THEMES

Secrets Breed Secrets

The novel begins and ends with secrets. The first event in the narrative is the suicide of Mrs. Ferrars—a suicide prompted by her secrets. She was guilty of murdering her husband and was being blackmailed by someone who discovered her unpunished crime. Ralph Paton is secretly engaged to Flora and even more secretly married to Ursula Bourne. Flora secretly stole money from her uncle. Miss Russell keeps her illegitimate son, Charles Kent, a secret. Parker hides the fact that he previously blackmailed an employer and was considering blackmailing Ackroyd as well. Major Blunt is secretly in love with Flora. Yet Dr. Sheppard keeps the biggest secret of all: concealing his guilt from the reader as well as from Hercule Poirot and the police. However, only some of these secrets are relevant to the murder of Roger Ackroyd. But because people are keeping so many secrets, their deliberate concealment—which sometimes includes lying—poses formidable obstacles to Poirot's search for the truth.

Unfortunately for all secret-keepers, Poirot is adept at ferreting out concealed information. Poirot's investigation is hindered by the commitment of the characters to keep their skeletons in the closet, but Poirot perseveres. When he first takes the case, he states, "Everyone ... has something to hide" (Chapter 7). Yet later he observes "it is not easy to hide things from Hercule Poirot." After spending time and effort hunting down answers to questions unrelated to the murder, Poirot finally gives a handful of people the opportunity to come clean. "Each one of you has something to hide" he says to those assembled (Chapter 12). One by one, the characters give up their secrets or have them revealed by Poirot.

Not only do the characters keep secrets, large and small, but secrets seem to breed secrets. Mrs. Ackroyd secretly attempted to find out the terms of Roger Ackroyd's will but only because, she says, he was secretive about money in the first place: "In dear Roger's place, I should have not objected to revealing the provisions of my will. But men are so secretive. One is forced to adopt little subterfuges" (Chapter 14). Mrs. Ferrars's secret crime leads to Dr. Sheppard's secret crime, and Dr. Sheppard commits suicide partly because he wants to keep his guilty secret from his sister Caroline.

The Price of Truth

Although Hercule Poirot is interested in bringing the guilty to justice, he is even more a seeker of truth. When he is on a case, his pursuit of the truth is relentless and single minded. Poirot rather comically compares himself to a hound following a scent to describe this aspect of his personality: "The good dog, he does not leave the scent" (Chapter 7). And he isn't after truth just because it is his job, or for the satisfaction of solving a puzzle, although these are certainly among his motivations. He finds the truth beautiful, elevating it to a work of art rather than something more akin to scientific knowledge. In Chapter 12 Poirot tells Flora quite seriously, "I mean to arrive at the truth. The truth, however ugly in itself, is always curious and beautiful to the seeker after it."

Hercule Poirot might love the truth beyond all else, but the novel demonstrates truth has a dangerous side. If one discovers the truth, one might regret it. Poirot tells Flora that in the end she may wish she had left the case to the police rather than bring him into the matter—implying the police are inept and will be unsuccessful. When she insists she does want the truth, he responds ominously, hoping she "will not regret those words." The characters also

seem to agree generally that women in particular need to be shielded from the truth. The police suggest delaying telling Flora her uncle is dead because she will be too upset to answer questions. Indeed, when they do tell her, she faints. In Chapter 10, Flora's mother prefers to believe Ackroyd's death was so dreadful she "can't help feeling that it must have been an accident of some kind." She doesn't want to think it could have been murder. And Dr. Sheppard commits suicide in part because he doesn't want Caroline to find out what really happened: "I should not like Caroline to know. She is fond of me, and then, too, she is proud."

Finally, the truth can be a weapon against the secretive and guilty. Once Poirot knows the truth, he uses it to force the murderer to confess and even encourage the murderer to end his own life. Gathering all the suspects together in Chapter 24, he announces, "Tomorrow the truth goes to Inspector Raglan." And when he confronts Dr. Sheppard with the whole truth, Dr. Sheppard sees, as Poirot puts it, there is only "one way out." Ultimately the truth Poirot discovers leads the way to justice.

Moral Weakness

Throughout the novel, individuals' moral failures and bad choices are blamed on weakness of character, or moral weakness. Ralph, known as a wild young man, has his poor life choices blamed on his mother passing down a moral weakness, a "victim of heredity. He had not inherited his mother's fatal propensity for drink, but nevertheless he had in him a strain of weakness." Flora, who knows Ralph well, refers to this weakness when she asks Hercule Poirot to investigate and clear Ralph of suspicion: "Ralph may be weak," she explains. "He may have done foolish things ... but he wouldn't murder anyone" (Chapter 7). In Chapter 17, Ralph's weakness is again the topic of conversation as Dr. Sheppard notes the young man's "weak nature ... But not a vicious one." Ultimately Ralph's weakness comes through in his relationships with money and with women. He is constantly in need of money, likely a result of poor self-discipline and self-indulgence. He decides to marry Flora to stay in his uncle's good graces (and his will). Poirot describes Ralph's pattern of poor decisions as a product of "innate weakness" and desire for "the easy, the immediate solution" (Chapter 22).

Ralph and his mother are not the only ones described as having weak character. As she admits to stealing her uncle's money, Flora also attributes both Ralph's and her own bad decisions to moral weakness. Indeed "that's what brought us together ... I understood him ... I'm the same underneath ... We're weak, miserable, despicable things" (Chapter 19).

Dr. Sheppard, too, shares this moral weakness, which leads to his becoming a blackmailer, then a murderer. Caroline brings up her brother's weakness when she tells Poirot the doctor is "weak as water, if I weren't about to look after him." Later in that chapter, Poirot poses a hypothetical situation revolving around this kind of moral weakness—describing it as a tendency to give in to temptation when one is placed in certain situations. He tells a little story about an ordinary man with no "murder in his heart" but with a "strain of weakness—deep down." If that man faced difficulties or came upon a secret, he might realize his opportunity to make a great deal of money and so become a blackmailer. Of course, Poirot's hypothetical story is not hypothetical at all: it is Dr. Sheppard's own story.

MOTIFS

Gossip

In the village of King's Abbot, Dr. Sheppard tells readers, residents' "hobbies and recreations can be summed up in the one word, 'gossip.'" This description proves apt over the course of the novel. Juicy news travels quickly from servant to servant, from elderly lady to elderly lady, and along all paths in between. Dr. Sheppard often finds some piece of information he thought was known only to him has already traveled along the gossip paths to his sister Caroline Sheppard or to Hercule Poirot. The giving and receiving of gossip becomes a narrative device in the story—one by which Poirot learns important details of the case and one by which readers follow along with new clues and discoveries. Most important, however, is that the reckless curiosity, speculation, suspicion, and occasional moments of truth of the gossiping villagers reflect and validate those feelings experienced by the reader. This chain of gossip, or information spreading, has the effect of drawing the reader into the novel as one of the villagers, not as an outsider.

Eavesdropping

Eavesdropping is an important motif in the novel, allowing Hercule Poirot to learn information characters would prefer to keep hidden. In a number of instances clues are revealed when someone overhears a conversation, or part of one. Caroline Sheppard overhears Ralph Paton talking to a woman she can't see but who turns out to be Ursula Bourne, his secret wife. Poirot and Dr. Sheppard overhear Major Blunt and Flora Ackroyd in a conversation in which Flora admits her need for money, and Blunt is clearly in love with Flora.

Eavesdropping also provides plot points and leads to important misdirection. One important example is Parker's eavesdropping outside Ackroyd's door the night of the murder. When he is caught obviously eavesdropping, he becomes a suspect—the stereotypical crime-novel butler. Not until much later does he admit he was eavesdropping in the hope of finding out some information to use for blackmail. And characters' overhearing of Ackroyd's Dictaphone playing back his own recorded voice provides the false alibi Dr. Sheppard needs to escape suspicion.

SYMBOLS

Mah Jong

The game of mah jong, played by Dr. Sheppard and Caroline along with Miss Gannett and Colonel Carter, functions as a symbol of strategy—of both Hercule Poirot and Dr. Sheppard. Like a game of mah jong, in which tiles turned face down are revealed during play by turning them face up, Poirot reveals the hidden secrets of the characters. His revelations are systematic and strategic, as if he were assembling pairs of tiles in mah jong. But the game also works as a symbol of Dr. Sheppard's well-executed strategy for committing murder and getting away with it. During the evening, Dr. Sheppard is startled to realize he has "The Perfect Winning—going mah jong on one's original hand." At this point in the novel, readers have no reason to think he will be found out as the murderer. He has a solid alibi, and no one seems to suspect him. His feelings of triumph over the "Perfect Winning" channel his feeling of having arranged everything so perfectly as to keep him beyond suspicion.

Letters and Manuscripts

Through two prominent examples in the novel, the written word is shown to have the ability to both hide truth and reveal secrets. First, the letter written from Mrs. Ferrars to Roger Ackroyd represents writing's ability to reveal secrets, as it identifies her blackmailer and solidifies her own confession of murder and suicide. Yet the secrets contained in the letter are easily hidden again by destroying it. Second, the book itself is a manuscript written by Dr. Sheppard, which he intended to publish at some point "as the history of one of Hercule Poirot's failures" and which becomes his confession and suicide note. In the final chapter Dr. Sheppard demonstrates how his written words could misrepresent the truth. He notes the sentence "I did what little had to be done!" which is included in the original account of finding the body. The reader is meant to assume he did what doctors do—examine the body. But in his confession he explains how these words are misleading. He actually did what needed to be done to execute his plan for murder, which "was quite little—just to shove the Dictaphone into my bag and push back the chair against the wall in its proper place."

Vegetable Marrow

When Poirot is first introduced, he has just thrown a vegetable marrow (squash) over the wall of his garden in frustration. Poirot, recently retired from his job as a detective, has retreated to King’s Abbott to "enjoy" his retirement, but quickly learns that he misses investigating. Retirement for Poirot is an unsatisfying and unstimulating state. For Poirot, the vegetable marrow is a symbol of the disappointment of retirement. After spending months cultivating the marrow, he became so fed up with the experience that he threw it over his garden wall in

frustration. Instead, Poirot needs the stimulation of an investigation in order to find satisfaction.

The Goose Quill

Poirot discovers a goose quill in the summerhouse, which he quickly recognizes as a tool used to snort heroin in an American fashion. The goose quill is a simple symbol for Charles Kent – indeed, it was dropped by him when he met with his mother, Miss Russell, in the summerhouse. The quill represents his presence in the summerhouse as well as his crippling addiction to drugs, which has become the fixation of his entire life, and prevented him from making something of himself.