International Journal of Indian Languages and Literature
A Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN : 3108-2254 IMPACT FACTOR : 4.25
Vol. 1, Issue 4 www.ijill.in July-Sept 2026

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd: A Century after the Controversy

Pallab Das
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Mankar College, Mankar,
Purba Bardhaman, West Bengal

Abstract: A century after its publication, Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) remains a landmark in the history of detective fiction, not for its plot alone but for the narrative device it introduced: a first-person narrator who is ultimately revealed as the murderer. This essay traces the novel's origins, from suggestions offered by James Watts and Lord Mountbatten to Christie's execution of the idea through Dr. James Sheppard, a Watson-like figure whose professional respectability shields him from suspicion. It situates the novel within the conventions of the genre's "Golden Age," examining how it unsettled the implicit contract between author and reader that had governed detective fiction since Poe and Conan Doyle, and how this controversy shaped subsequent debates, including Ronald Knox's "Ten Commandments." Finally, it considers the novel's lasting influence on the concept of the unreliable narrator and its afterlife in contemporary fiction such as *Gone Girl* and *The Silent Patient*.

Keywords: 'Agatha Christie', 'unreliable narrator', 'detective fiction', 'Golden Age of crime writing', 'Hercule Poirot', 'narrative technique'

Any reader of detective fiction will agree that a good mystery novel lives or dies by its final twist. Yet only rarely does a novel appear whose closing revelation reaches beyond the boundaries of the story itself and calls into question the conventions of an entire literary tradition. Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is precisely such a novel. It first appeared in book form in Britain in June 1926, published by William Collins, Sons. The year before, however, between July and September 1925, it had already been serialised in London's

International Journal of Indian Languages and Literature
A Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN : 3108-2254 IMPACT FACTOR : 4.25
Vol. 1, Issue 4 www.ijill.in July-Sept 2026

Evening News under the title *Who Killed Ackroyd?* The novel is thus one hundred and one years old, and one hundred years have now passed since its publication as a book. Yet across that century, neither its mystery, nor the controversy surrounding its form, nor its significance to literary theory has faded in the slightest.The detective story as a genre began in the early nineteenth century with Edgar Allan Poe, and it reached the height of its popularity through Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. The years between the two world wars are remembered as detective fiction's 'Golden Age', whose four principal figures — Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh — came to be known collectively as the 'Queens of Crime'. Our concern here, of course, is with Christie and her singular contribution to the form.

The novel is set in the fictional English village of King's Abbot, home to the wealthy businessman Roger Ackroyd. His intended, Mrs Ferrars, has taken her own life; some years earlier she had poisoned her first husband, and when someone discovered this and began blackmailing her, the resulting strain drove her to suicide. The evening after her death, Ackroyd himself is found stabbed in his study. As it happens, the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot has retired to the same village to enjoy a few quiet weeks of leisure — though it soon becomes clear that his rest is not to be. He takes charge of the murder investigation, and it is at this point that the 'detective' Poirot properly enters the narrative.

The presence of Topshe in the Feluda novels, or of Ajit in the Byomkesh stories, is essentially an echo of the narrative device used in the Sherlock Holmes tales. Just as Watson narrates for Holmes, the narrator of the novel under discussion is the village doctor, James Sheppard. His profession, too, seems shaped by Conan Doyle's Dr Watson: like Watson, Sheppard is not merely the narrator but also Poirot's assistant in the investigation. It is exactly here that Christie's great surprise lay concealed. In the novel's final chapter, we learn that the murderer is none other than the narrator himself — Dr Sheppard. Yet it is through this very man's eyes that the reader has followed the entire investigation; the person on whose perception and judgement the reader relied to weigh every clue turns out to be the actual culprit. In no story built on the Holmes model could a reader ever imagine Dr Watson as the guilty party. It is here that the novel's originality lies.

International Journal of Indian Languages and Literature
A Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN : 3108-2254 IMPACT FACTOR : 4.25
Vol. 1, Issue 4 www.ijill.in July-Sept 2026

It was precisely this twist that brought the novel to the centre of literary discussion at the time. Christie herself recorded in her autobiography that the idea was first planted in her mind by her brother-in-law, James Watts, who, dissatisfied with the conventions of contemporary detective fiction, suggested she create a Watson-like character who would, unlike Watson, turn out at the story's end to be the murderer (Agatha Christie Limited, 2016). A curious episode belongs here too. Lord Mountbatten, then a young naval officer and an admirer of Christie's work, wrote to her in March 1924 with an idea of his own: a story narrated in the first person whose narrator would ultimately be revealed as the murderer (Agatha Christie Limited, 2016; Murder & Mayhem, n.d.). That two entirely unconnected sources should hand Christie the same essential device forced her to take the idea seriously. For its time, it was a strikingly original — and audacious — proposition, and it is worth pausing on why 'audacious' is the right word.

The novel's significance for literary theory is bound up chiefly with a single term: the 'unreliable narrator'. The phrase was coined by the American critic Wayne C. Booth in his 1961 study *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Booth, [1961] 1983). An unreliable narrator is a first-person narrator on whose account a reader cannot safely rely, because that narrator — knowingly or otherwise — conceals the truth, distorts it, or discloses only part of it. This idea holds no great novelty for us today. But in the history of detective fiction up to that point, trusting the narrator absolutely had been the rule rather than the exception. From Poe's 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841) and 'The Purloined Letter' (1844) through to the entire Sherlock Holmes canon, the narrator is invariably a neutral, dependable figure whose principal function is to display the detective's brilliance to the reader. As critics working on unreliable narration in detective fiction have observed, this long tradition meant that readers of the early twentieth century took the narrator's word largely on trust (van Schaik, 2015).

It was exactly this trust that Christie set out to disrupt. Dr Sheppard tells no outright lies; he simply, and skilfully, withholds certain truths. He arranges his account so that the reader's attention is drawn elsewhere. At one point in the novel, Sheppard himself concedes that carefully chosen words can conceal an ugly truth. Central to this strategy is the way Christie exploits Sheppard's social standing to make him seem trustworthy and unremarkable to the reader. A

International Journal of Indian Languages and Literature
A Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN : 3108-2254 IMPACT FACTOR : 4.25
Vol. 1, Issue 4 www.ijill.in July-Sept 2026

village doctor — a man in whom patients confide, whose very profession is a byword for discretion — is not someone a reader instinctively suspects. Both Mrs Ferrars and Roger Ackroyd trust him precisely because of his professional identity. Even his role as Poirot's assistant in the investigation lends him a kind of institutional neutrality, which effectively removes him from the reader's list of suspects.

In the early twentieth century, reading detective fiction was regarded as a form of intellectual exercise, governed by an unspoken pact between writer and reader: the author would supply every necessary clue, and the reader, in turn, could participate in the investigation through their own reasoning as the story unfolded. In 1930, leading British writers of detective fiction founded an organisation called the Detection Club, whose members included Dorothy L. Sayers and G. K. Chesterton, among others; Christie herself was a member (Detection Club was formed in 1930 by a group of British mystery writers, including Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Ronald Knox, and others). One of its founding members, Father Ronald Knox, drew up, half in jest, a set of rules that later became known as 'Knox's Ten Commandments'. Among them was the stipulation that a detective's assistant — a Watson figure — must never conceal from the reader any thought passing through his mind, and indeed that such a character's intelligence ought to be pitched slightly below that of the average reader (Knox's rules stated that the stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader). It is worth noting that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was published in 1926 — four years before the Detection Club was founded. Indeed, it is widely held that these very rules were drawn up, at least in part, as a response to the controversy Christie's novel had provoked.

On publication, the novel split critical opinion sharply. One camp accused Christie outright of having cheated her readers: if the narrator himself withholds the truth, they argued, the reader is never given a fair chance to solve the mystery. It is remarkable to consider that if anyone made such an accusation today, in 2026, they would likely be met with silence, since detective fiction of this kind is now commonplace — indeed, in some cases, if a reader guesses the culprit too early, the story risks being dismissed as merely 'predictable'. Supplying genuine

International Journal of Indian Languages and Literature
A Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN : 3108-2254 IMPACT FACTOR : 4.25
Vol. 1, Issue 4 www.ijill.in July-Sept 2026

surprise has, if anything, become one of the central challenges facing contemporary crime writers.

But the unwritten contract between writer and reader was different in Christie's day, as already noted. Even so, Christie found defenders. They argued that she had not, in fact, lied anywhere: every necessary clue is present in Sheppard's narration; it is simply arranged so that even an attentive reader is likely to pass over it. A persistent story holds that some members of the Detection Club were so incensed that they proposed expelling Christie from the club altogether, and that she was saved only by the casting vote of the club's president, Dorothy L. Sayers. Scholars, however, treat this anecdote with some scepticism, since Sayers did not become president of the club until 1949 — twenty-three years after the novel's publication as a book (Sayers became president of the Detection Club only in 1949, following E. C. Bentley, who had held the post since 1936). By then, Christie had earned considerable standing among the club's members through her subsequent body of work. What remains true, nonetheless, is that writing the novel as she did was a genuinely bold decision.

Examined closely, the novel is in fact scrupulously fair in its use of clues. Poirot solves the mystery precisely by re-reading Sheppard's own written account — the very account the reader has been following from the outset. Theoretically, then, all the essential clues needed to solve the case were available to an attentive reader, and there was nothing to prevent such a reader from reaching the solution before Poirot did. Scrutinising every sentence closely, reading 'between the lines', and treating unverified claims with suspicion — a sufficiently rigorous application of these habits might well have allowed readers of the time to unravel the mystery themselves. My own sense is that readers, conditioned by earlier generations of detective writers, had grown accustomed to a particular kind of narrative packaging; Christie served them a different dish inside the same familiar wrapping. In this game of cat and mouse between author and reader, it is the author who wins.

As more novels of this kind appeared over the following decades, the original controversy gradually subsided, while the book's reputation only grew. The American critic Howard Haycraft, in his 1941 study *Murder for Pleasure*, treated the novel as one of the most

influential foundation stones of detective fiction (Haycraft's *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story*, 1941, laid out an early critical view of the mystery genre, surveying authors of great quality or historical importance). The French newspaper *Le Monde*, in its 1999 poll of the hundred best books of the century, placed the novel forty-ninth on the list (Le Monde's 1999 poll listed *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie, 1926, at number 49). Then, in 2013, some eighty-seven years after publication, the members of the Crime Writers' Association voted it the greatest crime novel ever written (the Crime Writers' Association's official 2013 results named *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie the winner of Best Ever Novel).

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd was published in book form in 1926. A century on, one gauge of the novel's continuing worldwide reach is that, thousands of miles away, it is taught as a set text in genre-fiction modules on English literature courses at universities across India. A reading of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) or Alex Michaelides's *The Silent Patient* (2019) is enough to reveal just how deeply both owe to Christie's conception of the unreliable narrator. There is little point denying it: the most significant literary legacy of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is precisely this — the idea of the unreliable narrator that it gave to the genre, and to fiction more broadly.

Bibliography

Agatha Christie Limited (2016) '90 Years of Christie Favourite: The Murder of Roger Ackroyd', *AgathaChristie.com*, 2 June. Available at: https://www.agathachristie.com/en/news/2016/90-years-of-christie-favourite-the-murder-of-roger-ackroyd (Accessed: 18 September 2026).

Booth, W. C. (1983) *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd edn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (First published 1961.)

Christie, A. (2010) *An Autobiography*. New edn. London: HarperCollins.

---. (2016) *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. London: HarperCollins.

Crime Writers' Association (2013) *60th Anniversary Vote: Best Crime Novel, Writer and Series*. Results reported in: I Hear of Sherlock Everywhere (2013) 'Poll: Best Crime Novel, Writer, Series', 24 October, updated 11 November. Available at: https://www.ihearofsherlock.com/2013/10/poll-best-crime-novel-writer-series.html (Accessed: 18 September 2026).

Detection Club (2015) in Edwards, M. *The Golden Age of Murder: The Mystery of the Writers Who Invented the Modern Detective Story*. London: HarperCollins.

Flynn, G. (2012) *Gone Girl*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Haycraft, H. (1941) *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story*. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company.

Knox, R. (1929) 'Introduction', in *The Best English Detective Stories of 1928*. Republished as 'The Detective Story Decalogue' (1946), and discussed in Mullen, G. (2017) 'The Ten Commandments for Detective Fiction (1929): A Brief History and Update', *Elizabeth Spann Craig* [blog], 11 August. Available at: https://elizabethspanncraig.com/mystery writing-tips/ten-commandments-detective-fiction-1929-brief-history/ (Accessed: 18 September 2026).

Le Monde / Fnac (1999) *Les cent livres du siècle*. Paris: Le Monde. Summarised in: Wikipedia (2026) 'Le Monde's 100 Books of the Century'. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Monde%27s_100_Books_of_the_Century (Accessed: 18 September 2026).

Michaelides, A. (2019) *The Silent Patient*. London: Orion.

Murder & Mayhem (n.d.) 'The Murder of Roger Ackroyd'. Available at: https://murder mayhem.com/the-murder-of-roger-ackroyd (Accessed: 18 September 2026).

van Schaik, L. (2015) *This Paper Is about Murderous Bunnies: Unreliable Narration, Its Use and Function in 'The Murder of Roger Ackroyd' and 'The Little Stranger'*. BA thesis. Radboud University Nijmegen. https://theses.ubn.ru.nl/server/api/core/bitstreams/0bc802f2-f99d-4110-840a 61fc46688f4e/content

International Journal of Indian Languages and Literature
A Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN : 3108-2254 IMPACT FACTOR : 4.25
Vol. 1, Issue 4 www.ijill.in July-Sept 2026

Author's Biography

Pallab Das is presently serving as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Mankar College, Mankar, Purba Bardhaman, West Bengal. His research interests encompass popular literature, Partition literature, and related areas of literary and cultural studies. His scholarly articles and book chapters have been published in several peer-reviewed and UGC-recognised journals and in edited volumes brought out by prestigious publishing houses. His contributions to non-fiction writing have also received scholarly recognition, with his work being cited in *Worldview Dalit Studies*. He has authored and edited several books focusing on popular literature and Partition literature, contributing to the growing body of critical scholarship in these fields. Recently he has submitted his Ph.D thesis on Partition Short Stories under The Kazi Nazrul University.