

## STUDENT AND TEACHER RESOURCES

AQA A-level English Literature Specification B:  
Elements of crime writing

Written by  
PHIL DARRAGH

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# INTRODUCTION



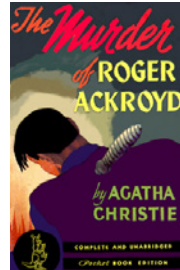
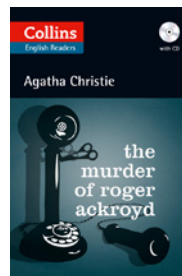
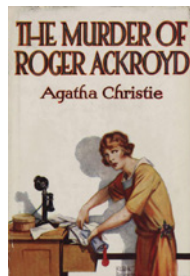
When studying crime fiction from a generic point of view, the approach taken by AQA Literature B, there can be few better places to start than with Agatha Christie, a writer who has done as much to shape the genre as anyone. It is difficult to overestimate her influence; Shakespeare is the only writer who has outsold her and even then only narrowly. Of course, sales are not everything but they are an indication of her widespread appeal and universality. Her work has stood the test of time and continues to influence successive generations of crime writers.

There is, however, a bias against genre fiction. Dickens's novels are full of crime but aren't classed as 'crime fiction'. In her introduction to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Laura Thompson argues that critics like Francis Wyndham who called Christie's work 'animated algebra' which is 'suspended in a world of supreme unreality' are missing the point.

'Christie's simplicity', Thompson suggests, is 'entirely intentional, and indeed as deceptive as the narrative of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Christie had 'a considerable worldly wisdom [... even] cynicism – but saw no need to proclaim this to her readers'. Christie 'never sought to prove herself superior to the genre. She sought merely to purify it.' To enjoy Christie's undeniable skill, it is perhaps best to accept her work as the purest example of its genre and not to see this as a criticism.

## Generic features

Elements of the genre are often readily identifiable from the front of a book. Take a look at these different front covers for the novel:



## Activity

What generic elements can you find in each cover?

What features recur across two or more covers?

What parts of the plot and which characters do you think are featured? Why?

## Reading for Genre

A first reading should be to enjoy the plot twisting and turning to its conclusion. You may find it useful to record key events in each chapter on the **Plot Summary Grid**. On a second reading or for revision you can add to the plot summary grid with ideas about how the narrative unfolds and any clues or foreshadowing that you may have missed on first reading, along with any other useful notes such as links to the other AOs. The row for Chapter 1 has been filled out with some suggestions and the following sections should also give you further ideas.

From now on, I will assume we are on to second reading. No apologies for plot spoilers from this point.

So, when reading a detective novel, what do we expect to find and do we find these elements in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*? How about:

- an unorthodox detective who sees what the others miss – (tick)
- a reliable sidekick who can report the action – (ironic tick)
- serious transgression of moral boundaries – blackmail, theft, drugs, murder (tick)
- arrogant and ineffective police officers who are continually wrong – (tick)
- a range of stock characters as suspects with motive and opportunity – (tick)
- secrets and lies – (tick)
- a society which hides corruption beneath a respectable veneer – (tick)
- an intricate plot with clues, misdirection and red herrings – (tick)
- a solution which provides resolution – (tick).

As you can see, it is not difficult to identify the generic elements in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* but studying it as a literary text opens up more interesting questions:

- How does Christie use these generic features and other authorial methods to create meanings? (AO2)
- How can different contextual factors affect the way the text is read? (AO3)
- What themes, ideas and interpretations are raised, especially when exploring the text from different critical perspectives? (AO5)

Use the **Notes Grid by Theme** to focus your study on key themes and genre features as you read *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* for a second time. The **Notes Grid** looks at the AOs separately and is a useful way of checking that you have covered everything that is required. Remember that in an exam response AO1 is central – you must answer the question with a logical and perceptive argument and cover the other AOs to help you do this in a thorough, analytical and evaluative way.

### Notes

I Thompson, L. (2013). Introduction. In Christie, A. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (pp. x–xi). London: Collins

# AUTHORIAL METHODS



## AO2 – analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts

A focus on the writer as the maker of the text is key to a successful response. In this section, we will focus on how Christie creates the detective drama that is *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

Laura Thompson states that ‘Christie’s simplicity [...] is entirely intentional’ and that she was a writer ‘who wanted to keep every trace of herself from view’.<sup>1</sup> At first sight, this seems to present some problems when exploring and analysing Christie’s authorial methods. We are not going to find rich, detailed descriptions, systems of symbolism or complex character development of the kind we might find in many literary texts. However, as Thompson also states, Christie was ‘a purveyor of puzzles’<sup>2</sup> and it is the way she creates these puzzles that we can analyse.

### Narrative Perspective and Structure

This is central to the way the plot moves forwards to its shocking conclusion. On first publication, the ending caused some anger, with some critics claiming that Christie had cheated them somehow, that it was not fair to hide the solution behind an unreliable narrator. Thompson argues, however, that Dr Sheppard is not really a traditional unreliable narrator; he does not ‘mislead’ but ‘merely elides’.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Dr Sheppard does not tell untruths but omits and implies, guiding our own inferences and judgements as we read the novel. This is why it is so important to read the novel several times in preparation for the exam as these elisions will not be noticed on first reading. Christie herself said:

Some readers have cried indignantly: “Cheating!” – an accusation that I have had pleasure in refuting by calling to attention various turns of phrasing and careful wording.<sup>4</sup>

### Activity

According to Laura Thompson, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* has ‘layer[s] of secrecy’.<sup>5</sup> Dr Sheppard is presented as having the motive of protecting Ralph Paton and this, on first reading, seems to explain any suspicious behaviour or withholding of information on his part.

Look at this conversation between Poirot and Dr Sheppard from Chapter 20. It has just been revealed that Flora Ackroyd did not see her uncle alive at 9.45 on the evening of the murder.

‘The inspector was surprised – but you – you were not.’

‘I never dreamed of her being the thief,’ I expostulated.

‘That – perhaps no. But I was watching your face and you were not – like Inspector Raglan – startled and incredulous.’

I thought for a minute or two.

‘Perhaps you are right,’ I said at last. ‘All along I’ve felt that Flora was keeping back something...’

*continued on next page*

**What different ways might we view this conversation on first and second reading?**

You might think about:

- the pauses in Poirot's dialogue
- the comparison to a certainly innocent character – Inspector Raglan
- the use of the verb 'expostulated'
- the length of time Sheppard takes to think and the phrase 'at last'.

**Look for other examples to include on your plot summary grid as you read the novel.**

### Characterisation

As stated above, there is little in the way of complex characterisation in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Caroline Sheppard is an interesting sketch and her portrayal is explored in the **Different Interpretations** section. Dr Sheppard has more complexity than first meets the eye as we have seen through his 'elisions' and other aspects of his characterisation are dealt with in the **Contexts** section.

All the others are stock characters – two-dimensional types dangled as 'marionettes' by the 'puppet-mistress' Agatha Christie<sup>6</sup>. They are far more important in the ways Christie uses them to serve the plot than they are likely to elicit sympathy or interest from the reader.

### Activity

Look at the Hector Blunt Character Card.

**Try creating Character Cards of your own for the other stock characters. Remember to focus on how Christie uses them to serve the plot.**

### Notes

- 1 Thompson, L. (2013). Introduction. In Christie, A. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (pp. x). London: Collins
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Thompson, L. (2013). Postscript. In Christie, A. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (pp. 300).
- 4 Christie, A. (1948). Introduction. In Christie, A. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (p. 4). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- 5 Thompson, L. (2013). Postscript. In Christie, A. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (pp. 301).
- 6 Thompson, L. (2013). Introduction. In Christie, A. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (pp. 301).

# CONTEXTS



## AO3 Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received

There are a couple of important things to remember about AO3. First, the word significance means two things: importance and meaning. Considering both these definitions allows attempts at evaluation which is a high level skill. Secondly, it is important to integrate any discussion about context into your overall argument and to link your discussion as closely as possible to the text. It is easy to overlay context like including a mini history essay but this is not a helpful approach and will not allow you to address the words ‘significance’ and ‘influence’.

The section on different interpretations explores ways of using Marxist and feminist approaches to help interpret the text. These approaches help with context because they explore how ideas about class, gender and power from the time of production influence meanings in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. As these approaches are already covered, we will look at some other possible contextual approaches.

Your exploration of context should consider both **contexts of production** (things that influenced the writing of the text) and **contexts of reception** (things that influenced the way readers have responded to the text).

Don’t forget that genre is itself a context of production, and that other texts can be a context themselves. Critical views and adaptations are also affected by the context surrounding them, so there is likely to be overlap with AO4 and AO5 in any consideration of context.

### Personal Context (*context of production*)

1925 and 1926 were difficult years in Agatha Christie’s life. By 1925, she had been married to Archie Christie for 10 years and the marriage was under strain. They had moved to Sunningdale, a large village in Berkshire famous for its golf course. Archie loved it but Agatha didn’t and had become, to all intents and purposes, a golf widow. Agatha’s beloved mother lived with the couple but was ill and would die two months before the publication of the novel. Two months after the publication, Archie would ask for a divorce. It is impossible to say exactly how these events affected Christie but, in December 1926, she disappeared for eleven days, an event which added to the allure and mystery surrounding her. The press were sympathetic, assuming she had taken her own life. It was later discovered that Christie had suffered a nervous breakdown.

So, this is a mini history essay as discussed above. How could we apply it to the novel?

### ACTIVITY

Re-read Chapter 16 – An Evening at Mah Jong.

To what extent can this chapter be viewed as a **satirical** description of English middle-class village life in the 1920s, influenced by Christie’s own dissatisfaction with life in a Berkshire village?

*continued on next page*



You might think about:

- the opening paragraph
- the portrayal of the colonel, e.g. his assertions about India and the Shanghai Club
- the portrayal of Miss Gannett e.g. her reading and attitude towards other women
- the juxtaposition of the dialogue about the mystery with the dialogue concerned with the game
- references to annoyance, strain and irritation in the character relationships.

*Key Word: **Satirical** – mocking, or criticising in an ironic way*

### ACTIVITY

Laura Thompson suggests that it is possible to hear ‘the distant sound of Agatha Christie’s own unhappiness in the narrative voice’. There are ‘sudden parenthetical statements’ such as: ‘I have lost the quality of resilience long since myself’ and Caroline describes her brother as ‘weak as water’. Thompson goes on to suggest that Sheppard is reluctantly ‘playing out a pleasureless end game’ in order to ‘maintain respectability in the eyes of society’.<sup>1</sup>

While reading the novel, find examples of this quality of world-weariness in Sheppard’s narrative voice and record them on your plot summary grid.

Then decide how far you agree with the idea that Christie is concerned with world-weary characters and broken relationships, and to what extent this can be seen as a feature of the crime genre.

### **Literary and historical context: America, prohibition and gangster fiction** **(context of production)**

The Volstead Act was passed in the USA in October 1919 to regulate the manufacture, sale and transport of intoxicating liquor. This became known as prohibition and led to a huge rise in organised crime. Although gangster films really established themselves as a genre in the 1930s, stories containing ideas about organised crime had begun to permeate popular culture prior to the publication of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, notably *The Great Gatsby* published in 1924.

So, again, this is a mini history essay. How can we apply these ideas to the text?

### ACTIVITY

Re-read Chapter 19 – Charles Kent. To what extent can Christie’s portrayal of Charles Kent be said to reflect ideas about American gangster fiction?

*continued on next page*

You might think about:

- Charles Kent's attitude to authority
- Christie's portrayal of Charles Kent's dialogue
- contemporary lexis about crime
- the contrast between Charles Kent and the police officers
- how Charles Kent might have been viewed by a contemporary reader
- how a modern reader might view Charles Kent.

### **Literary Context: Sherlock Holmes (*context of production and reception*)**

The novel follows several conventions established in the Sherlock Holmes stories by Conan Doyle. Like Sherlock Holmes, Poirot is a private investigator, an outsider, and a highly skilled, logical thinker. Like Holmes, Poirot trumps the police who are unable to manage the investigation. And like Holmes, Poirot points the reader in the direction of the key facts and questions to be considered in the case.

A further parallel is that both have a doctor as an apparently supportive sidekick to tell their stories – and it is this parallel between Watson and Sheppard, both narrators and doctors, which arguably affects the reception of the novel, as it further guides us towards the acceptance of the narrative which Sheppard presents. The comparison is made explicit in the blurb on the cover of the first edition of the novel which states:

Geniuses like Sherlock Holmes often find a use for faithful mediocrities like Dr Watson, and by a coincidence it is the local doctor who follows Poirot round, and himself tells the story. Furthermore, as seldom happens in these cases, he is instrumental in giving Poirot one of the most valuable clues to the mystery.

The clever phrasing of this blurb equating Sheppard with Watson would certainly have contributed to the deception of the contemporary readers.

One obvious contrast to Sherlock Holmes, however, is that Poirot shares the role of detective with other minor investigators such as Caroline Sheppard, who gathers and shares information from the network of informants she has in the village. Although Poirot, like Holmes, derives much of his success from keeping his thoughts to himself – a wise strategy given the nature of his doctor–helper – he nonetheless relies on information garnered through Caroline's very different approach. The contrast between the traditional, logical, methodical, isolated male expert role, as exemplified through Poirot and Holmes, and the role of the seemingly-nosy female investigator whose relationships and communicativeness actually allow her to ascertain facts very rapidly, as exemplified through Caroline, could reflect societal shifts at the time of writing and provide interesting fodder for a feminist reading of the novel (AO5). Caroline Sheppard certainly acts as a blueprint for Christie's later character of Miss Marple, and shares characteristics with Dorothy L. Sayers' contemporary female sidekick character, Miss Climpson. These women unobtrusively gain access to information that male detectives would struggle to obtain without arousing suspicion.



### ACTIVITY

What further parallels can you identify between Sherlock Holmes stories and this novel?  
 What elements of Sherlock Holmes stories are a staple feature of the crime genre?  
 Why do you think these features continue to appeal to modern readers, as we can see through the success of modern TV series such as *Sherlock*?

### Modern Readings: Shipman (*context of reception*)

In 1998, Dr Harold Shipman was convicted of murder. He was suspected of killing at least 215 of his patients. The conclusion drawn by the coroner was that he enjoyed the power he had over life and death, and he was seen as a cold and calculating killer. The revelation was a shocking one, both to the public and the medical community, especially as doctors have to take a ‘hippocratic oath’ vowing to take care over life and death and not play God. Shipman later committed suicide in 2004. There are similarities to be drawn immediately with *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, both in terms of the societal status of the criminal and the final suicide being viewed as a form of resolution, albeit an unsatisfactory one.

### ACTIVITY

Research the Shipman case and public reactions to the case online. As modern readers, does this case influence your view of the novel and the character of Dr Sheppard?

To what extent do doctors occupy the same status in society now as in the 1920s? Is there still something more shocking about a doctor committing murder than a ‘regular’ citizen?

### Modern Readings: the appeal of the ‘English Village’ (*context of reception*)

*Reminder:* exploring the use of setting is also AO2.

When compared to modern ‘realistic’ crime stories like the TV drama *Broadchurch*, Ian Rankin’s Rebus stories or Kate Atkinson’s *Case Histories*, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* can seem insubstantial, irrelevant and unrealistic. Having said this, the English village setting of the novel has remained popular within crime fiction: for example, the TV detective drama *Midsomer Murders* is approaching its twentieth year in production.

So, how can we explain the enduring appeal of the English village as a setting? Is it just escapism or nostalgia? In his 2003 introduction to the novel, Mathew Prichard (Christie’s grandson) states:

*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* freezes English rural society at a crucial turning point. After the Second World War, rural life in England would never quite be the same again and the key position that characters like Mrs Sheppard played at the hub of community gossip would disappear with the breakdown of social strata and the advent of modern technology. My grandmother continued to exploit this calm and

seemingly innocuous backdrop of village life repeatedly in later works, and used it to offset some of her most heinous and bloody crimes.<sup>2</sup>

### ACTIVITY

Comment on potential modern readings on your notes grid.  
How would you explain the significance of the English village setting to Christie's crime fiction and how would you explain its popularity with modern readers and viewers?

### Adaptations (*context of reception*)

*Reminder:* exploring interpretations of texts is also AO5.

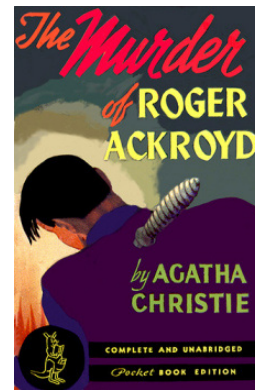
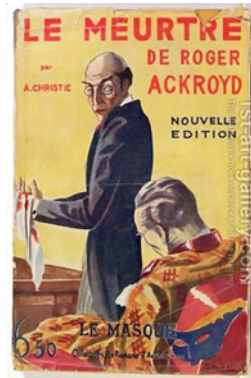
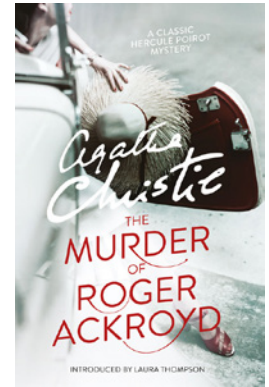
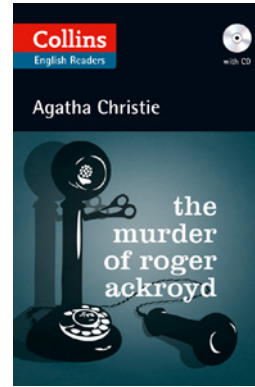
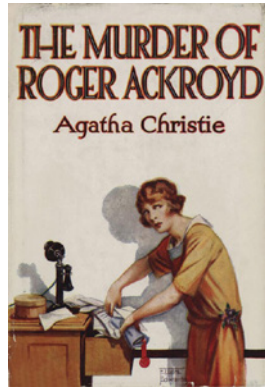
Christie's work has been adapted widely, as you would expect from such a successful writer. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* has been adapted for stage, radio (by Orson Welles), film (English and Russian) and television (2000 ITV adaptation starring David Suchet as Poirot).

It might also be interesting to look at the history of another of Christie's works. In 2015, the BBC's major Christmas drama was an adaptation of *And Then There Were None*. This was first published in 1939 in the UK under the title *Ten Little Niggers*. When it was published in the USA in 1940, the title was changed to *And Then There Were None* for obvious reasons. It has also been known as *Ten Little Negroes*, *Ten Little Indians* and *Ten Little Soldier Boys*. The title changes themselves are revealing about the different contexts of reception for Christie's work.

The writer of the 2015 adaptation, Sarah Phelps, said in her writer's blog on the BBC website of *And Then There Were None*, 'I was shocked at how brutal it was [...] I was really surprised and interested by the fact it was published in 1939 just as war was gathering in Europe [...]. There is someone in charge and that person is malign. It felt brutal and thrilling because of it.'<sup>3</sup> Phelps' surprise at the brutality of Christie's work is not uncommon for the first-time modern reader who perhaps has a picture of Christie as old-fashioned, tame and cosy. Perhaps each generation takes what it wants from Christie's work and perhaps each generation sees something different. Ultra-realistic, dark crime drama is extremely popular in modern times, as evidenced in Scandinoir series *The Killing* and *The Bridge*. Phelps' gritty and dark adaptation shows that a novel which could be seen as having an extremely unlikely plot – ten guilty strangers marooned on an isolated island off the Devon coast – can still appeal strongly to modern tastes.

### Publication over time

Another interesting insight into the ways Christie's work has been received over time and the ways it has been promoted by publishers is to take a second look at some of the front covers.



## ACTIVITY

Try ordering the covers chronologically. What influenced your decisions?  
How have the covers changed over time?  
What do the changes suggest about changes in audiences and views of the text?

### Notes

- 1 Thompson, L. (2013). Postscript. In Christie, A. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (pp. 302). London: Collins
- 2 Pritchard, M. Introduction. In Christie, A. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* © 2003 Agatha Christie Limited, a Chorion company
- 3 BBC Writers' Room Blog: Adapting Agatha Christie's 'And Then There Were None' for BBC One (2015) Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/writersroom/entries/8010ddc5-83eb-418c-9cf3-95cb6cfc8709> (Accessed 9 August 2016).

# DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

**A05: explore literary texts informed by different interpretations**



*Note:* In an exam response, you will need to think about different ways in which the text might be interpreted. It is important to embed this in your overall argument rather than treating it as a bolt-on or added extra. All AOs are assessed in every exam question.

When answering any examination question, it is important to remember that staying focused on the question is vital. Marxist and feminist criticism can be extremely useful in opening up a range of meanings and interpretations but it is important to remember that the unit is called Elements of Crime Fiction so ideas like moral transgression, crime, punishment and reward must remain central to your response. Marxist and feminist criticism can helpfully allow for different interpretations of these generic elements.

Please remember that you can find more detailed information about Marxist and feminist criticism in your *AQA Critical Anthology*.

## Feminism and Marxism

Feminism and Marxism are both critical approaches which explore the role of society in informing 'dominant ideologies'. In other words, they believe it is society which governs attitudes, ideas and behaviours. In any society, the powerful will create, either consciously or subconsciously, ideologies which reinforce their legitimacy to lead or rule in order to control less powerful people.

*Key Word: Ideology* – a set of beliefs which are shared and promoted by the members of a social group or society; a set of ideas which form the basis of a political or economic or other system.

## Feminism

Feminist criticism explores how ideologies about gender and the role of women in society affect our reading of a text. Feminist criticism often looks at how ideas of gender are constructed in a male-dominated, patriarchal society.

One way of arriving at a feminist interpretation of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is to explore how gender is portrayed in the text. From a feminist perspective, gender is often portrayed stereotypically. These stereotypical portrayals can be seen to reflect dominant ideologies, most commonly those of a male-centred, patriarchal society. For example, in a patriarchal society the female gender is often only portrayed as positive when it is 'passive' or 'weak'. So stereotypes like the self-sacrificing martyr and females who are cute but essentially helpless are non-challenging from a patriarchal point of view and are therefore often portrayed positively. Whereas 'active' or 'strong' female stereotypes are seen as challenging male power and are therefore often portrayed negatively, like the dark temptress or the dissatisfied nagging wife. From a feminist point of view, stereotypes like these can be seen as helping to maintain and reinforce patriarchal authority.

So how can we apply these ideas to the characters in the text? Although the author is female, the narrator is male and is therefore likely to see males as behaving 'rationally' and 'logically'. Poirot is consistently portrayed as logical: he orders 'facts' with his 'little grey cells' and holds back from deductions until he is completely sure he is correct. As Laura Thompson states, Poirot is portrayed as, 'in essence, nothing more than a brain, a moustachioed deus ex machina: detective through and through'.<sup>1</sup>

Caroline Sheppard, on the other hand, is portrayed very differently. She has a series of ‘theories’ about the murder. These are based on wild conjecture and change with every new fact she learns. She is portrayed as lacking Poirot’s ability to logically order the facts. When presented with two new pieces of information, she ‘visibly wavered [...] much as a roulette ball might coyly hover between two numbers’ (Chapter 3).

It could be argued, however, that Caroline’s gender prevents her from having any active role in the investigation and, perhaps, in society in general and that this results in her relying constantly on others, especially her brother, for information. She is constantly portrayed as waiting within the confines of her house, often watching at the window. Caroline does, however, make use of all the opportunities available to her in that society which is what makes her such an interesting character. Her brother knows he will not be able to withhold information from her and she is as active as possible in seeking it out in a range of ingenious ways, such as pretending to be vegetarian so as to keep Poirot at dinner with her and her brother, there being only two lamb chops.

Christie herself took ‘great pleasure’ in creating Caroline and was dismayed when she was replaced in a stage version by ‘a young girl with charm and looks and no character whatever’. Christie continued to write strong female characters and herself identified Caroline as ‘the forerunner to Miss Marple’<sup>2</sup> – a female character with Caroline’s social status but Poirot’s power of reasoning. Marple also lacks Poirot’s vanity and arrogance.

### Further Thinking

Explore the way Christie portrays gender through the following characters.

- **Flora Ackroyd** – seemingly a stereotypically sweet, weak and helpless young woman. How would you interpret Flora’s theft of £40, her willingness to marry Ralph Paton – a man she ‘does not care a penny piece’ for, her feelings on receiving an inheritance and her love for Hector Blunt?
- **Ralph Paton** – young, feckless and weak. Is bullied into an engagement with Flora even though he is already married to Ursula Bourne. Keeps his marriage secret even though this results in his wife masquerading as a servant. Easily manipulated by Dr Sheppard.
- **Hector Blunt** – man of action and few words, big game hunter. Uncomfortable in social situations, especially around Flora whom he loves.

### Marxism

A Marxist believes that society is dominated by the concept that ownership of capital (wealth and assets) is the most important thing. Therefore ideologies such as laws are designed, either directly or indirectly, to protect private property and its powerful owners rather than being guided by moral considerations. ‘Capitalist’ ideologies might argue, for instance, that someone is poor not because of limited opportunity or exploitation, but because of some inherent inferiority. A Marxist seeks to criticise the dominance of capitalist ideologies and, in literature, to expose these ideologies in texts.

## ACTIVITY

In crime fiction, ideological structures are often disturbed. The crime itself is often a transgression, or violation, against some moral or legal code. When reading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* from a Marxist perspective, a good starting point is to identify some transgressions. For example:

- Sheppard's murder of Ackroyd
- Flora Ackroyd's theft
- Mrs Cecil Ackroyd's theft
- Ralph and Ursula's secret marriage
- Parker's blackmail.

When looking at each transgression, think about:

- what moral or legal boundary has been crossed
- the outcome of the transgression – is the transgressor punished, rewarded, forgiven (by the reader as well as within the framework of the novel)?

This then leads to a possible exploration:

- To what extent do the outcomes of transgression support or challenge capitalist dominant ideologies, e.g. that property must be protected?

## ACTIVITY

Look at this interpretation:

Roger Ackroyd, the victim, can be viewed as an extremely important symbol from a Marxist perspective. He could represent the powerful force of capital. He has power over nearly every character in the novel, either as their employer or through control of their finances. This power is not used benevolently. Ackroyd is 'choleric' and miserly and there is very little real grief over his death: shock, yes, but not grief. Mrs Ackroyd and Flora complain regularly about not being provided for sufficiently and this leads to two thefts: the £40 and the antique silver. Neither character is punished for their transgression, suggesting a degree of understanding of their actions on the parts of the other characters and, more importantly, the author and reader. Few readers would blame Flora certainly. In the resolution of the novel, Ackroyd's death has actually benefitted more people than it has harmed. Flora, Ralph and Ursula are certainly in a much happier position. From a Marxist point of view, then, Ackroyd being the victim of this detective novel is inevitable. His wealth gave him the power to exploit less powerful people and they were bound to fight back, hence the number of characters with powerful motives. What is perhaps the most surprising thing is that the actual murderer did not stand to make a direct financial gain from Ackroyd's death.

Interestingly, the two characters who behave most morally are both servants: Miss Russell and Ursula Bourne. Both are treated with the utmost suspicion by the other characters. Caroline refers to Miss Russell as an 'adventuress' and Ursula is viewed in a similar way because they are perceived as trying to gain wealth by marrying above their

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station. The other characters perhaps see them as threats because they refuse to defer fully to people of higher social status and are seen as having 'airs'. What is ironic is that the motives they impute to Miss Russell and Ursula are the ones they display all too readily themselves, the desire for wealth and power. As far as the reader can tell, however, neither Ursula nor Miss Russell desire wealth. Miss Russell is secretive because she is trying to protect a wayward son; Ursula detests the secrecy of her marriage to Ralph and wants everything out in the open. It is therefore possible to read the novel as a criticism of capitalism where the desire for money leads to moral bankruptcy.

Explore how far you agree with this interpretation.

You could think about:

- why Ackroyd is a conventional victim for a detective novel
- how Christie portrays class and power in the novel as a whole
- how significant money is in the novel
- how the reader might respond to different characters and the way they behave.

### Notes

- 1 Thompson, L. (2013). Introduction. In Christie, A. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (p. xi).
- 2 Christie, A. (1948). Introduction. In Christie, A. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (p. 4).
- 3 Thompson, L. (2013). Introduction. In Christie, A. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (p. xii).

CHARACTER CARD

# HECTOR BLUNT

Stereotype  
Rating



Suspicion  
Rating



Sympathy  
from reader



<b>Character</b>	<p>Famous big game hunter. Has travelled extensively. Middle-aged and unmarried. Friend of Roger Ackroyd</p>	
<b>Stereotypical Qualities</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<p>Man of few words. Uncomfortable in social situations. Shy with women.</p>
	<b>Class</b>	<p>Upper-class. Could represent aspects of the British Empire and its attitudes, e.g. jokes with Flora about opera: 'Funny idea of pleasure – worse racket than the natives make with their tom-toms. Flora laughed.'</p>
<b>Suspicious</b>	<p>In love with Flora Ackroyd Lost money in an investment Present at King's Abbot for both Ferrars's deaths Knew about Tunisian dagger</p>	
<b>Plot Device</b>	<p>Minor suspect. Conversation with Flora at goldfish pond overheard by Poirot and Dr Sheppard.</p>	



# NOTES GRID BY THEME

Theme/Generic Feature	AO1 Terminology & Relevant Argument/ Quotations	AO2 Authorial Methods	AO3 Contexts	AO4 Connections across Literary Texts	AO5 Interpretations
Deception	<p>Sheppard's status as a doctor facilitates his deception of not only the other characters but the reader as well, e.g. 'I played Watson to his Sherlock'</p> <p>The verb 'played' gives us a clue as to his deceit.</p>	<p>'Played' implies that this is just an act – he is occupying a part in a play. Or that he views this as a game – the Mah Jong game in Chapter 16 operates as a metaphor for this also as he sees himself as a 'clever' player and takes pride in deceiving the other players.</p> <p>The literary allusion to Dr Watson further dupes the reader into accepting the reliability of the first person narrative, as his literary forerunner in Dr Watson sets up the reader's belief that the doctor's relationship with the detective will be a supportive one.</p>	<p>Reception at the time: "Some readers have cried indignantly: "Cheating!" – an accusation that I have had pleasure in refuting by calling to attention various turns of phrasing and careful wording." - Christie</p> <p>This is clearly an example of the 'careful wording' which disguises Sheppard's deception. The indignation that people felt at the time demonstrates how successful the deception has been.</p>	<p>The connection to Sherlock Holmes is clear. Could be seen as the 'orthodox' story referred to in the dedication. The parallel between Poirot and Holmes – both clever outsiders who keep the logical solution of the puzzle to themselves – leads us to believe there is a similar parallel between the two doctors, Dr Watson and Dr Sheppard, making the deceit all the more shocking.</p>	<p>Readers might view the deception as more possible due to his societal status as a doctor, especially following the Shipman case which further demonstrated to the modern reader the easy access to murder weapons which doctors have and the trust we still place in them.</p> <p>A Marxist critique might consider how, in a society bound by capitalist class structures, Dr Sheppard's social status creates a bias in favour of the information he provides in the readers' minds in contrast to information from, for example, the servants</p>
Innocence					
Punishment					
Victims					
Criminal Mind					
Morality & Forgiveness					



# PLOT SUMMARY GRID

Chapter	Summary	How the Narrative Unfolds [AO2 Authorial Methods]	Links to AOs/Useful Notes
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>James Sheppard relates the suicide of Mrs Ferrars.</li> <li>Mr Ferrars died a year earlier.</li> <li>Mrs Ferrars had been looking 'hag-ridden'.</li> <li>Caroline Sheppard suspects her of murder.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Foreshadowing</b> when you know the solution. Dr S – 'considerably upset and worried', 'stirring times ahead', "She didn't leave a letter of any kind," I said sharply.</p> <p>Why <b>begin</b> with Mrs Ferrars' suicide when it is only relevant to Dr S's motive? Seems like a narrative frame on first reading &gt; very skilful misdirection.</p> <p>Everything else points to a reliable narrator, e.g. disapproval of Caroline's wild guesses, mocking humour, e.g. 'mongoose rampant crest', concern for Mrs Ferrars.</p> <p>Veronal overdose <b>foreshadows</b> Dr S's own suicide at end. Points to justice in the resolution.</p>	<p><b>AO3 Contexts</b> Small village setting. Gossip from servants.</p> <p><b>AO2 Generic Features and AO4 Links to Other Crime Fiction</b> Begins with death but not really a crime (on first reading). There is a sense that the death is related, e.g. 'stirring times ahead.' There is conjecture over the motive for Mrs F's suicide which suggests dark secrets under the surface of King's Abbot.</p> <p><b>AO5 Interpretations</b> Feminism – portrayal of Caroline is largely negative from Dr S. Possesses negative stereotypical qualities of an 'acidulated spinster' – gossip, nosiness, wild guesses, and judgement of others. Caroline is forced into passive role by societal expectations. Dr S says she does not have to 'go' to find out but is she restricted from this by her gender and therefore just using the only means at her disposal. Dr S dismisses her interest as nosiness – does he have another reason? Mrs Ferrars – 'the wife of a man like Ashley Ferrars must have had to suffer a good deal' – does this add to Dr S's villainy?</p>

