**The Murder of Roger Ackroyd Summary and Analysis**

Chapters 1 & 2 Summary

It is the morning of September 17th, and Dr. James Sheppard returns home after being called to the house of Mrs. Ferrars, a woman found dead in the night. Dr. Sheppard is worried by her death, and his nosy sister, Caroline, immediately calls him in to breakfast to prod him for details. Mrs. Ferrars’ husband, Ashley Ferrars, died the year before, and Caroline is convinced that Mrs. Ferrars poisoned him. Dr. Sheppard tells Caroline that Mrs. Ferrars died of an overdose of Veronal, a sleeping medication, which cements Caroline’s belief that Mrs. Ferrars committed suicide out of guilt over her husband’s murder. Although Dr. Sheppard argues that Caroline’s assertions are nonsense, he secretly believes she could be right. Caroline further states that Mrs. Ferrars must have left a note of some kind, which Dr. Sheppard sharply rebukes. He reminds her that if he can declare Mrs. Ferrars’ death as nothing more than an accidental overdose, there may not have to be an investigation into the event at all. In Chapter 2, Dr. Sheppard pauses the narrative momentarily to give an account of the major characters in his town, King’s Abbot. He explains that the two wealthiest homes belong to the late Mrs. Ferrars and Roger Ackroyd, a wealthy, genial man who is an esteemed member of the town. Many years before, a short marriage to an alcoholic woman left Ackroyd with a stepson, Ralph Paton, who he raised as his own. Although Ackroyd has been single for many years, the gossip around town was that he and Mrs. Ferrars would probably marry as soon as her period of mourning for her late husband ended. Dr. Sheppard also introduces Miss Russell, the housekeeper at Fernly Park (Ackroyd’s home), and Ackroyd’s sister-in-law, Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd, who came to live at Fernly Park with her daughter when her husband died. There is some tension between the two, particularly because the town suspected Miss Russell of aiming to marry Roger Ackroyd before Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd showed up and worked to prevent such a marriage. Dr. Sheppard then picks up his narrative again. That day, he explains, he went about his day seeing patients, all the while worried about Mrs. Ferrars’ death. He suddenly remembers seeing her the day before, walking, in conversation with Ralph Paton, who he hadn’t known was in town. (The many issues between Ralph and his stepfather had kept Ralph from King’s Abbott for a while.) In the meantime, Dr. Sheppard runs into Roger Ackroyd, who appears nervous and deeply upset by Mrs. Ferrars’ death. He asks Dr. Sheppard to come see him as soon as possible. Dr. Sheppard agrees to come for dinner that evening. After avoiding Miss Gannett, a local town gossip, Dr. Sheppard returns home to see the rest of his patients, and is surprised to find Roger Ackroyd’s housekeeper Miss Russell among them. Although she claims to be there for a sore knee, she detains him to talk about drug addiction – specifically cocaine, and whether someone with an addition to cocaine could ever recover. Dr. Sheppard brings up Veronal, the drug that killed Mrs. Ferrars, but she is uninterested and finishes the conversation by discussing the kind of deadly poisons one encounters in mystery novels.

Chapters 1 & 2 Analysis

The first sentence of the novel begins with the announcement of a death – firmly signaling the detective genre and establishing the event that will set the novel’s plot in motion. As the reader knows from the novel’s title, it is Roger Ackroyd whose death the novel will mostly center around – Mrs. Ferrars’ death is merely a vehicle to allow the novel to begin working towards this end. The first chapter of the novel also establishes the novel’s narrator (Dr. Sheppard), as well as the point of view he narrates from (first person). Although Dr. Sheppard appears to be fairly forthcoming with the facts of the plot, as the reader will ultimately discover, one cannot entirely trust his narration. The first chapter contains a great deal of foreshadowing. Dr. Sheppard’s simple statement that he was “considerably upset and worried” (p.1) contains significant meaning, and actually suggests his profound involvement in the plot. He is not just upset by Mrs. Ferrars’ death, but by the implications that it will have on him. Later on, he suggests that “as a professional man, I naturally aim at discretion” (p. 2), which on the surface seems innocuous, but gains deeper significance given Dr. Sheppard’s actual involvement in the murder. Finally, Caroline’s accusation to her brother that he is a “precious old humbug” (p. 6) is a truer statement than even she knows. His utter duplicity throughout the novel will ultimately prove that this insignificant comment elucidates the novel’s greatest secret. If the first chapter immediately establishes the drama to pique the reader’s interest, the second chapter takes a step back to provide the reader with the necessary backstory to understand the plot. Chapter 2 is literally titled “Who’s Who In King’s Abbot” and describes the characters who inhabit the town as well as the important events leading up to Mrs. Ferrars’ death. Indeed, most of the characters who will become major suspects in Roger Ackroyd’s murder – as well as Ackroyd himself – are introduced in Chapter 2: Ralph Paton, Miss Russell, Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd and a brief reference to Flora. Christie includes many additional details in Chapter 2 that are easy to miss as hints of James Sheppards’ guilt. His displeasure at seeing Mrs. Ferrars and Ralph Paton together, his explanation that when he last saw Mrs. Ferrars her manner had been “normal enough considering – well – considering everything” (p. 10), as well as the “sundry other matters” (p. 10) he contemplates as he completes his rounds “mechanically” (p. 10), all point to a deeper level of guilt. However, Christie references these hints so subtly that it is almost impossible, on a first read of the novel, to recognize them as hints. Instead, Christie immediately draws attention to more overtly suspicious behavior among her other characters – specifically, Ralph Paton being in King’s Abbott without Roger Ackroyd knowing, and Miss Russells’ visit to Dr. Sheppard and her inquiry about drugs. Both of these actions suggest such clear duplicity on the part of Ralph Paton and Miss Russell that the reader is easily distracted from the more mild suspicion around the novel’s narrator. Additionally, the narration’s clarity and seemingly detailed nature appears to have left no stone unturned, so it is easy for the reader to immediately trust Dr. Sheppard and subconsciously cast him as an innocent witness to the events around him. In this way, Christie plays with the idea of a “reliable narrator” – given the general pattern of detective novels in which the narrator is usually an innocent third party, it is almost impossible not to assume Dr. Sheppard will play this same role in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd. We assume Dr. Sheppard is a reliable narrator from the outset because the form of the genre requires it.

Chapter 3 Summary

Dr. Sheppard tells his sister that he will be dining with Roger Ackroyd that night, which she encourages, hoping that he’ll bring home more gossip. They discuss Ralph Paton and the fact that Roger Ackroyd did not know his stepson was back in town. Caroline speculates on what Ralph might have been doing in King’s Abbot without telling her uncle, and guesses that he might be there to see his stepcousin, Flora Ackroyd (Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd’s daughter). Caroline believes Ralph and Flora are secretly engaged. Caroline and Sheppard also discuss their new neighbor, a mysterious man who Caroline could not find any information about, despite her numerous sources of gossip among the servants and tradespeople. Dr. Sheppard goes outside to garden, and is disturbed by a flying squash that their neighbor (who he believes is named “Porrot”) has thrown from his garden. Sheppard and “Porrot” (actually, the reader will later learn, Hercule Poirot) have a brief conversation during which Poirot explains that he has retired to King’s Abbott, but will not reveal his job. Sheppard, meanwhile, admits to losing an inheritance a few years back after speculating poorly. Sheppard initially believes that Poirot is a retired hairdresser, but reconsiders when Poirot reveals his friendship with Roger Ackroyd. Sheppard does not believe Ackroyd would confide in a member of the lower class like a hairdresser. Poirot also reveals that Ackroyd has told him that Flora and Ralph Paton are indeed engaged, but it is not a secret. Rather, Roger Ackroyd is pleased by and encouraged the engagement. Later, Sheppard meets Caroline who has just come home. He tells her he met “Porrot”, while she tells him that she was sneaking through the woods and overheard Ralph Paton having a conversation with a woman she couldn’t identify. In the conversation, Ralph hinted at the inheritance he will get from his estranged stepfather when Roger Ackroyd dies. The two wonder who Ralph could have been talking to – whether Flora Ackroyd or someone totally different. Sheppard decides to visit Ralph Paton at the inn. He and Ralph talk, and Ralph hints that he’s in a lot of trouble, specifically with regards to his stepfather, but he does not explain further. Sheppard offers to help, but Ralph responds mysteriously that he must proceed alone.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 finally introduces the novel’s most famous character – the detective Hercule Poirot. Even so, in his first introduction he is referred to by the wrong name (“Porrott”), and he will not correct that error for a few more chapters. This adds a level of mystery to Hercule Poirot that deepens the interest that Dr. Sheppard (and, of course, nosy Caroline) as well as the reader all have towards Poirot. Poirot is initially introduced not as a famous detective, but as a retiree struggling with garden squashes. This is characteristic of Christie, whose other major detective, Miss Marple, is characterized as a doddering old lady rather than a suave and impressive figure. Throughout the novel, Sheppard remains unconvinced of Poirot’s genius, even as he repeatedly demonstrates brilliant and thorough observations and deductions. Sheppard takes great pain to point out Poirot’s less impressive characteristics, such as his slightly pompous nature and small build. Ultimately, Poirot's genius undermines Sheppard’s unimpressed attitude, another way that Sheppard proves an “unreliable narrator”. Poirot’s accomplishments, on the other hand, will prove more remarkable for these apparent shortcomings. Once again, in this chapter, Dr. Sheppard repeatedly emphasizes his sister’s attempts at duplicity (in trying to find out more about Poirot, for example), which distracts the reader from any suspicions they may form towards Sheppard himself. Despite his ambivalent opinion of his neighbor, Poirot’s skill is apparent in his first encounter with Dr. Sheppard. Sheppard describes Poirot as “an understanding little man” (p. 20), and within moments of meeting the detective, Sheppard confesses the very motive which will prove so damning and critical by the novel’s end. In the course of a benign conversation, Sheppard admits that he came into money a few years before, but speculated poorly and used it up. Although it seems like no more than extraneous conversation at the time (and indeed, Christie includes much extraneous conversation in her novel to keep the reader distracted – such as Sheppard’s conversation with Caroline earlier in the chapter about whether Poirot is a hairdresser), this small kernel of information will prove the crux of the novel’s more sinister turns. The novel proceeds at a quick pace. As clues emerge one after another, it is easy to miss small details that condemn or cast suspicion on the guilty party – exactly what Christie intends with her mystery. Before the reader can linger on Sheppard’s conversation with Poirot (and the clear motive Christie gives Sheppard to pursue money and financial freedom), two more major plot events are introduced: the conversation that Caroline overhears between Ralph and the mystery woman in the forest, and Sheppard’s visit to Ralph at the inn. At the end of Chapter 3, Christie employs one of the major ways she (and Sheppard) mislead the reader – not by doling out false information, but rather by withholding information. The scene between Sheppard and Ralph appears to end when the chapter ends, with Ralph’s ominous assertion that he must “play a lone hand…”, but the ellipsis at the end of this chapter cannot be considered too lightly. As the reader will ultimately discover, there is much more to this scene than the chapter revealed, plenty of conversation that occurred after this ellipsis, where Ralph told Sheppard much more about what was going on with him.

Chapter 4 Summary

Dr. Sheppard arrives at Fernly Park for dinner and is greeted by Roger Ackroyd’s butler, Parker. He runs into Ackroyd’s young secretary, Raymond, who remarks on the big black bag Sheppard has brought. The doctor explains that although he is there socially, he expects to be called at any moment to another case and has thus brought his doctor’s instruments with him. Dr. Sheppard goes to Ackroyd’s drawing room to wait for the rest of the dinner guests – on entering, he hears a noise that he later identifies as the lid to a silver display table being closed. He runs into Ackroyd’s secretary, Miss Russell, who seems shaken and displeased to have run into Dr. Sheppard as she leaves the room. Flora Ackroyd, Roger Ackroyd’s niece, enters, and greets Dr. Sheppard. She announces to Dr. Sheppard that she and Ralph Paton are to be married, which her uncle is very pleased by. Then, Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd enters. Although Dr. Sheppard does not like Mrs. Ackroyd for her speculative nature and insincerity, he converses with her for a little. Major Blunt, a big game hunter and friend of Roger Ackroyd who is staying with him for a few weeks, enters. He greets the doctor and joins Flora Ackroyd. Finally, Ackroyd and his secretary Raymond join them, and they all go to dinner, where Ackroyd, preoccupied and upset, barely eats. After dinner, Roger Ackroyd pulls Dr. Sheppard into his study. He pretends to ask for pills to distract his butler, Parker, but once Parker is gone Ackroyd begins explaining what’s truly going on. He admits to Dr. Sheppard that before she died, Mrs. Ferrars confessed to him that she’d poisoned her husband. In the intervening year, someone who knew what she’d done had been blackmailing her, and the stress, fear, and financial strain of it had finally caused her to break. Sullied as she was, she could never marry Roger Ackroyd – instead, Ackroyd believes, she killed herself to escape the blackmailer. Although Mrs. Ferrars never told him the blackmailer’s name, Roger Ackroyd is convinced that she has left some kind of message for him. Indeed, immediately after he says that, Parker arrives with the evening mail, which contains a letter from the late Mrs. Ferrars. Roger Ackroyd begins to read: in it, Mrs. Ferrars asks him to punish her blackmailer, who she will name in the letter. Before he gets to the name, however, Ackroyd stops, telling Sheppard he must finish the letter alone. Sheppard cannot convince Ackroyd to finish reading the letter while he’s there. Some time later, he leaves, running into Parker at the door. He tells Parker not to disturb Ackroyd, and begins his walk. At the gates of Ackroyd’s estate, he meets a mysterious stranger who asks for directions to Fenly Park. Finally, Sheppard arrives home and is just heading off to bed when the phone rings. He tells Caroline that it is Parker, informing him that Roger Ackroyd has been found murdered.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The division of Chapter 4 into two parts (the only time the novel does this) serves to build the tension around Sheppard’s dinner with Ackroyd. Part 1 describes Dr. Sheppard’s actions leading up to and during dinner and Part 2 picks up afterwords with the events following dinner. In this way, Christie paints a clear portrait of the events of the evening without tiring the reader with tedious details. Additionally, the literary structure helps lend significance to the evening. Sheppard’s focus on retelling the events of the night with such absolute clarity suggests the importance of the night, and the major event that will soon occur. Dr. Sheppard’s subsequent introduction of the rest of Ackroyd’s dinner guests clearly indicates the characters that will be the major suspects for the crime to come. Besides Ralph Paton and Miss Russell, who he has already introduced, he carefully describes Flora, Mrs. Ackroyd, Raymond and Major Blunt – a more detailed description of Parker, the butler, and Ursula Bourne, the parlormaid, will come later. Sheppard (and Christie) are clear to indicate not just the appearance of the characters, but also their perceived emotional states and backgrounds, as though painting as thorough a picture as possible of all the potential murderers. When Sheppard finally does speak to Roger Ackroyd, his anxiety and fearfulness, as well as his reluctance to speak truthfully about what is going on, helps to add to the suspense already established by the chapter’s division. Sheppard describes not just the events that follow, but the times of these events – ten to 9 pm when he leaves Ackroyd, 9 pm when he reaches the gate, 10 pm when he arrives home, etc. These relatively precise inclusions add a further level of ominousness to the chapter – as though a key witness precisely records the events of the night. Additionally, they can be read as Sheppard providing his own alibi to the crime that is to come. Once again Christie brilliantly gives the reader clues to Sheppard’s true intentions. After Roger Ackroyd tells him that Mrs. Ferrars’ had been blackmailed, he immediately asks by who. A paragraph follows which, on first reading, seems to imply that Sheppard is afraid Ralph Paton is the blackmailer. “Suddenly before my eyes there arose the picture of Ralph Paton and Mrs. Ferrars side by side…. Supposing—oh! But surely that was impossible. I remembered the frankness of Ralph’s greeting that very afternoon. Absurd!” (p. 39). On a first read, this sentence seems to suggest Dr. Sheppard’s fear that Ralph Patton could be Mrs. Ferrars blackmailer. However, a closer read demonstrates that it just as clearly establishes Sheppard’s fear that Mrs. Ferrars told Ralph Paton that Sheppard himself was her blackmailer. The ambiguity of the sentence, its subtlety within the context of Sheppard’s guilt, helps deepen the mystery around the novel’s true villain. So, too, does Sheppard’s quick introduction of two more suspects. Immediately after he leaves Roger Ackroyd, he runs into Parker, the butler, who until this point he has described neutrally. Now, suddenly, he sees Parker as having a “fat, smug, oily face…there was something decidedly shifty in his eye” (p. 44) – the marks of a shady and unappealing character. Then, walking from Fernly Hall, he meets a stranger with a hoarse voice, who is consciously guarding his face. The presentation of these two suspicious characters, suddenly, provides the reader with immediate suspects for the crime that is to come, potentially distracting from any holes or questions in Sheppard’s own story.

Chapters 5 & 6 Summary

Dr. Sheppard arrives back at Fernly Park and demands that Parker take him to Ackroyd’s body. Parker, surprised, asks what he is talking about. Dr. Sheppard is surprised to hear that Parker did not deliver the mysterious phone message. He hopes that means the call was just a practical joke, but just in case, Dr. Sheppard insists on seeing Ackroyd to confirm for himself that he is fine. Parker and Dr. Sheppard go to Ackroyd’s office, but the door is locked. The two bang on the door but there is no answer, so instead they break down the door with a nearby chair. Inside, they discover Ackroyd’s body lifeless in a chair with a metal dagger in his neck. Parker leaves to call the police and inform Raymond and Major Blunt, while Sheppard stays with the body. Raymond, Major Blunt and Parker return, and the four speculate on who killed Roger Ackroyd and for what reason. Raymond insists that nothing major has been stolen, but Sheppard notices that the envelope from Mrs. Ferrars is gone. Finally, the inspector arrives, and Sheppard and Parker explain the mysterious phone message as well as their discovery of the body. The group discovers that the window, which Sheppard insists he closed earlier, is now open, and they see footsteps in the mud outside, which the Inspector believes were caused by the murderer fleeing. Sheppard remembers the mysterious man he saw approaching Fernly Park earlier, but Parker insists that no one has come through the front door all night. Sheppard confirms that he left Ackroyd at ten minutes to 9 pm, but Raymond, meanwhile, tells the group that he heard Roger Ackroyd talking around 9:30 pm – at the time he thought it was with Dr. Sheppard, but now he doesn’t know who it could have been. Raymond states that the little of the conversation he overheard involved Ackroyd stating, “The calls on my purse have been so frequent of late that I fear it is impossible for me to accede to your request” (p. 56). Parker informs the inspector that he saw Flora Ackroyd leaving her uncle’s study at 9:45 pm. He admits that he had gone to deliver Ackroyd’s nightly whisky and soda, having forgotten Ackroyd’s earlier request that he be left alone. The inspector asks to talk to Flora, and Raymond goes to fetch her. They pretend to ask her about a robbery, not wanting to upset her with news of the murder, and she confirms that she saw her uncle around 9:45 to wish him goodnight. Finally, they admit to her that her uncle was killed, and, in shock, she faints. Blunt wakes Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd to tell her the news and so she can attend to Flora. Meanwhile, the inspector asks Dr. Sheppard about the stranger. Sheppard remembers that while he recognized something familiar about the man’s voice, it sounded somewhat disguised. The two go back to Ackroyd’s study, where the inspector reveals that, in asking Parker some questions about the murder, Parker mentioned something about Ackroyd and blackmail. Sheppard decides to tell the inspector everything he has related so far with regards to Mrs. Ferrars and Roger Ackroyd. The inspector replies that this gives them a clear motive for the murderer – who he now believes is Parker. He thinks Ackroyd discovered Parker had been blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars, then accused Parker, who killed Ackroyd in response, before placing the call to Dr. Sheppard. Meanwhile, they examine the murder weapon – a decorative dagger. They discover fingerprints on the dagger, and seek out Raymond to see if he recognizes the weapon. Raymond identifies the dagger as a curio given to Roger Ackroyd from Major Blunt, who, when called, verifies this. The dagger had been stored in the silver table with the lid that Dr. Sheppard had studied earlier in the drawing room. He explains how he was sure that he heard the lid being lowered earlier in the day before dinner. They question Miss Russell, who confirms that she lowered the lid to the table when she was in the drawing room that evening. She can’t remember if the dagger was there or not when she lowered the lid. They agree that anyone could have picked up the weapon at any point during the day. The inspector locks up the study until his boss Colonel Melrose can study the crime scene the next day. Raymond observes the inspector rather obviously trying to sneak a sample of Parker’s fingerprints, and he gamely offers the inspector business cards with his and Dr. Sheppard’s fingerprints, as well. Dr. Sheppard finally arrives home, where Caroline awaits to hear the whole story. He explains that the police suspect Parker, but she dismisses this idea as ridiculous.

Chapters 5 & 6 Analysis

Chapter 5 finally delivers the murder that the novel’s title has been promising. The discovery of Ackroyd’s body, as well as the resulting flurry of activity, deliver many more clues as to the identity of the murderer. Once again the reader remains in the hands of Sheppard as narrator, and once again, as the reader will ultimately discover, Sheppard deceives by omission. When explaining Mrs. Ferrars’ blackmail issue to the inspector in Chapter 6, Sheppard writes that he “narrated the whole events of the evening as I have set them down here” (p 62-3), a statement that appears to imply he told the inspector everything he knew, but instead actually implies that he deceived the inspector the same way he deceived the reader. Not that the suspicious behavior of the other characters is fabricated. Luckily for the deceitful Dr. Sheppard, everyone in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd has something to hide, and must act dishonest when the force of the inspector’s office comes sweeping down on them. Flora’s discomfort when she’s first gets questioned by the inspector, Parker’s guilt over the accusation of sneaking around – all of this behavior is that of truly guilty parties. However the guilt is displayed by all the characters of the novel for many different offenses. The inspector’s arrival and rather obvious pomposity and incompetence in Chapter 6 – from his excitement over the fingerprints on the dagger to his awkward attempts to collect Parker’s fingerprints – will only serve to emphasize Poirot’s considerable skill when he eventually enters the investigation. Although the inspector is only one of many police detectives who will be working on the case, he is the first responder and clearly, in Dr. Sheppard’s view, not the skilled officer that he thinks he is. It is interesting to note the tone of the novel, especially in the chapters directly before and after Ackroyd’s murder. Although not a humorous novel, there is nonetheless a lightness with which Christie describes the murder. It is a subject of fascination and interest, rather than something grizzly and upsetting. The characters certainly react to Ackroyd’s murder with horror, but Christie does not intend to terrify her reader. Instead, as a murder mystery, the novel is meant to be interesting and intriguing like a puzzle. Christie achieves this lightness by focusing on clues and details of the potential suspects, rather than, for example, detailed descriptions of the victim, or lengthy explanations of other characters’ grief.

Chapters 7 & 8 Summary

The next morning, Flora Ackroyd comes to visit Dr. Sheppard. She asks him to go next door with her to try and convince Hercule Poirot (who, she explains, is actually a famous detective who has retired to King’s Abbott for anonymity) to help solve her uncle’s murder. Although Caroline offers to join them, Flora insists on Dr. Sheppard, who can provide the details of the murder as he found the body. She is worried that Ralph Paton, her betrothed, will be implicated in the murder and she hopes that Poirot can clear his name. A new inspector, Inspector Raglan, has been asking questions and it is clear that he suspects Ralph. Dr. Sheppard tries to dissuade her, but she insists. She reveals that she tried to visit Ralph that morning, but the staff at the inn informed her that he went out the night before around 9 pm and never came back. They also informed her that Dr. Sheppard had attempted to visit Ralph the night before, which she takes as evidence that he cares for Ralph and wants to prove his innocence too. Dr. Sheppard and Flora go to Poirot’s house, where he greets them warmly. He agrees to help investigate the case, but not before telling them significantly that in agreeing, he commits to finding the complete truth. Dr. Sheppard recounts the events of the previous night, ending by admitting that he did go to the inn on his way home to inform Ralph of his uncle’s murder, but found Ralph gone. Poirot invites Dr. Sheppard to accompany him to the local police, where they meet with Inspector Davis (who was the first on the scene the night before), Inspector Raglan and Colonel Melrose. Inspector Raglan is frustrated by the idea of having Poirot help investigate, but Poirot flatters him into acquiescence. Raglan reveals that Ralph Paton is indeed the lead suspect – he is confirmed to have disappeared around 9:30 pm the night before and was known to have been in financial trouble. Additionally, they believe he owns two pairs of shoes that match the footprints found outside Ackroyd’s window. The group heads to Fernly Park to compare the shoes they found in Ralph’s room at the inn to the footprints outside the window. When they get there, Poirot, Dr. Sheppard, and Colonel Melrose go to investigate Ackroyd’s study while Inspector Raglan compares the footprints. Poirot studies the room. He asks Parker whether there was a fire in the grate when they found Ackroyd’s body the night before. Parker responds that it had burned down quite low. He also informs Poirot that the grandfather chair, which normally sits in the corner of the room, had been pulled out quite a bit. Poirot becomes fascinated by this detail, claiming no one would sit in a chair so awkwardly pulled out in the middle of the room. None of the suspects can tell him who pushed it back, although Parker affirms that it was moved back by the time he arrived with the police. The window was closed when Sheppard left Roger Ackroyd, but opened when they found the body. Poirot explains that the fire burning down low means that Ackroyd would not have opened the window because the room got too hot – instead, it proves that he must have opened it to admit someone. This makes him interested to determine who was with Ackroyd at 9:30 the previous night. In the meantime, Colonel Melrose arrives, informing the two that they traced the call to Dr. Sheppard that supposedly came from Parker at Fernly Park – it actually came from a public call office at King’s Abbott Station. The group is baffled by the news that the call came from King Abbott station. Poirot insists that when they discover the truth of the call, they will have solved the case. He calls in Raymond and Parker to ask if Ackroyd had admitted any strangers the week before (who might be the same stranger that Sheppard met at the gates). Raymond insists that he did not move the grandfather chair back from its position in the middle of the room the night before. Raymond and Parker remember a stranger visiting Ackroyd the previous week to try and sell Ackroyd a dictaphone, but no one else suspicious. They realize he was too short to have been the tall stranger Sheppard met at the gates. Poirot examines the silver table from which the murder weapon was taken. He and Sheppard then run into Inspector Raglan. Raglan shows them a list he’s made of everyone in the house and what they were doing between 9:45 and 10:00 pm. Since Flora left her uncle at 9:45 and Dr. Sheppard insisted that Ackroyd had been dead at least a half hour when he found the body at 10:30, Ackroyd must have been killed during the 15-minute window. Raglan tells them that the woman living at the lodge by the entrance to Fernly Park confirms she saw Ralph Paton running towards Ackroyd’s house at 9:25 pm. Raglan tells them he is convinced that Paton committed the murder – he snuck into his uncle’s study, asked him for money and when refused, left, but returned later to kill Ackroyd before fleeing the town. Poirot is unsatisfied with this explanation, and demands to know why Paton would have called Dr. Sheppard from the train station and pretended to be Parker. Poirot studies the footprints that Raglan is convinced are Ralph Paton’s, arguing that many people have shoes with studs who could have made the tracks, not just Ralph Paton. He also points out a woman’s footprints. The woman’s footprints appear to lead to a summerhouse, which Poirot investigates. He discovers on the floor a goose quill and a piece of white fabric.

Chapters 7 & 8 Analysis

Chapter 7 affords the reader the first opportunity to see Poirot “in action” investigating Ackroyd’s murder. One of the main conventions of most of Christie’s mystery novels is a central detective – although usually (between Poirot and Miss Marple) an unexpected hero, they are nonetheless brilliant and exceptionally observant. Poirot’s thoughtfulness and focus in listening to Sheppard’s account of the previous night, as well as in investigating Ackroyd’s study, immediately pique both Sheppard and the reader’s interest. Throughout the novel, Poirot’s brilliance will constantly leave the reader and the rest of the characters one step behind, knowing that the detective is getting closer and closer to solving the murder, but stuck in the dark as to the conclusions he draws. This prolongs the mystery, allowing the reader to attempt to come to his own conclusions about the murderer, and makes it all the more satisfying when, at the end of the novel, Poirot finally reveals everything he knows. Poirot asks Sheppard about the fire in the grate, but then immediately backtracks, explaining that in order to find out about the fire, he must ask the man who would know to check the fire – the butler, Parker. “One must always proceed with method” he says, “To each man his own knowledge” (p. 83). Poirot, here, gives the first indication of his “method” – his ability to understand just what information he can get from each person involved in the case. Every witness and suspect can provide their own clues to help him solve the murder. However, he must know the right questions to ask, then piece together these clues to form the truth of what happened. No other investigator would have thought to ask Parker about the fire, but this clue enables Poirot to deduce that Ackroyd probably opened the window to let in a visitor. Several times throughout these chapters, Sheppard makes reference to Poirot’s inaccessible methods. “I felt he were looking at the case from some peculiar angle of his own, and what he saw I could not tell” (p. 88) he says. In this way, Sheppard creates a division between Poirot and himself, and, by extension, the reader. The implication is that Poirot stays several steps ahead of everyone else – that the observations and clues he picks up on have a deeper and different significance to him than to anyone else. So Christie encourages her reader to attempt to match Poirot in deductions, adding to the “game-like” feel of the mystery. Throughout the novel, Poirot refers to Dr. Sheppard as a sort of replacement for his long-time friend Arthur Hastings. The best friend of Poirot, Hastings appears as a character in eight Poirot novels, in addition to narrating even more than that. He is the companion-chronicler of Poirot. Sheppard, who narrates the novel like Hastings might, and follows Poirot as he investigates, seems initially to fill this role in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd. “You must have been sent from the good God to replace my friend Hastings” Poirot says to Sheppard in Chapter 8, “I observe that you do not quit my side” (p. 97-8). Although it appears, indeed, that Dr. Sheppard is "the new Hastings" in the novel, ultimately his decision to remain so close to Poirot has a very different implication. That is, he wants to follow Poirot’s footsteps to stay on top of how much Poirot knows and suspects. Sheppard, then, is actually revealed as a sort of anti-Hastings, the very person Poirot is looking to discover: his enemy, not his ally. In this way, Christie subverts the genre that she herself created. She takes the “brilliant detective/loyal chronicler and friend” trope and undermines it by having the loyal friend actually turn out to be the enemy.

Chapters 9 & 10 Summary

Poirot and Sheppard wander the grounds of Fernly Park until they reach a recessed seat that overlooks a goldfish pond. There, they overhear a conversation between a buoyant Flora Ackroyd and Major Blunt. Flora has just learned that her uncle’s will left her a huge inheritance. She is joyful. She is now free from the burden of financial dependence on her relatives. Poirot and Sheppard reveal themselves, and Poirot asks Major Blunt about the events of the night before. Blunt tells him he was walking on the terrace when he overheard Ackroyd talking to someone in his study. He got close enough to the study to hear Ackroyd because he thought he noticed a woman in white disappearing into the bushes, and had moved closer to see. Blunt assumed that Ackroyd was talking to his secretary, Raymond. He also insists that he didn’t move the grandfather chair. Meanwhile, Flora assures them that when she was examining the silver table with Dr. Sheppard before dinner, the dagger was not there. She is frustrated because the inspectors believe she is just saying that to protect Ralph Paton, who they believe snuck into the drawing room later in the night to take the dagger from the table. Poirot changes the subject by attempting to fetch something shiny from the bottom of the goldfish pond that Major Blunt had spotted earlier. He claims he cannot find it, but later, when the four are walking back to lunch, he secretly shows Sheppard what he found. It is a wedding ring, inscribed with the phrase “From R, March 13”. Before lunch, Poirot and Sheppard meet Ackroyd’s lawyer, Mr. Hammond, who explains that the terms of Ackroyd’s will grant a small living stipend to Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd, 20,000 pounds to Flora Ackroyd, 1000 pounds to Miss Russell, 500 pounds to Raymond, and the rest – a considerable sum – to Ralph Paton. Hammond also confirms that Ralph is perpetually in want of money. Poirot asks Dr. Sheppard to conduct a private conversation with Major Blunt about Mrs. Ferrars. He wants Dr. Sheppard to ask if Major Blunt was around when Mrs. Ferrars’ husband died. He is particularly interested in Major Blunt’s response. Dr. Sheppard carries out the plan, but finds nothing suspicious in Major Blunt’s reaction to his question. He does learn that Blunt is currently a bit hard up for money, having invested poorly, but otherwise reports nothing suspicious to Poirot. After lunch, Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd complains to Dr. Sheppard about the financial strain of dependence on Roger Ackroyd for herself and Flora. She further complains about Ackroyd’s decision to will 1000 pounds to Miss Russell. Mr. Hammond asks her if she’s all set for money for a few days, and she informs him that she’s fine – Ackroyd had cashed a check for 100 pounds just a few days before. The group next goes up to Ackroyd’s bedroom to confirm that the 100 pounds that Ackroyd cashed a few days before remains intact. The inspector unlocks the door to Ackroyd’s wing of the house, and Raymond counts the money, which Ackroyd kept in an unlocked drawer near his bed. They discover that forty pounds have been removed from the stack. The inspector questions whether any of the servants could have removed the money. Mrs. Ackroyd does not think so, but she does share that the parlormaid, Ursula Bourne, had given notice that she was quitting just the day before. They seek out Miss Russell, who confirms that the housemaid Elise Dale, who was in charge of Ackroyd’s room, was a trustworthy girl. Miss Russell further comments that she does not know why Ursula Bourne decided to quit, but that she’d had an argument with Ackroyd about disarranging some papers on his desk and given notice shortly after that. They question Ursula Bourne. She confirms that she decided to quit after Ackroyd got annoyed with her for moving the papers on his desk. Poirot asks her how long the conversation about her dismissal lasted, and she tells him it was probably twenty to thirty minutes. They question Elise Dale, the housemaid, and find nothing suspicious about her. Later, Poirot and Dr. Sheppard leave, and Poirot brings up his doubt that Ackroyd would have dismissed a parlormaid over something as trivial as the papers on his desk. He also brings up the fact that on Inspector Raglan’s list, Ursula Bourne was the only person whose alibi had no confirmation from anyone else. He requests that Sheppard travel to the home of Ursula Bourne’s employers the following day to find out what he can about her. Poirot confesses that all signs point to Ralph Paton as the murderer, but since he promised Flora he’d leave no stone unturned, he will keep investigating.

Chapters 9 & 10 Analysis

One of the most interesting facts about Ackroyd’s murder – and one of the reasons it makes for such a good murder mystery – is how many people stood to benefit from it. This can be observed with Flora, who, in Chapter 9, is thrilled by the news of her inheritance after her uncle’s death. Although she is clearly grief-striken by the news, his death nonetheless represents freedom for her – with the inheritance money, she finally attains freedom from the hold that financial worries placed on her her whole life. Although just a small point in the novel, it clearly illustrates one of Christie’s major themes: in life, nothing is as it seems. Although Flora appears as one of the “freer” characters in the play – an upper-class woman who lives off her Uncle’s generosity – she is actually one of the most trapped. Her position as a dependent female means she has to beg her uncle for every cent that she gets, and the societal pressure she faces to maintain a certain image necessitates spending a lot of money she doesn’t have. Ironically, although he was her benefactor in life, his death actually frees her from the prison of this relationship – she no longer has to beg him for everything, and instead has the means to provide for herself. The ring that Poirot discovers at the bottom of the lake is later revealed to be a wedding ring that Ralph Paton gave to his secret lover, Ursula Bourne. The ring, a clear symbol of their relationship, has been dropped in the mud, just as their relationship is currently experiencing difficulties and not in the most pristine shape. Should the truth of their relationship come out, their names, just like the ring, will surely be dragged through the mud of town gossip. As Poirot continues to investigate, the reader again can see the thorough method he employs in his inquiries. In Chapter 8, he refers to his “little grey cells” (p. 93), referencing the logic and analysis that he uses to deduce the truth of a case, and in Chapters 9 and 10 Sheppard observes him putting his "grey cells" to use. Although Raglan, chasing clues, tediously collected alibis from every member of the house, he wasn’t able to then analyze his data to realize that only Ursula Bourne had an alibi that wasn’t confirmed or witnessed by anyone else. Poirot, instead, makes that connection, causing him to consider Bourne more carefully as a potential suspect. This leads him to get Sheppard to visit her former employers’ home, where he will have more cause for suspicion. Eventually, by following this one thread of the case, Poirot will crack a major component (Bourne’s relationship with Ralph) wide open, which will help exonerate Ralph. This is the “method” that Poirot constantly references throughout the novel, which somewhat contrasts with the obsession over physical clues like fingerprints and footprints that the other inspectors have. Ultimately, the truth of both the fingerprints on the dagger as well as the footprints outside Ackroyd’s office will not illuminate the murderer, but Poirot’s comprehensive and methodical logic will.

Chapters 11 & 12 Summary

Dr. Sheppard visits Mrs. Folliot the next day as per Poirot’s request. He asks her about her former parlormaid Ursula Bourne, and she immediately becomes uncomfortable, refusing to give specific answers to his questions. He realizes that he’s not going to get any clear answers from her, so he leaves. At home, Caroline tells Sheppard that Poirot came and visited her that afternoon. After talking a bit, Caroline shared with Poirot the conversation that she overheard in the woods where Ralph talked to an unknown woman about his potential inheritance from his uncle. She also explains that Poirot asked her about Dr. Sheppard’s patients on the morning of the murder, and she lists them, ending with Miss Russell, who she believes Poirot was especially interested in. Sheppard wonders at Miss Russell’s visit again, especially her interest in drugs, poisons and poisoning. But since Ackroyd was not poisoned, he dismisses it as irrelevant. On Monday, the police hold an official inquest into Ackroyd’s death. Afterwords, Inspector Raglan confesses to Poirot that although he doesn’t want Ralph to be guilty, the case points more and more towards Ralph as the murderer. He reveals that Ralph’s description has been wired around the country and the police all over are on the lookout for him. Inspector Raglan remains fixated on the fingerprints they found on the murder weapon. He confirms that they don’t match anyone in the household on the night of the murder, but Poirot suggests that he check if they match Ackroyd himself – Poirot noticed that they seemed to be at an odd angle, meaning perhaps the murderer put Ackroyd’s hand on the weapon after killing him. Inspector Raglan seems unconvinced, but promises to check on this. Poirot gathers Dr. Sheppard, Flora, Mrs. Ackroyd and Major Blunt at Fernly Park for a meeting. First, he begs Flora to come forward if she has any idea where Ralph is hiding. He tells her that by hiding Ralph, she just makes him look more guilty. Flora swears she does not know where Ralph hides. Poirot then asks the rest of the table to come forth if they know where Ralph hides, but no one speaks up. Instead, Mrs. Ackroyd expresses gratitude that Ralph and Flora’s engagement was never formally announced, which has spared Flora any public humiliation given the suspicion around Ralph. Incensed at her mother’s insensitivity, Flora declares that she will officially announce the engagement in the paper tomorrow. Poirot, however, asks that she abstain from making the announcement for a few more days, insisting that it is in her and Ralph’s best interest to do so. Then, he turns to the table and makes the pronouncement that everyone sitting there is hiding something from him, whether small or not, related to the case. He insists that he will know the truth of the case, and asks that they come forward with what they are hiding. However, no one speaks.

Chapters 11 & 12 Analysis

For seemingly the first time in the novel, Dr. Sheppard and Poirot are separated for the day in Chapter 11. As he makes his way to Mrs. Folliot’s home, Sheppard wonders why Poirot sent him. Later, he learns that Poirot used the opportunity to visit Caroline alone and ask questions about, among other things, Sheppard’s patients on the morning of the murder. Although on the surface level it is not clear that Poirot’s actions are anything but innocent, it is possible to see, for the first time, Poirot’s investigative techniques employed against Dr. Sheppard just as much as any other character. In visiting Caroline, Poirot learns about the conversation between Ralph and the mystery woman in the woods, which Sheppard had deliberately withheld from him. Additionally, he finds out about Sheppard’s patients the morning of the murder, which he will later use to help determine the mysterious phone call made to Sheppard from the train station the night of Ackroyd’s death. Part of Poirot’s genius is his ability to subtly and expertly investigate without putting even the guiltiest suspect on their guard, as demonstrated here. In Chapter 12, Poirot gathers all of the suspects at the table and makes his extraordinary pronouncement that every one there is hiding something from him. He further vows that no matter what, he will find out the truth of the case. By seating Dr. Sheppard among the rest of the suspects as one of the people who Poirot pronounces this to, Christie for the first time “casts” Sheppard as a potential suspect. Dr. Sheppard further reinforces this with the line “His glance, challenging and accusing, swept round the table. And every pair of eyes dropped before his. Yes, mine as well” (p. 146). With this line, Sheppard admits to the reader that he bears some degree of guilt for something - it is one of the reader’s clearest hints as to the identity of the real murderer.

Chapters 13 & 14 Summary

That evening, Dr. Sheppard visits Poirot at his home and they discuss the case. Dr. Sheppard accuses Poirot of getting information about his patients from Caroline. Poirot confesses that he was interested in one of Sheppard’s patients that morning. Assuming that Poirot refers to Miss Russell, Sheppard wonders if Poirot also finds her suspicious. Poirot explains that he confirmed that a mysterious stranger approached Fernly Park around 9 pm the night of the murder – a maid of a local woman in town ran into him as well that night on his way there. After inquiring at the local inn, Poirot learns that the stranger drank there and mentioned he just came over from the United States. Poirot brings out the goose quill he found in the summerhouse, which he recognized as a tool used to take heroin. This method of sniffing heroin from a goose quill is very popular in the United States, which leads Poirot to believe that the stranger may have gone to the summerhouse in Fernly Park once he arrived on the grounds that night. He will not explain to Dr. Sheppard what he believes the scrap of cambric he found there means. Instead, he mentions Ursula Bourne again – he doesn’t believe that it would have taken a half hour for her to discuss quitting with Ackroyd over moving some papers on his desk. He also reminds Dr. Sheppard that she is the one person in Fernly Park whose alibi was not verified for the time that Ackroyd was said to have been murdered. Dr. Sheppard brings up his own theories. Based on the fact that Ralph Paton was in some kind of trouble, was seen approaching Fernly Park that night, and they found footprints that matched his shoes outside of the window, he argues everything points to Ralph Paton being the person that Ackroyd was talking to at 9:30 pm. However, since Ackroyd was not murdered until 9:45, he believes Ralph left, and someone else – the American stranger – came in and committed the murder. Poirot acknowledges that this is a good theory, but that it leaves too much unaccounted for, like the phone call from the train station, the pushed out chair and Major Blunt’s belief that Ackroyd was talking to Raymond at 9:30 pm. Plus, it is also strange, then, that Ralph Paton remains missing. Poirot explains that there seem to be three possible motives for Ralph to have committed the murder. First, someone was blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars, and according to the lawyer, even though Ralph always needed money, he hadn’t asked him for money recently. Now the blackmailer had been exposed, and if it was Ralph, he would need to silence Ackroyd before the truth came out. Second, he was clearly in some kind of trouble that he was afraid of his uncle finding out about. Third, he stood to inherit a lot of money from his uncle’s death. Dr. Sheppard confesses that these three motives make him fear that Ralph really is guilty, but Poirot counters mysteriously that the three motives are “almost too much” (p. 154), and makes him believe that Ralph may actually be innocent. As Dr. Sheppard explains, after this meeting he and Poirot’s paths began to diverge more. Early Tuesday morning, Mrs. Ackroyd summons Dr. Sheppard to her. She is beside herself with distress over the events of the previous days, and complains about Poirot’s accusations that she (and everyone else) was hiding something. After carrying on for a while, she finally arrives at her point: she confesses to Dr. Sheppard what she could not admit to Poirot at the earlier meeting. She asks Sheppard to explain it all to Poirot for her: the day of Ackroyd’s death, stressed about debt, she snuck into Ackroyd’s study and searched his desk for his will to see what provisions he’d made for her in it. As she was looking though, the parlormaid Ursula Bourne walked in and caught her in the act. Later, Ackroyd came in, and she heard Ursula asking Ackroyd to speak to him, and she worried that Bourne may have told him what she saw. She also confesses to Dr. Sheppard that she left the lid of the silver table open the day of Ackroyd’s murder – she had noticed a valuable piece of silver in it, and claims that she’d removed it to get it appraised. She forgot to lower the lid of the table because she heard footsteps on the terrace outside and fled the room. Dr. Sheppard is able to deduce from this that the footsteps must have been Miss Russell’s, which leads him to conclude that Miss Russell must have entered the study via the window before he ran into her leaving it a few minutes later. Dr. Sheppard considers the cambric that Poirot found in the summerhouse, and wonders if it might have come from Miss Russell’s handkerchief, meaning she had been in the summerhouse earlier in the day. As he leaves, Dr. Sheppard runs into Ursula Bourne, who has been crying. He asks her why she told them that Roger Ackroyd summoned her on the day she decided to quit, when Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd just stated that she asked to speak to him. Bourne replies vaguely that she had intended to quit before anything happened with Ackroyd and the papers. She also asks Dr. Sheppard if he has any news of Ralph Paton, and tells him significantly that Paton ought to return. Dr. Sheppard returns home, where Caroline announces that she has had another visit from Poirot, who asked her to find out whether Ralph Paton’s boots were black or brown. She has used her network of servants to determine that the boots were black.

Chapters 13 & 14 Analysis

In Chapter 13, Sheppard confronts Poirot about the snooping that he did earlier in the day. He is clearly resentful and nervous that Poirot seems to be investigating him as much as any other character. Although he takes for granted that Poirot’s comment about only being interested in one of his patients refers to Miss Russell, the reader will later learn that this is not the patient Poirot was interested in. Poirot was actually more interested in another patient of Dr. Sheppard - the American steward. Later in this Chapter, Poirot gives Sheppard and the reader another taste of his investigative technique. “The first thing is to get a clear history of what happened that evening – always bearing in mind that the person who speaks may be lying” (p. 149) he says. Although Sheppard comments that this is “rather a suspicious attitude” (p. 149), Poirot insists that it is necessary. Indeed, by taking nothing for granted Poirot can arrive at the truth. Were he to assume that all the things people told him were true, he runs the risk of building a theory on a lie, which would take him away, rather than towards, the truth. By assuming that everything he is told could be a lie, Poirot is forced to investigate all leads and verify all statements. Only when he can independently verify a statement does he truly accept it as part of the truth of what happened. In this way, painstakingly, he uses logic to build the true story of what occurred the night of the murder. Towards the end of Chapter 13, Poirot lists all the possible motives that Ralph Paton has for committing the murder. He comes up with three – a damning number to Dr. Sheppard, but curiously, to Poirot, three motives “is almost too much” (p. 154). To Poirot, three motives is cause for suspicion. If someone wanted to set Ralph up, they did too convincing a job of it. It makes him suspect that Ralph is actually the perfect scapegoat, rather than the most obvious murderer. Chapter 14, as Dr. Sheppard explains, represents a break in the traditional detective story form that the novel has thus far taken. “As I say, up till the Monday evening, my narrative might have been that of Poirot himself. I played Watson to his Sherlock. But after Monday our ways diverged” (p. 155) Sheppard recounts, making reference to the similarities between the story so far and a Sherlock Holmes-type detective story. Of course, although Sheppard has been at Poirot’s side up until this point, Poirot has nonetheless managed to do some surreptitious investigating into his “Watson” (something Sherlock Holmes, of course, would never do, as Watson would never be a suspect in a Holmes novel). As of Chapter 14, though, their paths diverge even more broadly, with each attending to their own business, and Sheppard (and thus, the reader) having less access to Poirot’s ministrations. Dr. Sheppard’s reflections in this chapter offer a great deal of foreshadowing of what is to come. He hints at the knowledge Poirot cultivated that he never could have expected. He ominously mentions “the black boots” (p. 156) and explains how everyone did their small part to elucidate the mystery. Although Dr. Sheppard has stated that he dislikes Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd, he does go to her when summoned and listens to her lengthy confession about snooping for Roger Ackroyd’s will and leaving the silver table lid open. Although Sheppard expresses frustration with and distaste for Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd throughout this conversation, it is interesting to realize that of all the characters accused of hiding something, it is she who admits her guilt first – and in this way, deserves the most respect. Sheppard himself, on the other hand, will turn out to be the novel’s least respectable character.

Chapters 15 & 16 Summary

Upon returning home, Caroline informs Sheppard that Geoffrey Raymond, Ackroyd’s secretary, had come by to look for Poirot. When he didn’t find him, he announced that he would stop by Poirot’s house in half an hour. Caroline encourages Dr. Sheppard to go as well. Next door, Sheppard recounts his visit with Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd to Poirot. They consider who Miss Russell may have gone out to meet the evening of the murder, since they now believe she snuck into the drawing room through the window after meeting with someone. Dr. Sheppard also tells Poirot about Caroline’s discovery that Ralph’s boots were black, which seems to discourage the detective. Poirot asks Dr. Sheppard about his meeting with Miss Russell when she visited him for her appointment on the morning of the murder. He recounts their conversation about poisons and drugs, and Poirot guesses that she asked him about cocaine. When Sheppard tells him she did, Poirot shows Sheppard a newspaper article from that morning about cocaine usage, which he claims must have put the idea in her head. Before he can explain further, however, Geoffrey Raymond arrives. He announces that he’s felt guilty ever since Poirot’s accusation from the meeting earlier, and confesses that he had been in debt before Ackroyd’s murder. The 500 pounds he got from Ackroyd’s will allows him to discharge his debt. He had been nervous to admit this to the police officers, but since he was with Major Blunt during the time that the murder was committed, he knows that his alibi will prevent him from being suspected. Poirot thanks him for his honesty, and Raymond leaves. Poirot and Dr. Sheppard continue to discuss the murder. Poirot points out that almost everyone in the household except Major Blunt stood to benefit from Ackroyd’s death; however, he still believes Blunt is concealing something from him. Dr. Sheppard wonders if they haven’t jumped to conclusions by assuming that the person who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars is the same person who killed Ackroyd. Poirot congratulates him on this point, but counters that the letter about the blackmail did disappear nonetheless after the murder was committed. Still, that doesn’t necessarily mean that the murderer took it. He wonders if Parker took the letter when Dr. Sheppard wasn’t looking. Poirot suspects Parker not of the murder, but perhaps of blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars. Sheppard admits that Parker could have taken the letter when he wasn’t looking – so, too, could Blunt or Raymond. Poirot suggests that they try out an experiment on Parker to determine his guilt; Sheppard agrees and they set out for Fernly Park. When they arrive, they request Flora Ackroyd, and Poirot asks her to help them with the experiment. She agrees, and they summon Parker. Poirot explains that he wants to re-enact his meeting with Flora outside of Ackroyd’s study on the night of the murder. He insists that they position themselves exactly as they were when their conversation took place. Flora puts her hand on the door handle, Parker stands before her holding the tray with Ackroyd’s after dinner drink, and they re-enact the scene. Poirot asks Parker why he has two glasses on his tray, and Parker responds that he always brings two glasses. Poirot, satisfied, dismisses Flora and Parker, and admits to Sheppard that although the question about the glasses was insignificant, the experiment was a success and he now knows something that he wanted to know. Later that night, Caroline and Dr. Sheppard engage in a game of Mah Jong with their friends, Miss Gannett and Colonel Carter. During the game, Caroline and Miss Gannett gossip about the murder, each speculating on who they think could be guilty. Among other things, Caroline suspects that Ralph Paton is hiding in Cranchester, a big city nearby, based on Poirot’s remarks when he visited her the other day. She also mentions having seen Poirot returning from Cranchester that afternoon. Caroline goads Dr. Sheppard to contribute juicy details to their gossip. After he wins a particularly impressive hand of Mah Jong, he shares Poirot’s discovery of the wedding ring with the group impulsively. Caroline and Miss Gannett are excited by this latest piece of gossip, and wonder who the ring belongs to.

Chapters 15 & 16 Analysis

Once again in Chapter 15, Dr. Sheppard makes intimations of his own guilt. When Caroline asks him to go to Poirot’s to find out what Raymond wanted to talk to Poirot about, he responds, “Curiosity is not my besetting sin” (p. 168). Of course, this implies that he does have a besetting sin, which the reader will later discover. Moments later, Caroline accuses him of “always hav[ing] to pretend” (p. 168), another accusation that will prove extremely true later on. Meanwhile, Raymond’s visit to Poirot’s home further proves the success of Poirot’s strategy in accusing the table full of suspects of hiding something from him. Sheppard describes him as having produced “a mixture of fear and guilt” (p. 167) in the suspects which caused them to come forward of their own volition and confess, which Sheppard chalks up to Poirot’s keen understanding of human nature. Indeed, one of Poirot’s greatest strengths as a detective is how effectively he works with people in investigating crimes. This is further demonstrated in his “experiment” with Flora and Parker – by enlisting Flora to ostensibly help him examine Parker, he actually arrives at his true aim, which is to determine if she was actually observed leaving her uncle’s room the night of his murder, or simply standing outside of it. This is not something she would have been likely to admit to him outright; instead, he arrives at the truth of this moment without ever having to ask her about it at all. Chapter 16, which sets a fervent, gossipy discussion about the murder amidst the backdrop of a game of Mah Jong, helps demonstrate one of Christie’s major themes (found in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd as well as most of her stories and novels): the “Murder of Manners”. Unlike other, more gruesome detective stories, Christie’s novel is firmly set in the polite, “civilized” upper- and middle-class world of Britain in the first half of the 20th century. Christie eschews violent crimes and macabre descriptions of violence: instead, her characters retain their manners and civility throughout. By setting a gossipy scene between friends to a Mah Jong game, Christie once again establishes the politeness of her characters that their social class demands. Although Caroline and Miss Gannet would prefer nothing more than to gossip openly about the murder, they must instead limit their discussion to appropriate moments while obeying the rules of the “game” – in the same way, the characters in King’s Abbot must abide by the rules of their society. Dr. Sheppard’s “perfect hand” of Mah Jong that he triumphantly achieves at the end of the chapter is also symbolic. To a certain extent, Dr. Sheppard feels he has committed the “perfect crime” – but just as he blunders after his hand of Mah Jong by admitting a detail about Poirot’s investigation to his companions that he soon regrets, so will he learn that his “perfect crime” is not actually perfect at all.

Chapters 17 & 18 Summary

The next day, the whole town of Fernly Park turns out for the joint funeral of Mrs. Ferrars and Roger Ackroyd. Afterwords, Poirot invites Dr. Sheppard back to his home, and asks him to help confront Parker, who he still suspects had some involvement in the blackmail or exploitation of Ackroyd or Mrs. Ferrars. Parker arrives at Poirot’s home, and the detective accuses him of being the blackmailer. Parker denies it, but Poirot tells him he’s researched Parker and determined that Parker had blackmailed his previous employer. Faced with this truth, Parker admits that he overheard Ackroyd mention blackmail the night of the murder, and attempted to listen at the door, hoping that if Ackroyd was being blackmailed, he might be able to “get in on the action” too. Parker swears he was not aware of Ackroyd being blackmailed before that night, nor did he murder Ackroyd. Poirot admits that he believes Parker, and agrees not to mention anything to the police. Before Parker leaves, though, he asks to see the butler’s checkbook. He reviews Parker’s finances, then dismisses him. Poirot next invites Dr. Sheppard to visit Ackroyd’s lawyer, Mr. Hammond, with him. At the lawyer’s office, Poirot confirms that Mr. Hammond was also Mrs. Ferrars' lawyer, then has Dr. Sheppard relate his story to Mr. Hammond about Ackroyd finding out that Mrs. Ferrars was being blackmailed. Mr. Hammond admits that he is not surprised – he long suspected something like that had been going on with Mrs. Ferrars. She had been paying out lots of money for some time, but refused to tell him what for. Poirot asks how much money she had paid out, and Mr. Hammond tells them it was near twenty thousand pounds in the last year. They leave. Poirot is now certain that Parker did not blackmail Mrs. Ferrars – his checkbook didn’t have such large sums listed in it, and he also believes Parker probably would have stopped being a butler if he’d acquired twenty thousand pounds through blackmail. Instead, Poirot considers Geoffrey Raymond or Major Blunt. He explains that he made some inquiries and determined that Major Blunt’s recent inheritance was around twenty thousand pounds, as well. Dr. Sheppard is shocked, but then Poirot admits he doesn’t really think Blunt is the blackmailer. Dr. Sheppard invites Poirot to lunch, and they eat with Caroline. Afterwords, Caroline asks Poirot if he found Ralph Paton in Cranchester, revealing that she saw him driving back from the city the day before. Poirot explains that he was merely returning from a dentists’ visit. They discuss the murder in more depth. Caroline, like Poirot, believes it was someone in the house who committed the murder, and she suspects Flora Ackroyd. After she lays out this idea, Poirot responds by telling a haunting, hypothetical story about a man with a “strain of weakness” who is moved to murder after a precise confluence of events. Meanwhile, the phone rings, summoning Dr. Sheppard to Liverpool. The police have found a man named Charles Kent who they believe is the stranger who visited Fernly Park on the night of the murder, and they want Dr. Sheppard to go to Liverpool and identify him. Poirot, Dr. Sheppard and Inspector Raglan take the train to Liverpool, where they meet up with the local police. They meet the detained Charles Kent, who Dr. Sheppard confirms is the man he saw at Fernly Park based on his voice. Kent denies that he committed the murder, insisting that if Ackroyd was killed between 9:45 and 10:00 pm, there is no way he could have done it, as he had left Fernly Park by 9:25. He was already at the Dog and Whistle saloon by that time, and insists that his alibi can be verified. Kent refuses to tell them why he went to Fernly Park, except to say that he was there to meet someone. Poirot asks him where he was born, telling him “I fancy you were born in Kent” (p. 208). Kent appears started by the remark, but does not respond.

Chapters 17 & 18 Analysis

Poirot’s comment in Chapter 17 that he “hopes” it was Parker who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars also hints at his growing suspicion of Dr. Sheppard’s guilt. Clearly, Poirot is fond of Dr. Sheppard, and he doesn’t want him to turn out to be the guilty party. This is significant, for Poirot often makes reference to the importance of remaining objective and viewing each character with suspicion in order to arrive at the truth. Although he does this, and ultimately does discover the truth, it adds a distinctly human layer to Poirot to realize that he may have hoped the truth would have led him in a different direction, away from his potential new friend. Caroline’s accusation in Chapter 17 that her brother is “weak” will ultimately be one of the most powerful foreshadowing in the novel. “Weak as water” (p. 199) she claims, before continuing, “With a bad bringing up, Heaven knows what mischief you might have got into by now” (p. 199). Later, in his apologia, Sheppard will reference this accusation as having been more accurate than even his sister knew at the time. It is on this “weakness” that he ultimately blames his actions. Poirot’s story at the end of Chapter 17, although seemingly a hypothetical one, can ultimately be viewed as his own hypothesis about who committed the murder. His description of a man with a “strain of weakness” will turn out to be a perfect description of the murderer when the truth of the crime comes out. In Chapter 18, Dr. Sheppard identifies the moment of the Charles Kent interview as the exact moment that Poirot figured out the truth of the case. “I know now that the whole thing lay clearly unraveled before him” (p. 209) he says, although neither he nor Poirot provide the reader with any more details as to this truth. The reader of The Murder of Roger Ackroyd has no doubt that Poirot will solve the case, because the novel’s narrator mentions that Poirot has actually done this at many points throughout the novel. Most detective fiction involves the satisfying restoration of order by a brilliant detective or team of detectives after a cunning and malicious evil-doer has committed some crime. In a Sherlock Holmes novel, for example, the reader has no doubt that Holmes will solve the case even before finishing the first chapter – it is simply the expectation established by the form of this genre. In this case, however, Christie further leans into this inevitability by having her narrator announce, at many points throughout the novel, the detective’s success. So, there is no doubt that Poirot figures everything out – Dr. Sheppard tells us so at many points. Even more impressive then, that the novel still manages to surprise the reader with its conclusion. Working within the fairly prescribed form of the “detective story”, Christie nonetheless creates a thoroughly innovative and astonishing conclusion, which has led The Murder of Roger Ackroyd to be considered one of the greatest detective stories ever written.

Chapters 19 & 20 Summary

The next day, Inspector Raglan arrives at Dr. Sheppard’s house to let him know that Charles Kent’s alibi checks out – he was at the Dog and Whistle when the murder was committed. The barmaid there also noticed that he had a lot of money with him at the time, which leads Inspector Raglan to believe that it was Kent who took the forty pounds from Ackroyd’s bedroom. Dr. Sheppard explains that Poirot theorizes that Charles Kent visited Fernly Park because “he was born in Kent”. The Inspector is baffled by this, and responds that he has long believed Poirot was crazy. Indeed, Caroline told Inspector Raglan that Poirot also had a nephew who was mentally unstable. Raglan and Dr. Sheppard go to Poirot’s house to let him know that Kent’s alibi has checked out. Poirot tells Inspector Raglan not to release Charles Kent just yet, but won’t explain why he’s making this suggestion. Inspector Raglan doesn’t understand: since they know Ackroyd was alive at 9:45, there is no way Kent could have committed the murder. Poirot counters that they don’t know that Ackroyd was alive at 9:45 pm, they only have Flora Ackroyd’s word for it. He explains that the “experiment for Parker” that he had Flora and Dr. Sheppard help him out with the other day was actually designed to see if Parker witnessed Flora exiting Ackroyd’s office. As the experiment proved, he didn’t – he only saw Flora with her hand on the doorknob. The questions that he posed to Parker about the glasses were irrelevant; the experiment was really to find out about Flora’s location. Poirot believes that if Flora wasn’t in her Uncle’s office, she was perhaps in his bedroom – and it was she who stole the forty pounds. She had her mother were constantly struggling for money, and perhaps she truly needed the forty pounds at the time. When she heard Parker coming, she pretended to be leaving Ackroyd’s office so that he wouldn’t be suspicious. After she was confronted by the police officers, she felt she had to stick to her story, but was so shocked to learn about Ackroyd’s death that she fainted. The inspector, Dr. Sheppard and Poirot travel to Fernly Park to confront Flora with this theory. They find her with Major Blunt, who she insists stay for the interview. After they present her with Poirot’s theory, she confesses instantly. She explains that she was “weak” and desperate for money, and this weakness led her to steal. It was also this which connected her to Ralph Paton – they were both “weak” in that way, and thus understood each other. She runs from the room in despair. Major Blunt immediately tells the Inspector that Flora was lying – it was he who took the money. He leaves the room, but Poirot stops him. He says he knows Blunt is lying, but very honorable. He tells Blunt that he knows Blunt is in love with Flora, and encourages Blunt to pursue her. Poirot insists she does not love Ralph Paton, but merely sticks by him out of loyalty. Blunt, startled by this revelation, acknowledges his love, and runs out to find Flora. Meanwhile, Inspector Raglan is frustrated by the revelation of Flora’s lie – it means that Ackroyd could have been murdered any time after 9:30 (when Ackroyd was heard talking in his office), and they need to re-examine everyone’s alibi. He decides to keep Charles Kent locked up, since he is once again a suspect in the murder. Dr. Sheppard returns home to see to his patients, and afterwords retreats to his “workshop” – a small room at the back of the house where he tinkers with small electronics. Later, Poirot arrives, and tells Dr. Sheppard he has requested Miss Russell meet with him (Poirot) in Dr. Sheppard’s office. He did not want their meeting to be public, and so he thought they could do so discreetly at the Doctor’s office. Dr. Sheppard assents. Meanwhile, Poirot reveals to Dr. Sheppard that he has convinced the police to print a notice in the paper that Ralph Paton has been found in Liverpool, attempting to board a boat to America. Sheppard protests that it’s not true, but Poirot explains that he expects this lie to produce “very interesting results” after it is printed. Miss Russell arrives for her meeting with Poirot. Poirot informs her that Charles Kent has been found in Liverpool, and Dr. Sheppard suddenly realizes that Miss Russell and Charles Kent’s voices are strikingly similar. Miss Russell feigns ignorance until Poirot tells her that they have revised the timeline, determined that Ackroyd could have been murdered earlier than 9:45 and the police believe Kent to have been the murderer. Miss Russell then confesses that she met with Charles Kent that night, so he couldn’t have committed the murder. Charles Kent is her son – she gave birth to him out of wedlock many years before in Kent, and changed his name to "Kent" so he could not be connected with her (hence Poirot’s remark about him having been "born in Kent"). Although she earned money for his education, he turned out “badly”, taking drugs and drinking. She sent him to Canada, but he somehow found out she was his mother, and returned to England, sending word that he wanted to meet her. Terrified of meeting him in the house, she told him to meet her in the summerhouse, where she was returning from when she ran into Dr. Sheppard after coming through the drawing room window. She had asked Dr. Sheppard about drugs because she wanted to know if Charles Kent could ever be cured of his addiction – she believes her son was a good person before his drug problem began. When she met him in the summerhouse, they talked about his problems, she gave him all the money she had, and he went away. Miss Russell asks Poirot if she has to confess this to Inspector Raglan, and he tells her that for now she can remain silent. She insists that her son had nothing to do with Ackroyd’s murder, and Poirot assures her that he could not have been the person talking to Roger Ackroyd at 9:30 that night.

Chapters 19 & 20 Analysis

Most of the secrets that the suspects have hidden from Poirot have come out by this point in the novel. As the reader has learned, almost all of them have to do with love or money. For Major Blunt, his love for Clara is a secret that he desperately hides. She is engaged to Ralph Paton, and thus not an option for him romantically. Society would disapprove of any kind of public declaration of his love – in his upper-class world, public acknowledgement or displays of passionate love is often out of place. Indeed, in many ways it is as foreign and forbidden as violence or murder. Poirot convinces Blunt to tell Flora of his love by arguing that while it is “good” that he keep his love hidden from all the rest of the world, he should at least not keep it hidden from Flora herself. He convinces Blunt that Flora is not actually in love with Ralph Paton, leading the Major to finally tell Flora of his true feelings. Of course, Christie keeps this meeting private from even the reader, another nod to the formality and stiffness of her characters’ world. The last chapters of the novel involve the almost continuous revelation of secrets. Chapter 20 features Miss Russell confessing her secret – she had a son who she did not acknowledge publically and who turned to drugs and alcohol. Like Major Blunt, Miss Russell’s secret is born of shame but redeemed by love – in her desire to keep her son hidden from the world, she went to great lengths, and only when his safety is threatened (and he is suspected for Ackroyd’s murder) does she confess to her connection. For Miss Russell, love is the only force powerful enough to draw her secret out of her. Although shame primarily motivates her to keep her secret, the love she bears for her son and her desire to see him protected is stronger, and makes her confess to their relationship in order to save him.

Chapters 21 & 22 Summary

The next day, the article on Ralph’s capture is published in the paper. Caroline, ignorant to its falsity, proudly proclaims that she knew all along Ralph was going to flee. Meanwhile, Dr. Sheppard asks her about Poirot’s “imbecile” nephew, and she responds that it’s a great grief to Poirot’s family, and they may have to institutionalize him. Caroline also mentions that she saw a mysterious stranger arriving at Poirot’s home early in the morning, although his face was covered and she couldn’t see who it was. Later, Poirot comes over, but Caroline cannot get him to reveal the identity of his mystery guest. He and Dr. Sheppard go for a walk, and Poirot asks Dr. Sheppard to invite Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd, Flora, Major Blunt and Mr. Raymond to his house that night for a “little conference” (p. 238). He does not want to ask them himself, because he doesn’t want to be peppered with questions about his plans. They arrive at Fernly Park, and Poirot refuses to go in with Dr. Sheppard, explaining that he will wait on the grounds while Sheppard makes his request. Inside, Dr. Sheppard learns from Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd that Flora Ackroyd and Major Blunt are now engaged. Dr. Sheppard invites her to Poirot’s home that night, and she accepts. She agrees to tell the others, and Dr. Sheppard departs to meet up with Poirot. They return home. There, they meet Caroline, who announces that Ursula Bourne has arrived and insisted on seeing Poirot at once. They immediately go to see her, and notice that she has been crying. Poirot addresses her as Mrs. Ralph Paton. At first, she does not respond, but then she accepts the title, bursting into tears. She confesses to Poirot that she sought him out after reading of Ralph’s capture in the newspaper, which has led her to decide to reveal the truth. Born a “lady”, but to a very poor family, Ursula had to make a living for herself, and decided to become a parlormaid even though it represented a step-down in class. Mrs. Folliott was actually her sister, who simply pretended Ursula was a former servant in order to act as a reference. While working at Fernly Park, Ursula Bourne met Ralph Paton and they fell in love. Knowing that his uncle would never approve of such a match, Paton and Ursula married in secret, and Ralph vowed to tell his uncle at a later date. Meanwhile, he fell further and further into debt. Roger Ackroyd called Ralph to him to announce that he wanted Ralph to marry Flora. Flora accepted, seeing freedom from her financial strain, and Ralph, knowing that his uncle would pay off his debts if he agreed to marry Flora, accepted as well, but kept it a secret from Ursula. When Ackroyd announced the engagement, however, Ursula found out, and Ralph came down from London to try and calm her down. They met in the wood, where Caroline overheard part of their conversation. Furious, Ursula met with Ackroyd to tell him the truth of her marriage to Ralph, which prompted her decision to quit her job at Fernly Park. Later that night, she met Ralph in the summerhouse, where they fought. She left the house at 9:30 pm to meet him, and was back in her room by 9:45. She explains that she left the summerhouse first, leaving Ralph behind her, and worries that now both she and Ralph are potential suspects. She had been trying to pass along a message to Ralph through Dr. Sheppard when she told him that Ralph “ought to return” a few days before.

Chapters 21 & 22 Analysis

One of Poirot’s most revealing lines in the novel comes towards the beginning of Chapter 21. “My friend Hastings, he of whom I told you, used to say of me that I was a human oyster. But he was unjust. Of facts, I keep nothing to myself. But to everyone his own interpretation of them” (p. 238). This is the exact truth of Poirot’s method – he freely shares the facts that he has gathered with all, but he keeps his own brilliant interpretation of them, which allows him to actually understand the truth of the matter, to himself until he’s solved the whole case. Throughout the novel, when Sheppard asks Poirot a question about his theories or suspicions, he often responds with a fact, which does not help Sheppard and the reader in terms of solving the case. To Poirot, facts are neutral enough to be shared, but interpretations are subjective, and until he has proven his own interpretations as fact, he keeps them to himself so he can continue to revise his own theories. Despite the fact that both servants and masters are presented as suspects of Roger Ackroyd’s murder, there is still a great deal of class division with the novel. Although Parker, Miss Russell and Ursula Bourne are all presented as potentially the murderer, they are considered separately from the upper-class members of the Fernly Park household. Indeed, when Poirot gathers the suspects to a meeting and announces they are all hiding something from him, it is only the “upstairs” upper-class suspects that he addresses. Later, when he bids the suspects come to his home for the novel’s climax, he again only publically invites the upper-class suspects. Miss Russell and Parker enter after the fact, a nod to their lower status. Perhaps the greatest example of the rigid class system in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd is the character of Ursula Bourne. Born a “lady”, but to a very poor family, Ursula was forced to make a living for herself, and decided to become a parlormaid even though it represented a step-down in class. Thus her love for Ralph was forbidden, causing the secrecy between them that led to so much trouble for Ralph. The challenge of her predicament was due entirely to her perceived class. Ackroyd’s fury at learning that his stepson had married a penniless servant is what caused her to tender her resignation. Once Ursula Bourne is revealed to have been born a member of a higher class (and married to Ralph Paton), she is suddenly introduced at reunion in Poirot’s home (that takes place in Chapter 23) that had until that point only included upper-class members of the household. And indeed, Poirot begins the meeting by justifying Bourne’s presence there, explaining that she is married to Ralph. (Miss Russell and Parker are snuck in later.)

Chapters 23 & 24 Summary

After she has told her tale, Caroline ushers Ursula upstairs to rest, while Poirot insists she attend his meeting that night. Poirot then muses on his friend Hastings, who he misses – it was often Hastings who would unknowingly provide a clue to a case by saying something foolish, and Hastings also kept a written record of his cases. Dr. Sheppard mentions that he has, up until this point, also been keeping a written record of the case, and Poirot excitedly asks to see it. While Dr. Sheppard leaves to attend to a case, Poirot reads the manuscript, and as he finishes up Sheppard returns home. Poirot remarks that Sheppard has left himself out of the narration almost entirely, and accuses the doctor of having been too reticent in that sense. The pair goes to Poirot’s home for the 9:00 pm meeting. Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd, Ursula Bourne, Flora Ackroyd, Geoffrey Raymond, Major Blunt and Dr. Sheppard are all in attendance. Poirot starts by introducing Ursula as Ralph’s wife. Although Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd is incredulous, Flora congratulates Ursula, explaining that although she wishes Ralph had told her about their secret wedding, she is not angry about the news. Miss Russell and Parker enter, and Poirot declares the group complete. He announces that everyone present is a potential suspect, and then begins explaining how he approached investigating the murder. He re-hashes his initial discoveries – how he determined that there were two separate meetings at the summerhouse the night of Ackroyd’s murder, how he realized the goose quill indicated someone who did drugs had been there, probably to visit Miss Russell given her discussion with Dr. Sheppard. The cambric made him think of a maid’s uniform, and after realizing that Ursula Bourne had no real alibi, he guessed she had gone to the summerhouse too. He wasn’t sure who she had gone to meet until he found the wedding ring in the goldfish pond, and learned that Ralph Paton had been seen entering Fernly Park. After Caroline told him about the conversation she overheard in the woods, he realized that Ralph and Ursula must have met there, and must have married secretly some time before. After recognizing that Ursula and Ralph met in the summerhouse around 9:30 pm, Poirot realized that Ralph could not have been the person talking to Ackroyd in his study at 9:30. He was struck by Major Blunt’s comment that he assumed Ackroyd was talking to his secretary, Geoffrey Raymond. Further, Poirot was struck by the odd phrase Raymond overheard from the study – specifically, the formal language Ackroyd used. Raymond counters that Ackroyd often used that kind of language when dictating letters, which Poirot responds is exactly what’s so strange. A man is unlikely to use such formal language in a real conversation. Poirot remembered the visitor Ackroyd had had the week before – the man from the Dictaphone company. So, Poirot inquired with the company to find out if Ackroyd purchased a Dictaphone from them that week, and had been told he had. This fact suggested that no one was with Ackroyd in his study; he was talking to his Dictaphone. Major Blunt subconsciously assumed he was talking to Raymond because Ackroyd so frequently used that kind of “dictation” language in his dealings with Raymond. Blunt wasn’t focusing too intensely on the voices from Ackroyd’s study because he was distracted by the woman in white going to the summerhouse – Ursula Bourne, off to meet Ralph Paton. Raymond counters that, despite these revelations, the case is unchanged and things still point to Ralph Paton as the murderer. He muses that if Ralph could come forward, he would clear up a lot of the mystery and suspicion about himself. Poirot then dramatically announces he knows where Ralph is and points to the door – where Ralph Paton is revealed, standing. Poirot explains that everyone he initially accused of lying to him that day at Fernly Park has come forward – except Dr. Sheppard. Sheppard responds that he might as well come clean, and explains that on the afternoon of the murder, Ralph had told him the story of his wedding, the trouble he was in now that his uncle planned to announce his engagement to Flora as well as the debts he owed. After the murder was committed, Dr. Sheppard ran into Ralph on the street and convinced him to hide for his own good. He was afraid that once the murder was discovered, Ralph or his wife Ursula would be blamed. Knowing that Ursula went back to the house after their meeting in the summerhouse, Ralph was worried that Ursula had, out of anger towards Ackroyd, perhaps committed the murder, and so he resolved to hide so that he would not be forced to give evidence against his wife. Poirot explains that once he began to suspect that Dr. Sheppard was hiding Ralph Paton, he started to think of the possible hiding places. Since Sheppard is a doctor, Poirot speculated that he might have tried to hide Paton in a mental hospital. To test his theory, he invented a nephew with mental issues and asked Caroline Sheppard for recommendations for suitable homes for him. He checked out the homes and at one of them learned that the doctor had brought in a patient matching Ralph’s description early Saturday morning. Eventually, Poirot was able to get Ralph out of the mental institution and bring him to his own home. He was the stranger Caroline saw entering Poirot’s home early in the morning a few days before. Ralph defends Dr. Sheppard’s actions, explaining that Sheppard did what he thought best. However, he realizes now that it was not for the best. In the mental institution he didn’t have access to the newspaper, so he didn’t know what was going on in the outside world or how grave things were looking for him. Ralph explains his side of the story: he left the summerhouse around 9:45 after his fight with Ursula and wandered around, trying to decide what to do next. He admits he has no alibi for the time after his meeting with Ursula. Poirot cheerfully announces that Ralph’s lack of alibi makes things very simple: to save Ralph, the real criminal must confess. He admits that he didn’t invite Inspector Raglan to this meeting because he didn’t want to tell him the story that night. Poirot leans forward and announces he is speaking “to the murderer”, explaining the next morning he will bring the truth to the inspector. At that point, a telegram arrives for Poirot. He reads it, explains it is from a steamer boat on its way to the United States, and then announces to the room that he is now sure of the identity of the murderer. He again reiterates that the truth goes to Inspector Raglan in the morning, then dismisses the room.

Chapters 23 & 24 Analysis

Once again in Chapter 23, Dr. Sheppard is brought into direct comparison with Hastings when he offers Poirot the written record of the case thus far. Of course, Dr. Sheppard will ultimately prove to be an anti-Hastings when his true involvement in the crime is revealed. Poirot’s excitement over Sheppard’s written record is, at this point, less because he is trying to find a Hastings substitute in Dr. Sheppard, and more because he is trying to manipulate Sheppard and get more of his story out of him. Later, when Poirot has read the manuscript, his insistence that Dr. Sheppard has left himself out of the story and downplayed his involvement in it, although initially perceived as flattery, is actually an accusation. Poirot by this point knows that Sheppard has had a much bigger part in the story than he’s recorded. This chapter also provides context for the novel itself. The reader now understands that the pages of the novel are the same that Dr. Sheppard shared with Poirot that day. As he himself explains, he gives Poirot the novel up through Chapter 20. This justifies Dr. Sheppard’s narration, and helps the reader understand that, ultimately, Poirot finds fault with that narration. Sheppard has not been entirely truthful. The brilliance of Chapter 24 is how it appears to exonerate Dr. Sheppard. If the reader had any suspicions of him (as, perhaps, the reader should have, given the various references to Sheppard’s guilt throughout the novel – e.g., the lowering of his eyes in Chapter 12), they seem to be explained by the truth revealed in this chapter: it is Sheppard who hid Ralph Paton. If this is the “secret” Sheppard has been hiding the whole novel, he is “guilty”, but certainly not a criminal. The implication is that Sheppard hid Ralph out of concern for the man because they were such good friends. Indeed, Poirot himself appears to acknowledge that this is Sheppard’s true deception. “Have I not told you at least thirty six times that it is useless to conceal things from Hercule Poirot?” (p. 266) he asks Dr. Sheppard. Poirot’s accusation at the end of Chapter 24 that the real murderer remains at large, appears to be directed at all the other characters gathered in the room, not Sheppard. This will make the final revelation of the novel even more shocking.

Chapters 25, 26 & 27 Summary

Poirot requests that Dr. Sheppard stay behind after everyone leaves. He asks the doctor what he thinks, and Sheppard admits he doesn’t know what to think. Sheppard doesn’t understand why Poirot didn’t just go to Inspector Raglan, if he knows the truth. Poirot tells him to try and figure it out, explaining that there’s “always a reason” behind his actions. Poirot once again walks Sheppard through his investigation. He explains that it was the telephone call that caused him pause – it truly made no sense if Ralph Paton was indeed the murderer. Poirot knew that the phone call could not have been sent by anyone in the house, but he was also convinced that the murderer was someone who was in the house that night. Therefore he initially concluded that the phone call had been placed by an accomplice. He considered the motive for the call. Because of the phone call, the murder was discovered that night of instead of, in all probability, the following morning. He couldn’t quite determine what advantage the murderer had for making sure the crime was discovered at night. His only idea was that the murderer, knowing what time the crime was to be discovered, could make sure he was there at the moment of discovery. Then, Poirot considered the grandfather chair that had been pulled out from the wall. Although Inspector Raglan assumed that was an unimportant detail, Poirot always assumed it was highly important. He realized that by pulling the chair out from the wall, it would stand in a direct line between the door and the window. At first, he assumed that it had been pulled out to hide something connected to the window, but then he realized that the chair was not actually high enough to truly obscure the window. Instead, he realized that having the chair in that position actually blocked a small table that had been in front of the window from view when a person first entered the room. Poirot assumed that something had been on that table that the murderer didn’t want anyone to see. He realized that meant it was something the murderer couldn’t take away with him at the time he committed the crime. But it was still important that it be removed as soon as possible after the crime was discovered. That made the telephone call make total sense: it allowed the murderer to be on the scene when the crime was discovered so he could remove whatever was on that table. Four people were present on the scene before the police arrived: Dr. Sheppard, Parker, Major Blunt and Raymond. Since Parker told him about the chair, Poirot assumed Parker couldn’t be the guilty party. Raymond and Blunt, however, he continued to suspect. Poirot began to suspect that the item that had been on the table was the Dictaphone. Although he realized that there had been a Dictaphone in the room at 9:30 pm, playing Ackroyd’s voice, they did not find one at the crime scene later. Thus, he assumed that the Dictaphone was what was removed from the table. As a rather bulky object, it would have presented a challenge for the murderer to remove initially. Poirot then turned to the footprints on the window ledge. It seemed likely to him that they were made by someone trying to throw suspicion on Ralph Paton. The police determined that Paton owned two pairs of shoes with studs like the shoes that made those prints. Inspector Raglan had confiscated a clean pair from Ralph’s room at the inn that couldn’t have been used that night. That meant that for Poirot’s theory to be true, the murderer had to have had Ralph’s shoes that night, meaning Ralph had to have been wearing a different, third pair of shoes. He asked Caroline to find out the color of Ralph’s boots not because he cared about the color, but simply to determine if Ralph owned boots (which would be that different, third pair). When he picked up Ralph from the mental institution, he asked him what shoes he had been wearing that night, and Ralph immediately showed him the boots he’d been wearing that night, and since. This proved that the murderer had taken Ralph’s second pair of shoes with studs at some point so he or she could make the footprints. Poirot than sums it up. The murderer was someone who was at the inn where Ralph was staying earlier in the day, knew Ackroyd well enough to know he had purchased a Dictaphone, had the mechanical skills to program a Dictaphone, owned a bag big enough to take away the Dictaphone, and had the study to himself a few moments after the murder was discovered: Dr. Sheppard. Faced with this accusation, Sheppard denies it, but Poirot explains that he knew Sheppard was suspect from the beginning. Sheppard had explained he left the house at ten to nine the night of the murder, and was at the gates of Fernly Park by 9:00 pm, when they had already established it only took five minutes to walk from the house to the gate. If Sheppard killed Ackroyd before he left, he would have had enough time to run around the outside of the house, put on Ralph’s shoes, make footprints in the mud, climb through the window and lock the study door from the inside before changing his shoes and heading back to the gate. Poirot timed the whole thing himself when he had Sheppard invite the Fernly Park residents to his home the day before, and determined the timing worked out. Poirot further explains that Sheppard killed Ackroyd because he was Mrs. Ferrars’ blackmailer. Since he was the doctor attending Mrs. Ferrars’ husband, he figured out that she had poisoned him, and he used that knowledge to extract cash from her. Poirot could discover no trace of the “legacy” that Sheppard mentioned to him when they first met, and so assumed it was the money he got – and lost – from blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars. At first, Poirot assumed that the phone call had just been invented by Dr. Sheppard. However, when he discovered it actually came from King’s Abbott station he was forced to reconsider. However, when Caroline explained to him that among his patients on the morning of the murder was the steward on an American liner, Poirot suspected that Sheppard had the steward call him from the station. Afterward, he would be on the ocean, well out of the way, and Sheppard could pretend it was Parker announcing the murder. The telegram that Poirot received moments before came from the steward on the liner, who confirmed that Sheppard had asked him to leave a message for a patient and then call with the response. Poirot then reminds Dr. Sheppard that he is bringing the truth to Inspector Raglan in the morning, unless Sheppard wants to take another way out. He insists that no matter what, Ralph Paton be exonerated, and suggests that Sheppard go home and finish his manuscript. The final chapter of the novel begins with Dr. Sheppard explaining that he has, indeed, completed his manuscript. It is now 5 am, and he has been writing since he left Poirot the night before. He had always had a “premonition of disaster” (p. 283), ever since he saw Ralph Paton talking to Mrs. Ferrars. He was worried she was telling him that Dr. Sheppard was her blackmailer. Sheppard explains some final details of the crime – Ackroyd had given him the Dictaphone to fix, which is how he was able to program it. He then hid it in his bag after he and Parker discovered the body and he sent Parker away to call the police. He explains that as soon as he finishes his manuscript he will address it to Poirot, who he trusts will keep the truth from Caroline, and then he will kill himself. Deciding there is a sort of poetic justice to using Veronal (the drug Mrs. Ferrars committed suicide with), he elects to overdose. He explains that he has no pity for Mrs. Ferrars, but nor does he have any pity for himself. His only regret is that Poirot decided to retire from work and grow vegetable marrows in King’s Abbott.

Chapters 25, 26 & 27 Analysis

The final chapters of the novel move swiftly to its stunning conclusion. To those who remember The Murder of Roger Ackroyd among the great works of detective fiction, it is the novel’s conclusion that contributes to this greatness. Christie’s twist that the narrator, Dr. Sheppard, is actually the murderer was revolutionary at the time, and challenged the boundaries of conventional detective fiction. This twist illustrates the idea of the “unreliable narrator”. An unreliable narrator is one whose honesty the reader has taken for granted up until this point, but who ultimately reveals himself to be guilty of manipulated the text. Many of Dr. Sheppard’s lies came by omission – he left out certain scenes that would have implicated him (most obviously, Ackroyd’s murder and his actions to cover up the crime). Any outright lies that Sheppard tells come as quotes – lies he tells to others, not lies written into his narration. (For example, he always makes claims, like not knowing where Ralph Paton is, when speaking to another character rather than in his narration.) Dr. Sheppard’s final chapter, where he owns his crime for the first and only time in the novel, is brief. In passing he mentions that he feels no pity for himself; his only regret seems to be that Poirot got involved to begin with. Otherwise, one must imagine that the crime would have remained unsolved. The title of this last chapter, “Apologia”, supports this lack of remorse. An “apologia” is a written defense of one’s conduct – and although Sheppard is brief in this chapter, he clearly is defending his actions more than he is apologizing for them. “Poor old Ackroyd” (p. 283) he says, and later, “I suppose I must have meant to murder him all along” (p. 284). Throughout the novel, other characters have made reference to their weaknesses. Here, Sheppard acknowledges his own with this defeatist attitude. “All along I have had a premonition of disaster” (p. 283) he writes, as though he never expected to get away with the murder. Indeed, there is a lack of fear or sadness in his decision to kill himself that speaks to this defeatism. Moreso than any other chapter, in Chapter 27 Dr. Sheppard’s true personality begins to shine. As Poirot himself remarked, Sheppard has “kept [his] personality in the background” (p. 255) for most of the manuscript – and indeed, he is a neutral enough narrator that the reader assumes a kind of geniality and goodness to him simply based on the face he describes himself presenting to others. In the final chapter, however, the man’s true self peeks through – defeatist, certainly, but also somewhat smug about his accomplishments as well as his writing skills (“I am rather pleased with myself as a writer” (p. 284)), and entirely remorseless for his crime. Indeed, he expresses only the vaguest concern over what his suicide will do to his sister (“I should not like Caroline to know. She is fond of me, and then, too, she is proud… My death will be a grief to her, but grief passes” (p. 285)). He soon passes from any feelings towards Caroline to rueful frustrations over Poirot’s involvement. He seems curiously detached from the entire event, as though manifesting his defeatism as objectivity. Mostly, he uses the final chapter to fill in the last details that the reader (and Poirot) need to understand the entire crime – a satisfying conclusion for those looking to fully comprehend the entire mechanics of the crime, but less satisfying for those readers hoping for an emotional apology from the murderer.