

The murder of Roger Ackroyd in relation to Auden's "The Guilty Vicarage"



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According to Auden's essay "The Guilty Vicarage," the typical formula for a detective story is the "occurrence of a murder; then, many are suspected, all but one suspect, who happens to be the murderer, are eliminated; finally the murderer is arrested or dies." The narrative of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* follows most of this formula, but diverts in places. First, there is the peaceful state before the murder and thus, the antagonist's false innocence. However, it could be argued that before the murder, there still isn't quite a state of peace - the novel opens announcing the death of Mrs Ferrars, which is soon discovered to be a suicide before the murder. Dr Sheppard is also uneasy, which he shows when he states that seeing Mrs Ferrars and Ralph Paton talking gave him a "foreboding" and it struck him "disagreeably". The 'false innocence' Auden writes about is likely the innocence the antagonist has before they commit the murder, but since they have the intent, it is false - however, Sheppard has already committed a crime, blackmailing Mrs Ferrars to suicide, and although it isn't revealed, Sheppard is still in this state of false innocence, but only in the idea that no one but he knows of his guilt.

Then there is the murder - the revelation of presence of guilt. With the murder comes all the suspects, and there are several suspects in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. However, the person who ends up having the blackest case against them is Ralph Paton, and his case only gets "blacker" as the story progresses (and is also the reason Flora and Ursula hide information from Poirot as they know it could lessen Paton's chance at innocence). Similarly, the innocence of the antagonist is undoubted until Poirot's reveal at the end - the only thing that alludes to the guilt of the antagonist is

Christie's subtle foreshadowing throughout the narrative such as Sheppard feeling "uneasy" with Caroline's involvement in the detection and how he claims to have "played rather cleverly" during a game of Mah Jong, although actually alluding to his attempt to cover up his crime.

Thirdly, there is the false location of guilt - in this case, it starts out as Charles Kent before Miss Russell reveals his true identity, but then it turns out to be Ralph Paton, in spite of Poirot's disbelief of his guilt. He has three motives for killing his uncle: not wanting to be engaged to Flora, his want for money, and to be able to get out of a scrape he's gotten himself into. With all the suspects stepping forward to admit their secrets to Poirot, Paton and Sheppard are the only two left, and Sheppard's narration manipulates the reader into never doubting his innocence.

However, according to Auden, then is the solution - the murderer has been found. In the case of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Poirot reveals this all in chapter 26, but Sheppard only truly admits to his crimes in the final chapter of the novel, stating that he had meant the novel to be "published some day as the history of one of Poirot's failures!" Sheppard's guilt, the so-called 'manifestation', is only revealed after Ralph Paton's appearance, as only then can he clear his name. Sheppard even states how "awkward" it is at Ralph's appearance; the only one left whose name isn't cleared is Sheppard's. Auden states that the audience doesn't know the truth of the crime at all, and only the murderer does, and eventually, the detective - however, when this is supposed to be all revealed, Poirot only reveals it to the murderer, Sheppard, and then to Inspector Raglan.

It becomes more complicated after the solution, as typically the arrest of the murderer should follow. However, Poirot doesn't arrest Sheppard, he rather gives him a choice: either be arrested and executed or commit suicide.

Sheppard chooses the latter. Auden writes in *The Guilty Vicarage* that if the murderer commits suicide, they are unable to repent. However, at the beginning of the novel, this is set up as almost justice for criminal actions through Ackroyd's explanation of Mrs Ferrars' suicide. He states that " She's paid the penalty," by killing herself as justice for poisoning her husband. Christie even emphasises this fact in Mrs Ferrars' own writing: " A life calls for a life." As if it doesn't matter how, but only if it's done. Not only this, but Sheppard is expected to commit suicide in the same way that Mrs Ferrars had - by overdosing on veronal. So although he isn't arrested, there's still a sense of justice for Ackroyd's murder, thus potential for catharsis.

Lastly, what is supposed to take place according to Auden is the peaceful state after the arrest. However, since the narrator of the story is the murderer, the reader never actually gets to see this state. However, in the last chapter, there is an implication that after his death there will be a sort of restoration of order, as there has been justice, as least for the major crimes of the novel. Even then, this is unknown, as throughout the novel the actual crimes of the suspects were revealed: Flora stole from Ackroyd, Parker blackmailed his ex-employer, and Miss Russell has an illegitimate son who is a drug addict. For these crimes, there is no justice, and to an extent, no restoration of peace.