

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd 1926

[N.B. This review contains **PLOT SPOILERS** for this novel, and also for **The Iron Chariot** by Stein Riverton, but not for any other novel]

The sixth novel and the third with Poirot, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* precipitated Christie to stardom. Some cried 'foul'. Posterity, however, has declared *Ackroyd* a classic of detective fiction.

Christie's brother-in-law, James Watts, and Lord Mountbatten, relative of the Queen and last Viceroy of India, independently suggested to Christie the central idea for the plot of *Ackroyd*. Christie may also have been aware of the Norwegian crime novel *Jernvognen* published in 1909 which uses the same central idea (see [Note](#) at end of review). Christie had, in fact, used this idea already, in a small way, in a previous novel. The difficult part, however, is not in having the idea but in making it work.



Lord Mountbatten

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/mountbatten_lord_louis.shtml]

In *Ackroyd* Christie shows herself to be a scientist of the whodunnit *genre*. She is unique in the extent to which she explored the possibilities and boundaries of plots and solutions. *Ackroyd* is perhaps her most daring experiment in extending these boundaries. At the time of its publication many people thought that she had overstepped the mark and broken an unwritten rule of the *genre*. We believe this to be wrong. Christie was scrupulous in being fair to the reader.

Ackroyd is significant for another reason: it marks the flourishing of Christie's developing approach to clues. This approach has two aspects. The first is the almost complete rejection of what one might call *sleuth clues*, that is, clues based on the detective's careful examination of the physical environment typified by the image of Sherlock Holmes with magnifying glass in hand. Instead the principal clues in *Ackroyd* are derived either from what people say and report, or from straightforward observation. Second, there are clue *structures* – that is, groups of clues in which each clue by itself is insufficient, but taken together they can reveal the solution. Or, perhaps more accurately, if one sees the solution correctly the clues fall into place. It is this *falling into place* of several otherwise unexplained facts that is the hallmark of the mature Christie, and that is rare in whodunnit mysteries by other writers.

In *Ackroyd* there are two quite different types of clue. There is the type that this novel shares with most of Christie's other novels – objective clues. But there is another type of clue that is related to the special nature of the solution: that the narrator - the 'I' character – is the murderer. In solving the narrative problem that this plot posed Christie planted 'narrative' clues. Christie was rightly proud of these.

These clues are generally rather enigmatic statements made by the 'I' character to the reader: statements that a story-teller like Hastings (or Watson) would never make. It is easy for a reader to overlook these clues, to consider them to be slightly odd phrasing. Taken together, however, they amount to a significant set of clues to the identification of the murderer as the narrator, Dr Sheppard.

At the start of the novel Sheppard is called out to a patient of his: Mrs Ferrars. She is dead. The cause is an overdose of tranquillisers. Suicide probably. We will soon learn that Mrs Ferrars had murdered her husband a year earlier, and that she was being blackmailed by an unknown person. Sheppard writes:

When had I last seen her [Mrs Ferrars]? Not for over a week. Her manner then had been normal enough considering – well – considering everything.

A paragraph later when Sheppard is remembering having seen Ralph Paton and Mrs Ferrars talking very earnestly together he writes:

I think ... that it was at this moment that a foreboding of the future first swept over me. ... That earnest *tête-à-tête* between Ralph Paton and Mrs Ferrars the day before struck me disagreeably.



***Oliver Ford Davies: A consummate Shakespearean actor
who plays Dr Sheppard in the TV episode of 2000***
[<http://www.aveleyman.com/ActorCredit.aspx?ActorID=4270>]

Two chapters later Roger Ackroyd is telling Dr Sheppard that Mrs Ferrars was being blackmailed. Sheppard tells the reader:

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!

The reason for Sheppard's anxiety is that he is worried that Mrs Ferrars may have told Ralph Paton that Sheppard was blackmailing her. The evening post is brought in to Ackroyd. Amongst the letters is one from Mrs Ferrars posted just before she died. It is likely to name the blackmailer.

Ackroyd starts reading the letter aloud and then puts it aside saying that he will continue reading it later when he is alone.

'No,' I cried impulsively, 'read it now.'

Ackroyd stared at me in some surprise.

'I beg your pardon,' I said, reddening. 'I do not mean read it aloud to me. But read it through while I am still here.'

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.

And then there is the key paragraph where Christie takes us right to the moment of the murder.

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. With a shake of the head I passed out and closed the door behind me.

Just after he has murdered Ackroyd, Sheppard returns to his house, which he shares with his sister Caroline. He writes:

Caroline was full of curiosity to know why I had returned so early. I had to make up a slightly fictitious account of the evening in order to satisfy her, and I had an uneasy feeling that she saw through the transparent device.

When Sheppard goes back to Ackroyd's house later that evening he enters Ackroyd's study.

Ackroyd was sitting as I had left him in the arm-chair before the fire.

The meaning of 'as I had left him' is ambiguous. A few lines later after Sheppard has sent Ackroyd's butler, Parker, to call the police, and Sheppard is left alone in the room with Ackroyd's dead body, Sheppard writes: 'I did what little had to be done'.

These hints of thoughts and actions that the narrator withholds from the reader are not confined to the period around the murder. Two-thirds of the way through the book Poirot describes to Sheppard and his sister, Caroline, how an 'ordinary man' might become a blackmailer and then a murderer. It is an accurate account of how Sheppard followed exactly this path – although Christie misdirects the reader into thinking that Poirot is referring to Ralph Paton. After Poirot's speech Sheppard writes:

I cannot try to describe the impression his words produced. There was something in the merciless analysis, and the ruthless power of vision which struck fear into both of us.

The fear for Sheppard is that Poirot knows he is the murderer, and for the loyal Caroline, this is probably the moment when she first, however fleetingly, has an inkling of what her brother has done.



*Caroline Sheppard, the forme fruste of Miss Marple,
as played by Selina Cadell*

This trail of ‘narrative’ clues has that hallmark of the mature Christie. None of the strange phrasing by itself can lead directly to the solution, but if the correct solution is seriously considered it all falls into place.

But Christie does not rely on these narrative clues. Indeed I suspect that she saw them not so much as clues as ensuring that she is being fair to the reader in the way that the story is told.

Poirot cannot, of course, make use of these narrative clues. Instead he uses what one might call objective clues, and there are a considerable number.

1. Sheppard’s timing around the murder is given rather precisely. Sheppard takes ten minutes between leaving Ackroyd’s study and reaching the lodge gates of Ackroyd’s property. Almost 40 pages later we learn that to walk this distance would take a person five minutes at the most. These two facts together raise the question of what was Sheppard doing for the extra five minutes.

2. There are three linked clues relating to the phone call that Sheppard receives shortly after the murder.

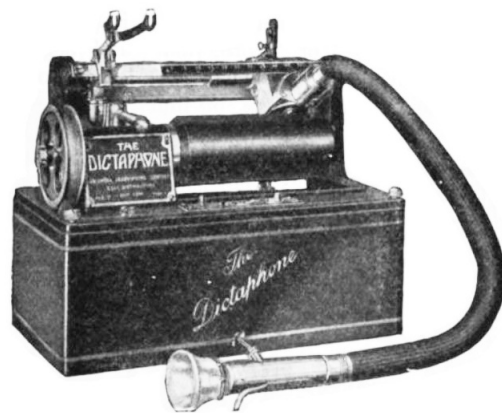
a) According to Sheppard the caller claims to be Ackroyd’s butler, Parker, and tells Sheppard that Ackroyd has been murdered. When Sheppard gets to Ackroyd’s house Parker denies that he made the call, and says that as far as he is aware Ackroyd is alive and well and in his study.

b) Sheppard is strangely insistent on breaking down Ackroyd’s door to check that he is alive .

c) Later investigation shows that the phone call was made from the local railway station.

Since only the murderer knows at the time of the phone call that Ackroyd is dead, only the murderer can have made the call, if the call is as Sheppard reports it. But what could be the motive? The effect of the call is for the murder to be discovered that night rather than the following morning. What advantage is there in that to the murderer? Perhaps it helps establish the time of death precisely if the murderer has a false alibi for that time. But there is no further corroboration of that theory. The other effect of the call is that Parker and Sheppard find the dead body and that Sheppard is briefly alone in Ackroyd's study. Could Parker be lying and have made the call? Very unlikely since the station is not near the house. Finally if the purpose of the call was to have the body found why call Sheppard rather than the police?

The three clues, and a motive, fall into place if one considers that Sheppard wanted to ensure he had access to the scene of the murder before anyone else. The mystery remains as to who made the call but we have only Sheppard's reports as to its content.



3. There are four clues that fall into place on the hypothesis that Sheppard set up a dictaphone to provide evidence that Ackroyd was still alive at 9.30.

A Dictaphone of the 1920s

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dictaphone_cylinder_machine.jpg]

a) Ackroyd's secretary, Raymond, reports that at 9.30pm he heard, through the door of Ackroyd's study, Ackroyd saying: 'The calls on my purse have been so frequent of late that I fear it is impossible for me to accede to your request.'

One has to accept the rather unrealistic convention of this type of detective fiction that witnesses have remarkable memories. Given that, Christie is fair: this wording is simply not wording that would be used in a conversation with another person who is present. It is the wording of a letter being read out loud or being dictated.

b) We learn that a dictaphone salesman came to speak with Ackroyd earlier in the week.

c) We find out that Sheppard is competent at mending mechanical things.

d) Poirot draws attention to Parker's report that a chair in Ackroyd's study was moved shortly after the body is discovered. Poirot, in one of those somewhat paradoxical statements which Christie, and Conan Doyle, love says, about the moving of the chair: 'It is completely unimportant. That is why it is so interesting'.

Let us consider this last clue. Sheppard says to Poirot that Raymond or Blunt must have pushed the chair back. But this is highly unlikely. Sheppard was in the study by himself. Then Raymond and Blunt came into the room and the three of them were in the room together until Parker returned with the police inspector. So Sheppard was the only person who had the room to himself at any time. If Raymond or Blunt had moved the chair back it is unlikely that Sheppard would not have seen and remembered this happening.

Even if the reader does not put the other three dictaphone clues together, if Sheppard moved the chair, as the balance of evidence suggests, and is denying having done so, then he must come under suspicion.

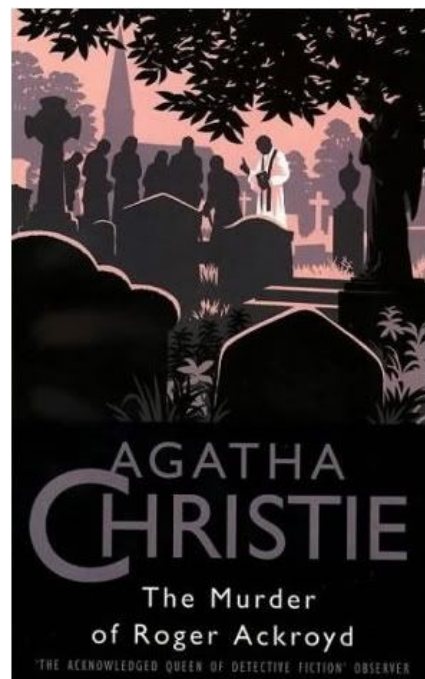
4. There are two further specific clues that Sheppard knows more than he should. Flora (Ackroyd's niece) stated originally that she had seen her uncle alive at 10.15pm, an hour and a half after he had been murdered. She had her own reasons for this lie – these form part of one of the sub-plots. The murderer, of course, would have known all along that she was lying (or was mistaken) even though he may not have known the reason why. When Flora admits that she had lied Poirot watches Sheppard's face carefully. He notes that Sheppard showed no surprise on learning that Flora had lied.

5. Poirot reads out some words that he wants put in the newspapers to the effect that Ralph Paton has been found in Liverpool, which is not in fact true. Sheppard writes:

I stared at him, dumbfounded.
'But - it isn't true! He's not at Liverpool!'
Poirot beamed on me.
'You have the intelligence so quick.'

As far as we know Sheppard has no idea where Ralph Paton is. How does he know Ralph is not in Liverpool?

If we examine these objective clues what is of note is that none are 'sleuth' clues derived from observation of the physical environment. None require Poirot to be the 'human foxhound' (see *The Murder on the Links*). That is not to say that there are no sleuth clues. One, the footprints by Ackroyd's study window, is a false clue planted by the murderer to mislead. It is true that Poirot carefully searches the summer house and finds a quill pen and a torn piece of starched cambric. He also says:



‘But do not be too sure that these dead things’ – he touched the top of the bookcase as he spoke – ‘are always dumb. To me they speak sometimes – chairs, tables – they have their message.’

But these physical clues are relevant solely to the sub-plots. The only careful observation that Poirot makes that is relevant to the main plot is to establish that the moved chair hides what is on the table as seen from the door. Christie, by the time of writing this third Poirot novel, is no longer in the shadow of Conan Doyle: physical clues have become all but vestigial.

In the two earlier Poirot novels the solutions to the main puzzle were somewhat arbitrary. Solutions other than the one offered are possible. In *Ackroyd*, however, no alternative to the actual solution is plausible. That is not to say that a reader could not devise some possible plot in which, say, Blunt or Parker or Paton killed Ackroyd. But any such plot would leave unexplained too many of the clues and facts. The correct solution does not, of course, account for every mysterious fact, such as the torn piece of cambric or the unknown visitor on the night of the murder. These are relevant to sub-plots and their purpose is to mislead the reader. They are also explained before the dénouement. But even had they remained unexplained until the end they would not justify an alternative solution. The sheer number of points that fall into place justifies the correct solution as the only plausible solution.

All this is not to say that *Ackroyd*, that most carefully constructed of detective stories, is devoid of any plot weaknesses. Perhaps the most significant is the risk that Sheppard took. Had it not been for the ‘alibi’ of Parker and Blunt hearing Ackroyd’s voice (from the dictaphone) through the door, Dr Sheppard would have been a major suspect. And yet there was a good chance that nobody would hear the voice. Furthermore, Parker, who was so observant, might easily have noticed the displaced chair and moved to a position from which he would have seen the dictaphone.

The patient who had undertaken to phone Dr Sheppard from the station might well have forgotten, or rung earlier, or not bothered. And Ackroyd’s body might have been discovered earlier (by Flora for example).

Sheppard was also vulnerable in his attempt to frame Ralph Paton. As part of this framing, Sheppard takes Ralph Paton to a nursing home on the night of the murder. Even allowing for the slow communication in the 1920s and the respect given to local doctors, it is surprising that no-one at the nursing home was suspicious that ‘Mr Smith’ was the missing Ralph Paton or have wondered at Dr Sheppard admitting such a patient at such a time.

In the two previous Poirot novels, Poirot’s life seems never to have been in danger. Unlike some of Christie’s other early novels, these Poirot books are not adventure stories. But Poirot at the end of *Ackroyd* gives Sheppard a way of avoiding arrest: suicide. He tells Sheppard that he will wait a day before informing the police. At this point only Poirot knows that Sheppard is the murderer. Poirot says to Sheppard:

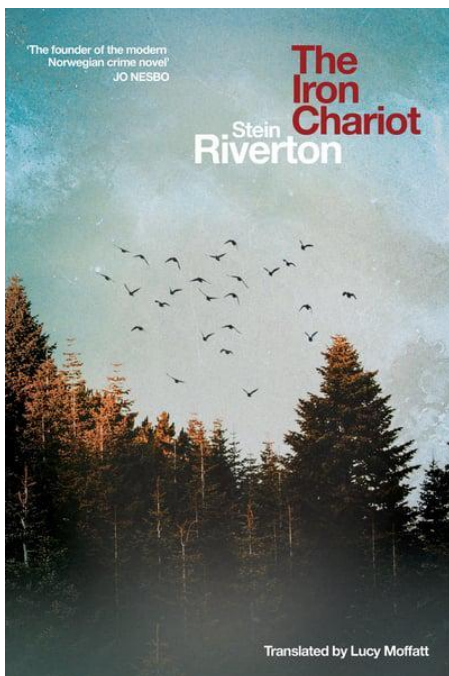
‘It would be most unwise on your part to attempt to silence me as you silenced M. Ackroyd. That kind of business does not succeed against Hercule Poirot, you understand.’

But it is not clear why ‘that kind of business’ might not succeed, and what does Sheppard have to lose in the attempt?

Fortunately for us Sheppard decides on suicide rather than further murder. Poirot lives to solve another crime.

Note on *The Iron Chariot*

In 1909 the Norwegian writer and journalist, Kristoffer Elvestad Svendsen, published the novel *Jernvognen* under the pen name Stein Riverton. The novel has been



beautifully translated into English by Lucy Moffatt in 2017 as *The Iron Chariot*. It is a crime novel in which the narrator turns out to be the murderer. It owes something to Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866). Dostoevsky’s novel, unlike both *The Iron Chariot* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, is written from a third person perspective. Towards the end of the first part of the novel the reader follows the central character, Raskolnikov, as he enters the flat of an elderly woman – a pawnbroker – and murders her with the butt-end of an axe. There are no witnesses and it seems that Raskolnikov will not be identified as the killer. The investigating detective, Porfiry Petrovich, however, latches on to Raskolnikov. He is polite, ironic and sometimes almost obsequious. He engages Raskolnikov in discussions, often apparently unrelated to the investigation. Gradually he wears Raskolnikov

down. Finally Raskolnikov confesses to his crime. This part of the plot of *Crime and Punishment* inspired the American crime TV series *Columbo* starring Peter Falk as the Porfiry Petrovich-like detective.¹ That series turns the whodunnit on its head: at the start of each episode the viewer sees the perpetrator commit the crime. The interest of the story is how the detective, Columbo, who seems always to know intuitively who the criminal is, manages to gain the evidence he needs. Each episode sees Columbo sticking like a limpet to the culprit.

Near the beginning of *The Iron Chariot* a man is found murdered in the countryside. The reader does not know who the murderer is. The narrator is staying at a hotel close to where the murder is committed. A private detective, Asbjørn Krag, from Kristiania (Oslo) is engaged to find the murderer. He immediately attaches himself to the narrator and, just like Porfiry Petrovich, he is polite and ironic and often raises topics of conversation that seem to have nothing to do with his investigation. The

narrator is slowly worn down and when Krag finally accuses him of murder, he effectively confesses through attempting unsuccessfully to kill Krag. The novel is Conan Doyle meets Dostoevsky. It is not a genuine whodunnit - by half way through the book there are no suspects other than the narrator. It is more psychological thriller. An early example of Nordic Noir.

The interest of *The Iron Chariot* in the context of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is that it is a crime novel in which the narrator is the murderer, and written almost 20 years before Christie's book. Both novels face the problem of how to write a successful crime novel in which the narrator is the perpetrator. But the problems are very different. For Stein Riverton the issue was how to sustain suspense and narrative direction as it becomes increasingly obvious to the reader that the narrator committed the murder. As it moves towards its climax the focus is increasingly on the psychological fracturing of the narrator and not on the solution to the murder. For Christie the issue was very different: how to write a genuine whodunnit, with a range of suspects, clues and misdirections, narrated by the murderer without either making the solution too obvious or being unfair to the reader. Towards the end of her career and almost fifty years later Christie wrote a novel that bears much closer comparison with Stein Riverton. Whether or not Christie knew of *Jernvognen* remains unclear.

1. We thank Dr Thomas Marsden for this insight.