case of limited knowledge and understanding [...] an idiot-narrator would be another. However, adult and mentally normal narrators also quite often tell things they do not fully know (RIMMON-KENAN 1993: 100).

The German theorist Ansgar Nünning suggested in his work a general division of the signals that betray the narrator's unreliability, distinguishing between three broad types of signs:

- Intratextual: when, for instance, we find a narrator contradicting himself, suffering from gaps in memory, or lying to other characters.
- Extratextual: referring to how the narrator subtly contradicts the reader's general knowledge of the world (within the parameters of logic).
- Reader's literary competence: this includes the reader's knowledge about literary types that take part of the literary tradition, knowledge about literary genres and its conventions or stylistic devices (adapted from NÜNNING 1997: 84).

Recollecting the main points these three authors share when establishing the main characteristics of unreliable narrators, we come to the conclusion that there are, among many others, seven crucial features that represent essential steps to define and unify this narrative category.

First of all, the language the narrator uses may be the most evident and outstanding characteristic. Whenever we have an embroidered discourse that seems implausible and artificial, it would probably hide an unreliable narrator. Furthermore, contradictions in narratorial discourse, either regarding his voice or other characters', also stand for unreliability. Along with them, if the narrator turns out to be a liar; if he misrepresents himself by using obscure language to hide something that it is not in his own best interests, we will be again in front of an unreliable one.

Another narrative device, related to the speech level, is found when, contrarily, the narrator is too much personally involved, too much detached from his material, or even too influenced by what he is telling. As a matter of fact, innocence and naivety also denote signs of unreliability. Thus, because of age and physical maturity, homodiegetic narrators may have an immature perception of reality, or they can even share with the reader a limited point of view. However, it is important to highlight that having a young and naïve narrator does not necessarily mean that this character is a liar, but rather that his lack of experience in life restricts him to talk about certain subjects.

I have considered appropriate relating this type of narrative unreliability with the literary genre of *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age narration in which the protagonist reaches his physical and spiritual maturity through a series of obstacles and difficulties. Typically, readers play the role of witnesses to this physical development and to the way the passage of time provides characters with more seriousness and reliability when telling their own story, since they acquire both life lessons and storytelling experience.

Still on the recollected characteristics of unreliable narrators, each time we listen to a voice who is constantly having fun, who boasts of having a mocking spirit and who plays with the reader's literary and cultural conventions it will probably exemplify an unreliable narrator. Finally, mental disorders such as illnesses (paranoia, hallucinations, schizophrenia...), insanity, and post-traumatic experiences are fundamental features that conditioned the narrator's reliability, since they evidence a lack of self-control, both concerning actions and narrative discourse.

A different example I propose takes place when, from the beginning of a narration, readers can perceive an excess of complicity with the narrator, this might also involve a degree of mistrust towards the latter, since he may be using the reader in his own benefit, to achieve some goal or to hide himself from something. In the case of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the narrator uses the readers' attention to create a kind of "alibi" under which he will remain unnoticed throughout the whole story. His testimony in this case allows him not only to earn our trust but also to avoid being one of Poirot's "suspects" almost till the end of the novel.

My disagreements are minor, but I would not generalise when considering physical and psychological “abnormalities” as decisive factors in the definition and sharpness of unreliable narrators. In order to argue my theory, I will bring up the case of the Canadian writer Barbara Gowdy (1950 -) and her short story collection *We So Seldom Look On Love*, first published in 1992. In each of the stories, Gowdy depicts a picturesque set of characters that can be generally defined as “unusual people living unusual human relationships”. Equally, all the characters of the collection are either physically deformed or psychologically disturbed (or in some cases even the two of them), which provokes a generalized feeling of rejection and disgust by society.

To be more specific, two of her characters are a two-headed man and a necrophilic girl who only finds real love in dead bodies. If we strictly follow the previous classification of unreliable narrator’s features, these two first-person narrators would represent the stereotypical non-reliable one, since they are supposed to be physically deformed, mentally deviant, morally depraved, out of the canon and socially nullified. However, the author plays with this conception and treats her characters with amazing normality, which makes them astonishingly down-to-earth, sensible, self-conscious, aware of their deformities and, incidentally, two of the most reliable narrators I have ever read about.

Another characteristic I could add has to do with the narrator’s point of view and his role as focaliser, also as a way of betraying his own reliability. One narrative technique that contributes to creating this sense of mistrust lies precisely in giving an over-confident sense to the narrative voice. My point is that there is no better way of deceiving the reader than presenting a too sensible and trustworthy narrator who, even though he tells his story in first person, he spends most of his discourse talking about the rest of the characters as opposed to himself. This advantage that some authors concede their narrators, this extra sense of confidence in themselves, gives them confidence and conviction when telling their stories. However, as I will explain in the next section, and as happens in Christie’s novel, this over-confident sense to the narrative voice can play against them, since the narrators that are utterly aware of enjoying the readers’ full confidence tend to be entrusted to the point of committing occasional slips that will eventually betray them as unreliable voices.

This strategy of using a narrator-witness makes the narrator cunningly showing a particular interest in other characters' lives and concerns, rather than in his own story, which again strays the readers' possible sense of distrust towards him, even generating a wide-ranging sense of relief and empathy with the narrator.

As I will explain in the succeeding section, this is precisely the kind of narrator Agatha Christie uses in her novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, whose role is apparently similar to that of Dr. Watson as the narrative voice in Sherlock Holmes's novels and short stories:

The Watson-narrator provides information the detective has, but cannot detail his reasoning. The reader receives the words, the actions, and perhaps even the expressed emotions of the detective, but his mind remains closed. It has to be if the story is to continue (BARGAINNER 1980: 180).

Dr. Watson represents a classical example of a first-person narrator but with the peculiarity that he only tells his own story as far as that story involves his close friend. This "peripheral" narrator is characterised by interpreting Holmes's life and concerns, providing the readers with a great amount of details concerning his characterisation but giving little information about Watson himself. He becomes the focaliser of the story, since readers perceive it from his eyes. Curiously, we discover the truth at the same time as he does; both narrator and reader are on the same level of truth-knowledge, there is no one that knows more than the other.

Christie's narrator, which uses his excess of confidence to deceive the reader, also shares this technique of the narrator-witness. Contrarily, Watson is a highly reliable voice, since he is constantly trying to act as a kind of biographer or historian of his friend, Sherlock Holmes.

## 5: Relying on the unreliable: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

### 5.1. Introduction: the narrator and the murderer

*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was Agatha Christie's sixth novel, first published in the United Kingdom in 1926. Considered as "Christie's masterpiece", it embodies the most daring, witty and controversial use of the detective story genre conventions by any writer of her time and thus became one of the landmarks of mystery writing. Great part of its innovation lies in the fact that the narrator of the whole story, Dr. Sheppard, turns out to be the murderer. This identification between narrator and murderer<sup>14</sup> carried out by a talented and unforeseen plot-twist<sup>15</sup> will make Sheppard's unreliability as narrator the crucial and (i)logical path in reader's interpretation of events.

In their *Dictionary of British Mystery Writers* (1989), Stanley and Benstock highlight the fact that "even though this narratological device may seem to flout the conventions of the genre, in fact it merely takes advantage of their existence to create a puzzle that is a peak of the genre's art" (74).

The narrator of this novel and the key figure of my analysis is Dr. Sheppard, a new acquaintance of Hercule Poirot and his neighbour in the city where the action is set, the fictional little town of King's Abbot. The story is told completely in his words, and Christie manages herself to make Sheppard's narrative discourse in such a way that nothing he says is untrue. Contrarily, in a second reading of the novel readers would realize that the voice we are listening to does not even tell a lie; he just disguises and hides the truth all through a smart mixture of words, actions and thoughts that make him look the most innocent and loyal character from a vast and diverse range of suspects the author offers in her novel.

In this way, although the author leaves a number of subtle clues and nods to the reader to make us figure out the murderer's identity, these remain secret and

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<sup>14</sup> The British writer also used this narrative device of using an unreliable voice in *Endless Night* (1967). The story is told by Michael Rogers who tells us the tragedy of his life. He is psychopathic and tells his story from a cell. As happens with *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Rogers build reader's confidence probably due to his youth, passionate and dreamy nature and apparent victim role. He suspects, and readers suspects with him.

<sup>15</sup> Also known as "turning point", it makes reference to the observable moment when, in a story or a play (or indeed in many kinds of narrative), there is a definite change in direction and one becomes aware that it is now about to move towards its end. (CUDDON 1999: 950)

unnoticed and will eventually come to light when we begin to distrust the narrative voice we are listening to.

As I will analyse in the subsequent sections, several examples are found throughout the narration that contribute to the reader's trust in the narrator. One of the most outstanding and explicit ones is the emphasis the author gives on the positive traits of Sheppard's characterisation. For instance, a clear case is found in his respected and appreciated position in the small town due to his job as a doctor, and consequently his social status, high morals and his belonging to the upper-middle classes.

The way Christie describes both Poirot and Dr. Sheppard also enriches the readers' confusion and provides them with another reason to fall in Sheppard's trap, since it forces us to wonder about the stranger's identity. In fact, it becomes Poirot, whose description is told from the apparent reliability of the doctor's perspective, and not the murderer who is portrayed as being the peculiar outsider. Thus, Poirot's weird appearance, his foreignness, the way he talks, and his unfamiliarity for Kings Abbot's inhabitants all define his portrayal.

In *The Gentle Art of Murder*, the American Professor Earl F. Bargainnier proposes an interesting comparison between Captain Arthur Hastings<sup>16</sup> and Dr. James Sheppard. According to him, Christie began by following Conan Doyle, with Hastings as Watson to Poirot's Holmes. As a dense narrator, Hastings is reliable only as to facts - what is seen and what Poirot tells him. In like manner, he represents an unreliable character as to the interpretation of *those* facts. Sheppard shares this unreliability as well as the same as he represents the character that accompanies the Belgian detective in his crime investigation, thus transcribing every step and the evolution of the murder in his *own* way. Then, Sheppard's role as Hercule Poirot's assistant, together with his apparent desire to solve the mystery and to uncover clues rather than dispel us from them, also represents two of the multiple narrative strategies Christie uses in her novel to divert the reader's suspicious and to create a kind of *honesty facade* recreated by his responsibility both as narrator and as character.

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<sup>16</sup> Captain Arthur Hastings is a fictional character created by Agatha Christie as Hercule Poirot's best friend and adventure mate. He represents Poirot's opposite pole: he is a standard, somewhat dull, Englishman, who secretly shows a sincere admiration to his friend, mixed with a bit of resentment. His first representation in Christie's novel was in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920). Hastings also appears as a character in eight other Poirot novels and plays, apart from being the narrator of several others and a kind of reporter and biographer of the Belgian detective.

Agatha Christie's decision to portray the narrator as a most reliable character and later to make us realise that it has been the main element of our deception makes *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* an original and innovative work. This subverts the previous narrative device that perceived the narrator as the omnipresent voice who, eager to discover the truth, was always right and "who takes the reader by hand from the first page and accompanied him through the comforting English environment, in which all people seem incapable of doing harm to others" (GUTKOWSKI 2011: 52).

We will now analyse the narrative entity in Christie's novel following the theoretical principles that Rimmon-Kenan proposes. In terms of the narrative level, the narrator of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is intradiegetic, meaning he does not occupy a 'superior' position in the story he narrates, but rather he is a diegetic character in the first narrative who tells other's characters stories and concerns. As far as the extent of his participation in the story, our narrator is a homodiegetic one telling his narration in first person and he is also what R. Kenan has coined "intradiegetic-homodiegetic" (autodiegetic in Genette's terminology) since he not only actively takes part in the story, but he can be even considered as its protagonist together with the detective. As regards the degree of participation in a story, Dr. Sheppard is an intrusive voice since he is constantly involved throughout the action and his interventions are very relevant because they reveal great amounts of information about the central enigma that surrounds the story. As happens with Pip, the narrative voice in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860), Dr. Sheppard in Christie's novel is not, in principle, an omniscient narrator as such, however the detachment and position towards the story he narrates is highly authoritarian, since he knows everything about it, like the extradiegetic narrator (intradiegetic opposed narrative level): obviously, he knows the solution to the final enigma, he has knowledge of simultaneous events happening in different places and in different times, he is aware of the characters' innermost thoughts and feelings, etc.

As mentioned in the introduction, in traditional detective stories the reader feels fulfilled when he reaches the solution of the initial enigma using his logical capabilities; the author, contrarily, has a kind of "responsibility" to astonish him with an end that is unexpected but plausible at the same time. But, how can these two opposite requirements of making up a plausible but misleading world be

combined? As Gutkowski points out, “the trick lies in the capability of the author to create, through a *cunning* narrator, a deviation from reader’s expectations” (51).

In the previous section I tried to draw my attention in the fact that having an unreliable narrator does not strictly mean having a liar, but there are many other factors that contribute to that assimilation. Henceforth, I start the analysis of the main narrative techniques and strategies Christie uses to deceive readers by leading us to a false conclusion, to “rely on the unreliable”.

From the factors and characteristics that shape narrative unreliability, the strategies I am going to focus on are those related with the language he uses and the way he uses it, paying attention to double meanings and multiple interpretation of his speeches, the ellipsis, the changes and slips in the narrative discourse, and the way his characterization contributes to his reliability.

## 5.2. Narrative techniques

### 5.2.1. Language

Fortunately words, ingeniously used, will serve to mask the ugliness of naked facts (*RA* 175)<sup>17</sup>

As a general rule, homodiegetic narrators' discourse is charged with narrative strategies to cause some explicit effect in the readership, with stylistic and rhetoric devices, with direct appeals to the receiver, with digressions, parenthesis, etc. The purposes tend to be diverse: from embellishing the narration, involving the addressee in the story, to providing the message with multiple interpretations and connotations, misleading the reader into reaching wrong conclusions. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Agatha Christie uses a narrator whose most powerful weapon to deceive the reader is language. Thus, Dr. Sheppard plays in a cunningly witty way with the multiple possibilities that language offers to disguise the truth. As he says in a particular moment of the novel, "I paused a moment to choose my words carefully" (*RA* 84), the use of words is extremely refined.

In relation to the infinite dimensions language presents, perhaps the narrative strategy Christie most successfully manages to convey Sheppard's testimony is the ambiguity and obscurity in his speech, so that nothing he says is false, there is no place for lies, but his utterances can be interpreted at least from two different perspectives: that of the narrator and that of the murderer:

To tell the truth, I was considerably upset and worried. I am not going to pretend that at that moment I foresaw the events of the next few weeks. I emphatically did not do so. But my instinct told me that there were stirring times ahead. (*RA* 1)

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<sup>17</sup> Henceforth, I will use the initials *RA* (standing for *Roger Ackroyd*) followed by the pagination it corresponds to quote from the novel I am basing this analysis on.

In my opinion, this is one of the clearest examples of Sheppard's ambiguity and obscurity when telling his story. He is not completely lying; in fact he cannot predict that he will eventually be discovered. However, he uses very specific and ingeniously chosen words to express himself, such as "truth", "pretend", "worried" or "foresaw". In this way, we tend to associate the idea of being worried with the guilty feeling, remorse and consequently with having committed a murder, so I consider this fragment as the first sign that the narrator gives to the reader, so that he could think of a possible confession, already on the first page of the book, covered under a great cloak of ambiguity. In fact, the use of "pretend" here is rather ambiguous, as if he wanted to say: I will not tell you something false, but neither something true. As Gutkowski points out in her own interpretation of the passage, "Dr. Sheppard's use of *to tell the truth* reinforces the reader's perception of a straightforward style" (GUTKOWSKI 2011: 53).

Another example of how language can hide great amounts of meaning, of how Sheppard wittily uses it as a way of earning the reader's trust at the same time as he betrays himself is located in Chapter V, when Sheppard and Parker broke into Ackroyd's study where the body was lying. At this moment the doctor shows a great certainty about the events and he behaves in an exaggeratedly careful manner, as if he wanted to hide something, and then, after sending Parker to ask for help, he says: "I did what little had to be done. I was careful not to disturb the position of the body, and not to handle the dagger at all. No object was to be attained by moving it. Ackroyd had clearly been dead some little time" (RA 53-54). A very first interpretation of this statement is that Sheppard devotes this time to tidying the study up, or, as a doctor, catching as much details as possible for the body's position. However, we later discover that he has actually put away the dictaphone that has simulated Ackroyd's voice and has restored the armchair that hid it to its proper place, as he explains in his confession note.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, this key statement of "what little had to be done" has opposite connotations for the reader, who relate this with the doctor's task, and for the narrator, for whom it represents the necessity to remain undiscovered.

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<sup>18</sup> "Then later, when the body was discovered, and I sent Parker to telephone for the police, what a judicious use of words: 'I did what little had to be done'. It was quite little — just to shove the dictaphone into my bag and push back the chair against the wall in its proper place". (RA 311)

Throughout Sheppard's narration the reader can find many examples of the obscurity and ambiguity of his speech, to the point of coming across some cases in which, after we are aware of the murderer's identity, he gives himself away, as in this case, when he takes advantage of his job as a doctor to give a future "advise" to the reader: "One advantage of being a medical practitioner is that you can usually tell when people are lying to you" (RA 141). A similar example is found several pages later: "It is a pity that a doctor is precluded by his profession from being able sometimes to say what he really thinks" (RA 170).

As pointed out in the previous section, Dr. Sheppard's is a very peculiar kind of narration, since he knows more than everyone else in the novel: more than the reader, more than the rest of the characters and even more than the detective. However, that will only be discovered at the end of the novel, in his confession.

In her article, Gutkowski chooses a quote to explain how the amounts of knowledge the narrator has hugely varies in comparison with the reader's one:

He and I lunched together at a hotel. I know now that the whole thing lay clearly unravelled before him. He had got the last thread he needed to lead him to the truth. But at the same time I had no suspicion of the fact. I overestimated his general self-confidence, and I took it for granted that the things which puzzled me must be equally puzzling to him. (RA 229)

Meanwhile, the narrator has to face, during the investigation, events and facts that he cannot explain. Nevertheless, he obviously knows the murderer's identity, but when he speaks of something that *puzzles* both he and Poirot, "he speaks of those little unsolved mysteries; the reader thinks he is referring to the perpetrator of the crime, thus excluding him from the possible culprits" (GUTKOWSKI 2011: 55).

You are like the little child who wants to know the way the engine works. You wish to see the affair, not as the family doctor sees it, but with the eye of a detective who knows and cares for no one – to whom they are all strangers and all equally liable to suspicion. (RA 162)

One of the key narrative strategies that contribute to Sheppard's unreliability is the role he plays in the novel as Poirot's assistant, representing his confidant,

helper and his shadow in the development of the investigation. Throughout the whole novel, Sheppard faithfully keeps a chronological account of the events that surrounded the crime: he makes lists of suspects and the possible reasons they have for committing it, he checks their alibis, he talks to the witnesses and he even appends plans of the room in which the murder was committed: “A very meticulous and accurate account. You have recorded all the facts faithfully and exactly — though you have shown yourself becomingly reticent as to your own share in them” (*RA* 278-79).

This role as investigator makes Sheppard use a particular type of language. Gutkowski brings up an appealing interpretation of the importance of the semantic field of verbs used in the narrative discourse as a strategy to make the readers feel disoriented and misled:

Then my eyes was caught by what, I believe, is called a silver table, the lid of which lifts, and through the glass of which you can see the contest. I crossed over to it, studying the contents [...] wanting to examine one of the jade figures more closely; I lifted the lid [...] at once I recognised the sound I had heard. (*RA* 33)

The main verbs that are used in this narrative sequence all belong to the semantic field of the sight, of seeing and acting through the eyes. However, in this case they evoke an investigation, thus creating a shift in the readers’ mind from reality to what the narrator wants the reader to think. The strategy is thus based on letting the reader rely on his sensations, hinted by the inappropriate semantic field. According to Gutkowski “he is not the investigator, but the investigated, and investigated people usually do not have any reason to investigate” (GUTKOWSKI 2011: 54).

What is more, Sheppard not only behaves as a real detective, trying to find the key to the enigma, but he also makes the investigation path into the wrong direction by accusing someone else. In this case, he makes up a whole theory, apparently convincing to Poirot, which incriminates the American foreigner he encounters the night of the crime:

“And who was the murderer?” inquired Poirot.

“The American stranger. He may have been in league with Parker, and possibly in Parker we have the man who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars. If so, Parker may have heard enough to realise the game was up, have told his accomplice so, and the latter did the crime with the dagger which Parker gave him.”

“It is a theory that,” admitted Poirot”. (RA 166)

From all the different classes of verbs, Christie plays with the wide range of possibilities that modal verbs offer when covering double meanings and giving rise to open interpretations: “Of course I *must* know all about it — doctors always tell — but they never tell?” (RA 13). This use of *must* is supposed to make the reader directly associate the doctor’s knowledge with having a complete access to the truth about the murder.

“I’ll spare you the technical language” I said. “We’ll keep that for the inquest. The blow was delivered by a right-handed man standing behind him, and death must have been instantaneous. By the expression on the dead man’s face, I would say that the blow was quite unexpected. He probably died without knowing who his assailant was.” (RA 71)

What is misleading in this example is again the use of modal verbs (*must have been; should say*), denoting opinion or high probability. Contrarily, for the narrator they represent an absolute certainty. Only the final adverb *probably* is sincere, since the doctor does not actually know if the victim saw him or if he remained unseen.

The same strategy concerning verbs is applied to the adjectives, since Christie uses very specific and well-chosen words to describe her narrator, with adjectives that are not common in description of killers. For example, everything related to the compassion, tenderness and emotive nature of people: “painful thoughts” (33).

Another case of the hidden connotations that can be found in the use of certain types of adjectives goes back to this peculiar conversation between Ackroyd and Sheppard:

“Make certain that window’s closed, will you?”, he asked. Somewhat surprised, I got up and went to it. It was not a French window, but one of the ordinary sash type. (RA 40)

This is the first contact the narrator has with the crime scene, Roger’s study. Although this example can be unnoticed because of its simplicity (the narrator is just telling us the situation he perceives when closing the window), by saying *somewhat surprised*, the doctor is hinting that there were some “loose ends” in his plan, since he did not expect to find such panorama.

The use of adverbs is also particularly revealing in the narrator’s discourse. Two are the examples I have chosen to prove my point: “Fortunately, long association with Caroline has led me to preserve an impassive countenance, and to be ready with small non-committal remarks” (RA 13). In this first case, the use of *fortunately* conveys some kind of relief in Sheppard’s narration, since he is completely aware of her sister’s intuition when discovering the truth and, as I will explain in later parts, she represents one of the most imminent obstacles in the narrator’s plan.

Secondly, by using *hastily* on the following occasion: “‘I wish you’d tell me something of your methods,’ I said hastily, to cover my confusion” (RA 93), the narrator is subtly confessing that he has been forced to say something quickly and unexpectedly in order to hide his nervousness and anxiety facing Poirot’s advances in the investigation.

Language also lets the reader recognize, and latter understand, several details that are almost imperceptible and that would only be plausible and coherent if someone who is actually involved in the crime told them. One of them is Sheppard’s obsessive concern about the time-space dimension: “just nine o’clock. I heard it chime the hour as I was turning out of the gate” (RA 58). Another attention-getting detail that this particular language use proposes is the name given to the different titles of the chapters that shape the novel. Thus, in the first chapter, *Dr. Sheppard at the breakfast table*, we only know about the figure of the narrator, in fact the first word of the novel is precisely the name of the murderer. Following this strategy, from chapter two, *Who’s Who in King’s Abbot*, onwards, the reader gradually gets to know about the rest of the characters.

### 5.2.2. *Ellipsis*

That which has been omitted — the content of the ellipsis — need not be unimportant; on the contrary, the event about which nothing is said may have been so painful that it is being elided for precisely that reason [...] Or the event is so difficult to put into words that it is preferable to maintain complete silence about it. Another possibility [...] is the situation in which though the event has taken place, the actor wants to deny the fact. By keeping silent about it, he attempts to undo it. (BAL 2009: 101)

Ellipsis represents another fundamental and necessary narrative strategy Christie uses when giving voice to the narrator, and it is largely related to the way in which he decides to tell the truth, *his* truth as well as his own interpretation of the events. Subsequently, through his narration, Dr. Sheppard is *partially* sincere. His statements are actually true, but this truth is not told in its entirety. His methodology is then omitting what he considers necessary, always looking for his own benefit, both as the narrator and eventually as the murderer.

For Gutkowski, the ellipsis in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* represents the “device through which the pieces of information provided by the narrator are omitted and distorted to lead the reader to a limited perception of the fictitious reality” (53).

As Bal points out in the introductory quote, ellipsis can be used because the narrator is not interested in showing its content, as in this conversation between Sheppard and his sister: “‘And are you absolutely satisfied?’ Asked my sister shrewdly. I did not answer, but got up from table” (*RA* 6). Here it is appreciable how Sheppard omits the conversation with Caroline because he has no interest in showing it to the reader, probably because it could give us some clues of his own role in the story.

A similar example is the following: “He had spoken as though Ralph had not been near the place for months. I had no time to puzzle the matter out further” (*RA* 12). In this case, lack of time serves him to pretend being too busy to give the reader the reason why he cannot talk about the issue, probably because if the reader had known the truth about Ralph Paton and his whereabouts, Sheppard’s story would have started to appear implausible and contradictory.

Bal suggests other possibility for ellipsis that occurs when the “actor” wants to deny the fact, by keeping silent about it, as happens in this quote when the narrator excuses himself of being too repetitive, thus omitting what he wants to remain unnoticed: “A joint inquest was held on Monday. I do not propose to give the proceedings in detail. To do so would only be to go over the same ground again and again.” (RA 149).

Another interesting and even unnoticed example of ellipsis is located in Sheppard’s description of the crime scene, when the detective tries to reconstruct the events that happened: “Ackroyd was sitting as I had left in the armchair before the fire. His head had fallen sideways, and clearly visible, just below the collar of his coat, was a shining piece of twisted metalwork.” (RA 53). Dr. Sheppard himself, after the murder, had left Ackroyd in that position but what he has omitted is that the victim was already a corpse.

As the research progresses, Sheppard gradually uses his "knowledge" of the event and his role as co-detective each time he gives his opinion and interpretation, saying only what he considers suitable: “‘Now tell me all the circumstances’. ‘Dr. Sheppard had better tell you’, said Flora. ‘He knows more than I do.’ Thus enjoined, I plunged into a careful narrative, embodying all the facts I have previously set down” (RA 83).

Sheppard’s role as investigator, as Poirot’s crime partner, allows him to provide the reader with his personal perspective, conclusions and interpretations. Indeed, there is a moment in the novel when he gives his *own* version of the murder, when the reader is aware of what he felt in that moment that seems as if he was hiding something, omitting something crucial:

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. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. I could think of nothing. (RA 47)

This is perhaps the most outstanding example of pre-meditated ellipsis in the narrator’s discourse, since at the end of the novel readers will learn that what Sheppard has actually left undone is that he has employed this ten-minute lapse of time to murder Ackroyd. What I mean by “pre-meditated ellipsis” is that in this

case the narrator is perfectly aware of the fact that he is really omitting, and even more importantly, he is aware of the high relevance of the omitted information. In the final chapter, *Apologia*, Dr. Sheppard himself provides the reader with his own interpretation of this particular moment, boasting of his witty and masterful writing skills: “All true, you see. But supposed I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in the blank ten minutes?” (*RA* 310).

A similar example of how the narrator omits what he considers necessary for the later development of events takes place when Sheppard retells the reader Ursula Bourne’s *true* story but when he is going to start his narration, he warns the reader by saying: “she began the story which I reproduce here in my own words” (267). Henceforth, he gives his own version of Bourne’s story so that the reader could make the decision of believing him, even knowing that he could omit what he considers required.

### 5.2.3. *Changes and slips in the narrator's discourse*

When analyzing the narrative voice, and always bearing in mind the murderer's identity, the reader might come across diverse strategies the author uses as *clues* that reveal the narrator's unreliability. These strategies have to do with all those narrator's slips (intentional or not), changes in tone, anticipations, incorrect amounts of information, moments of uncertainty and indecision or moments in which the narrator seems to have more knowledge than he should, and that, somehow, makes the reader take a step further.

In my view, the method that the narrator employs to hide these little slips from the reader consists in making the rest of the characters seem less suspicious than himself, in being sure that each of them has a motive and a chance to have committed the crime, so that we associate any anticipation in his discourse to his *desire* to tell the truth, and his mistakes remain justified to the reader.

From the earliest chapters, Sheppard is delicately involved in some moments when he could not restrain himself and thus he anticipates what is going to happen from then on, as in the following quote:

I think I can safely say that it was at this moment that a foreboding of the future first swept over me. Nothing tangible as yet — but a vague premonition of the way things were setting. That earnest tête-à-tête between Ralph Paton and Mrs. Ferrars the day before struck me disagreeably (*RA* 11).

As we see, there is a change in his narrative tone, and he lets out that he *knows* that something wrong will happen, and this innocent comment turns out to be a kind of confession.

Another example that betrays Sheppard's unreliability, due to a slip in his narration, takes place when, almost at the beginning of the novel, Roger and James are gathered in Ackroyd's study minutes earlier to the murder, and Roger is about to read the letter he received from his lover, Mrs. Ferrars, that directly and irrevocably incriminates Sheppard as his blackmailer, and consequently, the person who will be his murderer. In this tense moment, the doctor cannot take the

pressure of being discovered and feigns a dramatic and sudden curiosity about the identity of that mysterious man, even to the point of begging and crying about it:

He put the letter in the envelope and laid it on the table.

“Later, when I am alone”

“No”, I cried impulsively, “read it now” [...]

Ackroyd shook his head.

“No, I’d rather wait”.

But for some reason, obscure to myself, I continued to urge him.

“At least, read the name of the man”, I said. (RA 47)

An interesting aspect to comment is that, as Sheppard is perfectly aware that he might have committed a mistake when showing such compulsive behaviour toward the victim, he makes up a kind of alibi by making the readers pay attention to another issue, in this case, Ackroyd’s butler, Mr Parker, as a possible suspect: “I was startled by seeing the figure of Parker close at hand [...] I occurred to me that he might have been listening at the door.” (RA 47)

One example of how Sheppard anticipates to the events that will occur later on is when he *hypothetically* receives Parker’s call informing him that Ackroyd has been murdered, and the doctor hurries up to Fernly Park. In his first encounter with Parker Sheppard says: “What’s the matter with you, Parker? If, as you say, your master has been murdered...” (RA 50). It seems to me that Sheppard could contain his excitement about starting his “drama”, and, although he was evidently aware of Ackroyd’s murder, he anxiously introduces the issue in the mansion, blaming Parker with this ironic emphasis on “if as you say...” Indeed, it results improbable that a person living outside the mansion was the first person being aware of the murder, instead of Ackroyd’s relatives who lived in the same place.

Anticipation in Sheppard’s narration also takes place when he tells something that he is supposed to realise later on, as in this example when he is talking about Poirot: “As I came to know later, this secrecy was characteristic of him. He would throw out hints and suggestions, but beyond that he would not go” (RA 169). This little anticipation lets the reader reconsider the fact that Sheppard knows how the story ends from the beginning of the novel.

I was puzzled. For the first time I was absolutely at sea as to Poirot's meaning [...] but, in spite of myself, I was forced to believe in an underlying reality. There had been real menace in his words — a certain undisputable sincerity. But I still believed him to be on the wrong tack. (RA 295)

This last scene, located in the closing chapter, represents the last anticipatory moment, and probably the most outstanding one, in Sheppard's discourse. At the end of his statement, the doctor confesses that he wants Poirot to be "on the wrong tack", despite he has always shown their desire to find the culprit as soon as possible, since his expectations of being *unscratched* are gradually moving away.

Indecision in the narrator's assertions is another example of the multiple narrative slips that can be found throughout the whole narration. As the investigation progresses, Sheppard has to pretend he is a mere witness of the crime, but Poirot's meticulousness in finding the truth makes him show gradual confusion and self-doubt: "There was something almost indescribable in the way he said those last words. I felt that he was looking at the case from some peculiar angle of his own, and what he saw I could not tell" (RA 96). James' plodding hesitation forces him to make some comments that betray himself and that make his discourse progressively abrupt and tense: "*Each of you has something to hide*' [...] His glance, challenging and accusing, swept around the table. And every pair of eyes dropped before his. Yes, mine as well." (RA 159)

Likewise, the climatic moment of indecision and nervousness in Sheppard's discourse takes place parallel to Poirot's truth discovering: "there was a ring of satisfaction in his tone. And with the sound of it I saw a ripple of something like uneasiness pass over all those faced grouped at the other end of the room. There was a suggestion in all this as of a trap — a trap that had closed." (RA 282)

Maybe as a consequence of Sheppard's nervousness in his speech, the reader can also find several changes of tone and emphasis in his narration, that again contribute to his unreliability: "it was a very uncomfortable minute for *me*. I hardly took in what happened next, but there were exclamations and cries of surprise! When I was sufficiently master of myself to be able to realise what was going on." (RA 290)

Along with anticipations, changes of tone and indecision in narratorial discourse, rectifications about things that he has done wrong, or that may

contribute to his discovery also take part in the narrative strategies Christie uses: “Ackroyd told me he was in London. I said. In the surprise of the moment I departed from my valuable rule of never parting with information” (RA 17).

Another recurrent narrative slip that can be found in Sheppard’s speech is that of contradictions. I personally think that the most manifest occasion occurs in the description Sheppard does about his new neighbour, Mr. Poirot: “An egg-shaped head partially covered with suspiciously black hair, two immense moustaches, and a pair of watchful eyes. It was our mysterious neighbour, Mr. Porrott.” (RA 20)

This is the first time the narrator comes across Hercule Poirot, his new neighbour and it represents his initial reaction and description of the detective. Sheppard’s attitude towards “the man who’ll discover him” is quite naïve, even ignorant, since he purposely mispronounces his name, as Porrott rather than Poirot, suggesting that he has never heard of it before. This strategy diverts the reader’s attention from considering the detective as a decisive person in Sheppard’s life. This apparent carelessness about his neighbour’s identity means a great contradiction and slip in Sheppard’s narrative discourse since at the end of the novel, in his confession he declares he had partially controlled his diary before handing it to Poirot, even mentioning a possible publication and it sounds rather improbable that he does not even correct Poirot’s name: “With an eye on possible publication in the future, I had divided the work into chapters.” (RA 277)

On top of this, it is also interesting to draw attention to the fact that the title of the chapter in which this statement appears is *The Man Who Grew Marrows*, to refer to Poirot’s leisure pursuit in his days of retirement. Sheppard’s preference for hiding Poirot’s real name again represents a narrative technique to reinforce the narrator’s superficial unconcern about his neighbour.

Following Sheppard’s contradictory descriptions, his truth-manipulating nature comes to light when he again tries to make the reader rely on his relation with Roger as a sincere and unbreakable one: “I saw the repulsion, the horror, in Ackroyd’s face [...] he is not the type of great lover who can forgive all for love’s sake. He is fundamentally a good citizen.” (RA 42)

However, several pages later we find a clear incongruity regarding Sheppard’s opinion of his *friend*: “Now Ackroyd is essentially pig-headed. The more you urge him to do a thing, the more determined he is not to do it” (RA 47).

At first glance, Dr Sheppard is a kind, helpful man who will do what he can to solve other people's problems. Nevertheless, he is able to successfully hide another of his facets: being wholly aware of how to use people's weaknesses to feather his own nest. As the murderer, he needs to know everything about everybody, so that no unpredicted event will take him by surprise. However, his excessive amount of knowledge about certain situations and characters also represents a narrative strategy present in his narration from its very beginning, and that makes the narrator be aware of certain things that is supposed not to know. This excessive knowledge makes the narrator, again, be quite contradictory, since he wants, no matter what, his hidden facet to remain unnoticed. We know that he wants to know everything about his neighbours and Poirot: "I was at Poirot's elbow the whole time. I saw what he saw. I tried my best to read his mind. As I know now, I failed in this latter task" (RA 169). Contradictorily, unlike his sister, he insists in being modest and indifferent to his neighbours' habits: "'Curiosity is not my besetting sin,' I remarked coldly. 'I can exist comfortably without knowing exactly what my neighbours are doing and thinking.'" (RA 184)

In the next case this excessive knowledge is reflected towards Ralph Paton, the person who is the chief suspect of the crime for almost the whole novel:

It seemed likely that Ralph Paton would have returned there by now. I knew Ralph very well-better, perhaps, than any one else in King's Abbot, for I had known his mother before him, and therefore I understood much in him that puzzled others. (RA 28)

Then it can be appreciated how the narrator distracts our attention when talking about young Paton as an appropriate suspect, that "puzzles" everyone in the village. Once readers are aware of Sheppard's guilt, another significant and perceptible example is found when Ackroyd and James are talking about who might have been blackmailing the widow Mrs. Ferrars, bringing up several names without apparently reaching any conclusion, and the doctor again decides to create his own alibi by accusing Paton, the scapegoat of King's Abbot's inhabitants:

It seems that there is one [...] who has been blackmailing her. It was the strain of that that drover her mad [...]. Suddenly before my eyes there arose

the picture of Ralph Paton and Mrs. Ferrars side by side. Their heads so close together. I felt a momentary throb of anxiety. Supposing — oh! But surely that was impossible. I remembered the frankness of Ralph's greeting that very afternoon. Absurd! (*RA* 43)

This quotation also reflects his fake fragmentarism in speech, pretending to be shocked and without understanding anything.

There is a moment in the novel when Sheppard's knowledge, not as a doctor, but as a murderer, plays a dirty trick when he replies to Caroline's inquisitiveness and exaggerated curiosity: "Ralph may be extravagant, but he's a dear boy, and has the nicest manners.' I wanted to tell Caroline that large numbers of murderers have had nice manners.'" (*RA* 81-82)

#### 5.2.4. *Opposition of two methods of reaching the truth*

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, as mystery fiction, the truth turns out to be the main goal. However, in this case Agatha Christie manages to make this task a challenge, both for the characters and for the reader, so, throughout the novel, she proposes a dual way to reach it. Thus, one of the most delicate and facetious narrative strategies the author uses in her novel is the sharp and antithetical sense that is provided by the two characters that seem most interested in finding out the murderer's identity: Hercule Poirot and Caroline Sheppard. With this narrative approach, what Christie is eventually achieving is, first, contributing to the reader's discovering the murderer, and secondly, it makes the figure of the narrator even more trustworthy and reliable for the readership.

The Belgian detective firmly follows an evidence-based methodology, there is always a reason in his actions: "I admit nothing that is not-proved!" (RA 234). Accordingly, he gradually advances the investigation by tying up loose ends, considering each of the circumstances of the case, interviewing the characters involved in the drama, until in a final blow he invariably gathers all the suspects and eventually unmasks the murderer. Sometimes, and as happens with our novel, his ethical standards are not orthodox enough, and he does not hesitate to push a man to commit suicide: "I am willing to give you the chance of another way out. There might be, for instance, an overdose of a sleeping draught. You comprehend me?" (RA 307). We are, then, clearly shown some of Poirot's deductive systems: thus, once he has examined the characters appearing in the story, he takes a series of notes about each of them in a systematic way: motive, alibi, contradictory evidences and suspicious circumstances: "Everything is simple, if you arrange the facts methodically" (RA 93). Unlike Poirot, a city man who likes to move in urban environments and hates the countryside because of its excessive heat (and cold), Caroline Sheppard is an elderly woman who lives in a small town, King's Abbot. Her weaknesses are a small garden, and her long conversations with friends and neighbours, who have been living in the village almost as many years as she has. Despite being a little "nosy" Miss Sheppard is a nice lady and also very intelligent.

In comparison with his sister, the doctor at first sight appears to be the rational, down-to-earth and sensible part of the family, which makes us more

easily get carried away by what he tells. However, although James also tries to earn the reader's trust by means of his displays of affection towards his sister, we eventually come to realize that another reason for this abhorring Caroline's talent for gossip and rumours lies in the fact that she may stumble upon the truth: "it is all wrong that Caroline should arrive at the truth simply by a kind of inspired guesswork" (RA 6). In fact, there are times he has to face some dangerous situations because of Caroline's ability to make uncomfortable comments about the crime, all of them on the right track for solving the enigma: "I saw the opportunity of further questioning gleaming from her eye. I saw the chance to escape into the garden" (RA 20).

At the end of the novel, we realise that what he has feared most throughout the course of the investigation, has been that Caroline may have discovered him: "My greatest fear all through has been Caroline. I have fancied she might guess." (RA 311). Though Caroline is a standard character of the sort that could have been treated stereotypically, she is portrayed so carefully that she takes on a vivid life of her own: "He (Poirot) said I had the makings of a born detective in me- and a wonderful psychological insight into human nature" (RA 145). Caroline's intuitive spirit was what encouraged Christie to create a female detective who devoted her intuition in rural environment. It is said that Caroline Sheppard was the seed that eventually gave life to the acclaimed and adorable Miss. Marple.

The same antithetical situation we see in the Sheppard's siblings can be extrapolated in the two main detectives that build Christie's literary output: Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. Thus, whereas the Belgian detective is an embodiment of many eccentricities, sometimes make him seem unreal and a kind of mental superhero, the lovely Miss Marple has a credibility touch derived in part from her predecessor, Caroline Sheppard, and in part from being modelled to some extent on Christie's grandmother.

Where Poirot works on logic and reasoning, Miss Marple works essentially on intuition. She depends for her success on five qualities (STANLEY and BENSTOCK 1989: 75): an extensive knowledge of people garnered over years; her belief that gossip is true more often than not; her intuition; a gift for making connections between people's minor misdemeanours and their capacity for greater ones; and finally her consistent, pessimistic lack of trust, which prevents her from taking any one she meets at face value.

## 6. Conclusions

Dr. Sheppard has deceived the reader. Even with the suspicious attitude of those who know that the murdered must necessarily be in the limited space of the pages, the reader is unable to uncover him (GUTKOWSKI 2011: 60)

This essay has been mainly focused on the study and analysis of the role of unreliable narrators in literary communication, as well as the narrative strategies resulting from the combination and management of this type of narrators when achieving a particular effect on the reader. This study has been applied to the mystery novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, written by British novelist Agatha Christie.

To provide this essay with a theoretical framework to this narrative entity in detective fiction, I have handled and questioned the theories of three authors whose contributions to the science of Narratology in the last century have meant a turning point for future research, since they have established the main pillars of its foundation: Wayne Booth, Seymour Chatman, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. One of the main points of disagreement between them was whether to consider the implied author and its counterpart, the implied reader, as narrative entities that are necessarily involved in literary communication. Contrarily, they agreed in considering the reader as a key and essential entity in literary communication, accentuating its role when constructing the meaning of a particular text.

In the initial section of this essay, we have studied Christie's particular use of unreliable narrators. One of her most acclaimed and accomplished strategies lay in involving the reader's participation in the resolution of the proposed puzzle, providing him with the same amount of information as the detective, and strategizing a set of difficulties in reaching the truth. Starting from this premise, I have interpreted the literary possibilities that this game offers in obtaining a specific effect on the reader: to deceive him by making him rely on an apparently trustworthy narrative voice.

For the development of the practical part of this paper, the general and common features that the aforementioned narratologists bring about unreliable

narrators have been applied. Among many other, cretinism, limited knowledge, lack of information, awareness of literary tradition, insanity and incorrect information are the main factors that shape unreliability in narrative fiction.

Then I have applied these features to Christie's novel, in order to show the narrative strategies she uses to make the narrator's unreliability remain unnoticed until the end of the story, making the reader feel misled when he reaches the right conclusion and the ultimate truth discovery. The devices I have analysed to a greater extent are: ambiguous and obscure language, ellipsis, changes and slips in the narrator's discourse such as anticipations, contradictions, indecision, excessive knowledge, and finally, the opposition of two complementary ways of reaching the truth, personified in both Poirot's logic and Caroline's intuition.

To finish with, I would like to comment on one issue concerning the last chapter in Christie's novel, *Apologia*. When the plot twist emerges and the murderer's identity is eventually revealed, the story is shown to be the narrator's attempt to write about Poirot's failure to catch him until the very end. However, his excessive pride and self-satisfaction makes him append a confession and suicide note, written after Poirot's discovery, so as to emphasize his cleverness.

This narrative technique is used in Christie's novel *And Then There Were None* (1939), whose final chapter includes a manuscript document sent to Scotland Yard in a bottle, which contains the murderer's confession, who has remained unknown until that moment. In it he explains, before committing suicide and running the risk of remaining anonymous forever, the events and the reasons why he planned and executed his crime. Accordingly, an interesting point these two novel share from a narrative perspective is the murderer's ultimate decision to be heard in confession, telling in detail the manner in which they have committed their respective crimes and how they have "cheated" *justice*, to show the world their masterpiece and go down to posterity as geniuses of crime.

May one quote from this novel serve as conclusion for my essay: "Crime is terribly revealing. Try and vary your methods as you will, your tastes, your habits, your attitude of mind, and your soul is revealed by your actions" (CHRISTIE 2007: 134).

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