

# Unreliable narration in "the moonlit road" and "in a grove"



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Both "The Moonlit Road" and "In a Grove" are murder mysteries that confront the reader with the question of truth in storytelling. The texts present the reader with several first person testimonies of a crime, or the witness' involvement in it, but give it no definite solution. No one is found guilty and hung; the reader has to decide, given the testimonies and his/her own reason, what happened in the Hetmans' estate and in the grove off the Yamashina stage road. Both texts challenge the reader to construct a definite story from several narratives of questionable reliability. Both texts approach narrative with suspicion; it is a form of communication not to be trusted since it relies on narrators who can never be completely objective or disinterested. Each text presents only one relatively reliable narrator - Joel Hetman Jr. in "The Moonlit Road" and the woodcutter in "In a Grove". The rest of the narrators are not to be trusted. In "The Moonlit Road" the reader needs to rely on the statements of Casper Grattan, a man with no past, and of a ghost that does not think or feel like a human being any more. In "In a Grove" the reader realizes that each witness has a connection to the crime and therefore has an interest which prevents him/her from being objective. The priest shows too much interest in a woman for a holy man, the policeman classifies Tajomaru as a criminal in the beginning of his testimony, Masago's mother is trying to paint a certain picture of her daughter, and the wife, husband and rapist have their own interest in shaping their narratives. The texts see narrative as a form of communication which changes the facts it wishes to present and its reliability according to its medium. Thus in "The Moonlit Road" the reader is directed to assume that some man's violent dreams are Joel Hetman Sr.'s version of the night of his wife's murder, and a medium is assumed to bring the statement of Julia Hetman. These mediums

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are far from being reliable and natural, and therefore the reader cannot determine which part of these statements belongs to the natural world and which part belongs to the supernatural world. In "In a Grove" the reader encounters the same problem: Tajomaro's confession might be somewhat forced, Masago's confession is given in a moment of emotional distress and the husband is talking from the other world, through a medium and even pardons Tajomaro. Again, the mediums are not reliable and the reader cannot determine which part of each testimony can be true. "In a Grove" also argues that narratives change according to social values and conventions: the wife, husband and rapist shape their testimonies in a way that they will still seem honorable to society after the act of shame, the rape. The truth, at this point, is lost and its place taken by the social conventions of honor. Since the texts are presented in a form of a police investigation or a court trial, the reader assumes that the truth must be hidden somewhere inside or between the testimonies of the witnesses. In most investigations or trials the reader receives a definite solution to the crime, but Bierce and Akutagawa offer no such solution. As the testimonies and the witnesses are so unreliable, no definite story can be reconstructed from the narratives. The reader must sift through the testimonies again and again in order to make his or her own conclusion - just as in real life. Learning the truth in the world outside of literature can be as difficult as finding out what happened in the Hetmans' estate and what happened in the grove off the Yamashina stage road. Up to this point, it seems that both "The Moonlit Road" and "In a Grove" are similar: they present a crime, offer first person testimonies of changing reliability, and leave the reader to try and solve the unsolvable mystery. Yet while Akutagawa relates to natural occurrences alone, Bierce

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adds the supernatural dimension, thus diminishing some of the reader's doubts and uncertainties about statements and narratives which he/she encounters in real life, and their lack of reliability. In "The Moonlit Road" the information regarding Julia Hetman's murder, missing from the discourse and the story itself, is explained by the contradicting statements of the unreliable narrators Casper Grattan and the dead Julia Hetman. Both of them are presented as unreliable narrators: Casper Grattan is a man who cannot remember his past, who walked one day out of a forest and is haunted by violent dreams - in another context he could be taken for a mentally ill person, who is by no means reliable. Julia Hetman is no longer a person, and her entire speech conveys the unbridgeable difference between her existence and the human existence, this gap may create misunderstandings and misconceptions in the reader's understanding of her world. Moreover, the medium Bayrolles through whom she is speaking is not necessarily the most reliable person either. Although these factors create unreliable narrators and present an unreachable objective story, in my opinion, they are less likely to influence the reader's view about the narratives in the world outside literature. The causes of unreliability in "The Moonlit Road" are based in the supernatural realm. Adding to that, the story of Joel Hetman Sr.'s disappearance that is told by both the ghost and Casper Grattan in a rather similar way. The limited and supernaturally explained unreliability has less and less connection to the world outside of literature and thus less and less connection to the reader's views of narratives of this world. This stands in complete opposite to "In a Grove". Though the Japanese medieval world is no close to today's reader or to the 1921 (the year "In a Grove" was published) reader, it is still a natural world that adheres to the reader's

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understanding. Each cause for a narrator's unreliability can be found in the world outside of literature - sexual attraction, bias, the will to hide the truth, social conventions, etc., thus shaking the reader's understanding of truth and narratives." "In a Grove" describes a world that makes the reader question the idea of truth in narration far more than "The Moonlit Road", which resorts to the supernatural solution. That is the main difference between the texts - while neither offers a solution to the crime they present, one offers a comforting view as to the problem of conflicting narratives and no final truth, and the other confronts the reader with a never-ending conflict which stems from the problematic human nature.