Prof. Jadwin
English 231C

Christie on Narrators and Narrative

1. **Christie calls the accuracy of narrators into question by providing us with a big surprise - a guilty narrator.**

    a. **The guilty narrator makes the reader share his guilt.**

        i.   In traditional detective stories, the narrator author/izes the story for us.
        ii.   We trust the narrator - the POV whose eye/"I" - we adopt and cherish. (Watson.) We are his ally, his friend. We trust him.
        iii. If we've trusted a criminal, we are an accessory to his crimes.
        iv. Our preoccupation with the story confirms our guilt:

- We snoop by reading the story
- We snoop on other people's lives
- Maybe we'd do other crimes, too - like Sheppard

        Now we too are suspects - like the "unmarried ladies and retired military officers [whose] hobbies and recreations can be summed up in the one word, "gossip" (7)

    b. **The guilty narrator highlights the difference between "truth" and "fiction" - the central issue of detective fiction.**

2. **Narratologists use the terms "story" and "discourse" to distinguish between what actually happens and the ways in which people describe what they have perceived happening. (handout)**

    a.   *Story* - what actually happened - the events being described. Infinite number of facts that exist in time/space continuum - can't ever be fully described.
    b.   *Discourse* - people's narratives about events in a *story*.
        i.   Everyone constructs a different DISCOURSE: a different view or narrative of the events that occurred.
        ii.   Any person may construct more than one discourse.
        iii. Any person may revise an existing discourse.
        iv. There are infinite numbers of discourses
        v.   No discourse represents any story completely; that's impossible.
        vi. There's no such thing as a "true" or "definitive" discourse - only better and worse ones

3. **How do we tell which discourse best or correctly represents the story at hand?**
    a.   All narrators emphasize certain details and leave other details out.
    b.   The process of selection is influenced by a narrator's conscious and unconscious filters
        i.   motives
        ii.   subject position (race, class, gender, age, social position of the teller)
        iii. opinions and prejudices
        iv. depth of understanding and ability to perceive events

    c.   The most *accurate* narratives are the ones that provide the most representative details together without suppressing any important ones.
    d.   However, writers often give us unreliable narratives to force us to make our own judgements about a STORY.

e. The most challenging and thought-provoking narratives are not necessarily those that provide the most accurate DISCOURSES, but those which force the reader to construct their own discourse.

4. **Fiction in general, and DF in particular, highlights gap between STORY AND DISCOURSE.**

   a. Fictions are discourses in the process of completion:
   b. they withhold or conceal information at first and reveal it later to the reader. Fiction asks us to enjoy "finding out what happens" - to complete a DISCOURSE begun at the beginning of the story.
   c. The novel, the writer, and the characters are "keeping" certain facts away from us.
   d. DF highlights the gap between story and discourse by asking reader "what REALLY happened here?"
   e. DF often uses multiple DISCOURSES to confuse the reader with lots of (conflicting) detail; reader, following detective, must create own better DISCOURSE that supplies a more accurate view of the STORY.

5. **The gap between story and discourse is foregrounded by the narrative of Dr. Sheppard, which is a model of the discrepancy.**
   a. Let's analyze Sheppard's "filters" - his
       i.   motives (what do they want their story to accomplish?)
       ii.   subject position (race, class, gender, age, social position)
       iii. opinions and prejudices
       iv.   depth of understanding and ability to perceive.

   b. What does he include in his narrative? What does he leave out?

6. **The Guilty Narrator undermines his own DISCOURSE.**

   a. Sheppard knows that knowledge is power; he therefore covets, gets, and keeps the lid on all knowledge. He does this in the following ways:

       i.   **By ushering us into a closed circle where he tells us privileged "insider" information.** On 127, Sheppard brags "one advantage of being a medical practitioner is that you can usually tell when people are lying to you," and notes that Mrs. Folliott is upset and lying in response to his questions about Ursula.

       ii.   **By exploiting his appearance of reliability - the doctor image.**   We trust him implicitly as we trust all people with intimate knowledge of our selves.

             (1)   We associate him with Watson, the innocent and always chivalrous first-person recounter of the Holmes stories, a beacon of propriety against which we measure the eccentric master detective.

             (2)   We trust people who have intimate knowledge of our bodies because we have to trust them.

       iii. **By playing dumb and pretending not to be interested.**

             (1)   Though JS claims that "Curiosity is not my besetting sin. . .I can exist comfortably without knowing exactly what my neighbors are doing and thinking" (164), he is actually very curious and used to gaining information quickly and effortlessly.

        (2)   On 111, Poirot asks Sheppard if he wants to aid the investigation; Sheppard replies "There's nothing I should like better. You don't know what a dull old fogey's life I lead. Never anything out of the ordinary."

    iv.   By playing the role of the "bumbling sidekick" of HP.
        (1)   We associate Sheppard with Poirot, who confirms our association by adopting JS as his sidekick. Poirot tells JS "You and I, M. le docteur, we investigate this affair side by side. Without you I should be lost" (110). HP gives him tasks, like interviewing Mrs. Folliott, and uses him in other ways as a deputy.

b.   **But Sheppard undermines himself by constantly reminding us that he hates people and withholds information.**

    i.   **He withholds information. If from his sister, then why not from us?**

        (1)   Lying to Caroline: "I have got in the habit of withholding all information possible from my sister. She usually finds out just the same, but I have the moral satisfaction of knowing that I am in no way to blame" (2).

        (2)   Withholding from others: "In the surprise of the moment, I departed from my valuable rule of never parting with information" (17).

        (3)   Winning by withholding: winning the Mah Jong game by silently playing along and allowing the other players to become distracted.

    ii.   **He lies paternalistically to his patients.**

        (1)   Dr. Sheppard tells us on page 152 that he lies to his patients or doesn't tell them what he thinks; he tells us "It is a pity that a doctor is precluded by his profession from being able sometimes to say what he really thinks."

        (2)   Poirot reiterates this same point to Sheppard, and notes that Sheppard also withholds information from Caroline: "There are times when it is necessary to have discretion. Do you tell your patients everything. . . . Nor do you tell your excellent sister everything either, is it not so?" 108

c.   **Dr. Sheppard provides us with an account that "frames" him the way he hopes others will be "framed" for his crime.**

    i.   The first 22 chapters of the novel comprise Dr. Sheppard's version of the STORY - a version that leaves out all information that links him to the crime, except in a few minor slips which are caught by HP. [Any students know of places in the text where Dr. Sheppard slips up?]

d.   **Logically, then, Dr. Sheppard is the most likely suspect because he's the most notable panopticon in the village - and, as he knows, "knowledge is power" - the power to blackmail and murder.**

    i.   Sheppard apparently "abandons" Ralph Paton on 28 - Ralph, according to Sheppard, says he must play "play a lone hand" - but we later learn that Sheppard helps Paton hide out at a nursing home.
    ii.   the "actual" murder of Roger Ackroyd takes place between pages 41-44, but Dr. Sheppard leaves it out of his story.

       iii.   Sheppard of course never lets on that it was he who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars.

7.   Ultimately, then, Christie holds the reader responsible for reconstructing the STORY from these confusing DISCOURSES.

    a.   **Dr. Sheppard's and Caroline Sheppard's narratives gradually give way to HP's narrative**; by chapter 23, HP has taken over and is reconstructing the narrative with the help (or resistance) of the circle of suspects.

    b.   HP's narrative shows that the person able to construct the "truest" version of the facts can actually influence other people's lives. While Dr. Sheppard's action forms the STORY of the tale, HP's version of Dr. Sheppard'S action forms the true DISCOURSE that we privilege.

    c.   Sheppard: "Everyone had a hand in the elucidation of the mystery. It was rather like a jigsaw puzzle to which everyone contributed their own little piece of knowledge or discovery. But their task ended there. To Poirot alone belongs the renown of fitting those pieces into their correct place" (152).