

THE POETICS OF NARRATIVE UNRELIABILITY AND READER MISDIRECTION IN THE WORKS OF AGATHA CHRISTIE

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Abstract: This article provides a comprehensive analysis of narrative unreliability and the poetics of reader misdirection in the works of Agatha Christie (1890–1976), the celebrated British detective fiction writer. Drawing on Aristotle’s theory of mimesis, Wayne C. Booth’s concept of the unreliable narrator, and Gérard Genette’s narratology as theoretical frameworks, the study examines four major Christie novels — *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), *And Then There Were None* (1939), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), and *Crooked House* (1949). The article identifies and analyses key narrative mechanisms including the red herring technique, selective silence, unreliable focalization, and metatextual deception. Christie’s strategy of subverting genre conventions is further assessed from a literary-philosophical perspective. The conclusion argues that narrative unreliability in Christie’s fiction functions not merely as a genre device, but as an epistemological challenge that interrogates the very nature of truth and the limits of human cognition.

Keywords: *narrative unreliability, detective fiction, Agatha Christie, red herring, focalization, episteme, narrator, false clue, literary deception, genre subversion.*

1. Introduction

Agatha Christie — the English author who earned the title “Queen of Detective Fiction” — established her genre not merely as a popular form of literature but as a rich field of inquiry for literary theory. Her works have been published in 103 languages worldwide, with total print runs exceeding two billion copies, and continue to be read across the globe.¹

The problem of narrative unreliability has remained a central concern in literary studies from Aristotle’s *Poetics* to the present day. Wayne C. Booth, in his seminal work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), developed the concept of the unreliable narrator.² According to this concept, the narrator is unable — or

¹According to data from Agatha Christie Limited and UNESCO, Christie's works are the most translated literary source in the world after the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. See: UNESCO Index Translationum, 2023.

²Booth, W. C. (1961). *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 158–159.

deliberately unwilling — to provide the reader with complete, trustworthy, or accurate information about events. Christie gave this principle an entirely distinctive form, constructing what might be termed an architecture of narrative deception.

The aim of this article is to analyse the narrative mechanisms operative in Christie's fiction from the perspectives of contemporary narratology, literary semiotics, and epistemology, and to establish their artistic and philosophical significance. The study employs Gérard Genette's theory of focalization,³ Umberto Eco's concept of the "Model Reader",⁴ and Roland Barthes's methodology of narrative analysis.⁵

2. Theoretical Framework: The Concept Of Narrative Unreliability

In Booth's formulation, the unreliable narrator is one who speaks in a manner inconsistent with the norms of the narrative, misrepresents facts, or offers morally problematic judgements. This theoretical concept was subsequently developed by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Peter Lamarque, and other narratologists.

The category of focalization, introduced by Genette, affords a more nuanced analysis of narrative perspective. The distinction between "who sees?" (focalization) and "who speaks?" (narrative voice) is deliberately blurred in Christie's fiction. This technique creates a distinctive epistemic field of play between reader and author.⁶

According to Umberto Eco's theory of the "Model Reader" (1979), every text creates its own "cooperative" reader — that is, it presupposes in the reader a requisite body of knowledge and a capacity for inference.⁷ Christie's works exploit precisely this cooperativity: all information the reader has accepted as reliable is, in fact, deliberately encoded in a misleading fashion.

3. Analysis: narrative mechanisms

The narrator as criminal: *the murder of roger ackroyd*

Christie's 1926 novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* stands as the most radical instance of narrative unreliability in her corpus. Events are narrated in the first person by the physician James Sheppard. The reader naturally accepts a first-

³Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. J. Lewin. Cornell University Press. pp. 185–189.

⁴Eco, U. (1979). *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Indiana University Press. pp. 7–11.

⁵Barthes, R. (1974). *S/Z*. Trans. R. Miller. Hill and Wang. pp. 75–79.

⁶Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. J. Lewin. Cornell University Press. pp. 185–189.

⁷Eco, U. (1979). *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Indiana University Press. pp. 7–11.

person narrator as a trustworthy and impartial witness. Yet at the novel's conclusion it is revealed that Sheppard is not merely a witness, but the perpetrator himself.

In so doing, Christie subverts the classical function of the “homodiegetic narrator” as defined by Genette: the narrator enters the diegetic world, becomes a subject within it, yet conceals this fact from the reader.⁸ Technically, the narrator does not lie — he merely employs strategic silence. In Barthes's terms, this constitutes a deliberate creation of “hermeneutic code gaps”.⁹

Multiplicity and anonymity: *murder on the orient express*

In *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), Christie extends narrative unreliability in a new direction: for both the reader and Poirot, there is no single discernible “criminal”, because the crime has been committed collectively. Each witness presents an individual narrative, and these narratives do not contradict one another; rather, they complement each other.¹⁰

This construction is reminiscent of the Rashomon effect — the multilateral interpretation of a single event. Yet Christie complicates this strategy further: all versions are simultaneously true, that is, all witnesses are simultaneously guilty. This epistemological paradox — truth is not singular but plural — models a postmodernist idea decades before its time.

The Red Herring and the Management of Attention

The red herring — the narrative device that draws the reader's attention in a false direction — is one of the primary instruments in Christie's arsenal. In *And Then There Were None* (1939), this technique is applied systematically: each death appears connected to the preceding one, drawing the reader into a perpetual illusion of sequential causality.¹¹

From a semiotic perspective, the red herring constitutes a “pseudo-sign”: it deliberately disrupts the relationship between signifier (form) and signified (meaning). In Eco's terminology, this is termed “miscoding” — the reader reads the text through an existing system of codes, while the author has activated a different code system.¹²

⁸Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. J. Lewin. Cornell University Press. pp. 185–189.

⁹Barthes, R. (1974). *S/Z*. Trans. R. Miller. Hill and Wang. pp. 75–79.

¹⁰Barnard, R. (1980). *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*. Collins. p. 45.

¹¹Sanders, D. (2009). Narrative Trickery in Agatha Christie's Golden Age Fiction. *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 39(2), p. 193–220.

¹²Eco, U. (1979). *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Indiana University Press. pp. 7–11.

Moral Unreliability in *Crooked House*

In *Crooked House* (1949), Christie adds a new dimension to narrative unreliability: moral unreliability. The criminal is ultimately revealed to be the thirteen-year-old girl Josephine. This disrupts not only the reader's expectations but also their moral schemata.¹³

Booth's reflections on the relationship between normative ethics and aesthetics are particularly pertinent here.¹⁴ Christie presents the morally "guilty" figure not only as atypical in age and gender, but as psychologically indistinguishable from innocence. The reader is compelled to re-examine their moral categories.

4. Discussion: epistemological significance

Christie's narrative strategy is not merely a genre device — it constitutes a significant problem in literary epistemology. As Immanuel Kant emphasised in his theory of knowledge, we perceive reality not directly, but through the mediation of categories and intuitions.¹⁵ Christie materialises this principle at the narrative level: the reader reads the text on the basis of "categories of knowing" — that is, genre conventions — yet these very categories become instruments of deception.

Furthermore, Christie's works raise the problem of "epistemic justice": who is considered a credible speaker? From the perspective of Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic justice,¹⁶ Christie, in certain works, suddenly presents as genuine sources those witnesses who had been deemed unreliable on account of their social standing, gender, or age, thereby exposing the reader's own stereotypes.

Christie's poetics of narrative deception thus takes shape around three core epistemological questions: (1) Who is capable of knowing the truth? (2) To what extent is the knowing subject reliable in the process of cognition? (3) How does society define its criteria of "reliability"? These questions carry the novels beyond the bounds of detective fiction and elevate them to the status of philosophical literature.

¹³Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. J. Lewin. Cornell University Press. pp. 185–189.

¹⁴Booth, W. C. (1961). *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. University of Chicago Press. pp. 158–159.

¹⁵Kant, I. (1999). *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. P. Guyer & A. Wood. Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1787).

¹⁶Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.

5. Conclusion

Narrative unreliability and the poetics of reader misdirection in Agatha Christie's works function as a multi-layered system. The present study arrives at the following conclusions.

First, Christie's construction of the narrator empirically confirms the theoretical models developed by Booth, Genette, and Rimmon-Kenan, and at times surpasses them — most notably in the cases of the homodiegetic unreliable narrator.

Second, the red herring technique and the device of selective silence perform the function of pseudo-signs in semiological terms and exploit the reader's coding system.

Third, Christie's narrative deceptions carry not only aesthetic but profound epistemological significance: they illuminate the limits of cognition, the criteria of credibility, and the relativity of moral categories.

Future research examining Christie's works from the perspectives of gender theory (particularly the differences in perceived reliability between male and female narrators) and postcolonial criticism would considerably enrich the field. In sum, Christie stands among the rare authors who transformed literary deception into an epistemological problematic.

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