Unit 3: The Lure of the Mystery—Why Readers Read

VIDEO: Click here for an introduction to Unit 3.

In this unit, you will:

- Read Auden, “The Guilty Vicarage.”
- Read to Chapter 25 in Little Scarlet.
- Post Draft #1 of your mystery to your group and to me.
- Complete several group and discussion board posts. See individual lessons.
Lesson 1: The Storyteller

Preview

Discussion Board Post: First and third person narrators.

As you finished reading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and discovered the murderer (how many of you guessed?), you realized how important the narrator is and how much we take this figure for granted when we read. We typically trust the narrator; the figure we count on to take us through the ups and downs of the plot. 19th century British novelist Anthony Trollope spoke of this trust when he wrote about writers and readers in his novel *Barchester Towers*:

“Our doctrine is, that the author and the reader should move along in full confidence with each other. Let the personages of the drama undergo ever so complete a comedy of errors among themselves, but let the spectator never mistake the Syracusan for the Ephesian; otherwise he is one of the dupes, and the part of a dupe is never dignified.”

Look back at Trollope’s lines. What do you not know about it that you think you need to know to understand? Syracusan and Ephesian? (Two ancient warring city states). What Trollope suggests is that writer and reader are always together, and that the writer doesn’t dupe or mislead the reader. But isn’t it true that the mystery writer always misleads? Is the mystery writer always violating the confidence of the readers?

You might see the distinction made above between writer and narrator. You know this difference: the writer creates the characters including the narrator, and although readers often conflate the voice of the writer and the narrator, the truth is that the author always uses the narrator to play a role, even if it’s subtle.

In Christie’s book, the narrator’s role is most certainly not subtle! When this novel was published, it provoked a storm of reaction. Readers were not used to have narrators, and first person ones at that, be the antagonists rather than the protagonists in the story. They were outraged, feeling, as Trollope called it, duped

*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is not only plotted so well that the murderer can actually tell the story from first person, but it is one of the best examples of unreliable narration. Check back to Griffith’s comments on point of view on pages 44-48 for his commentary on how authors create points of view through their narrators.

In this novel, the narrator is first person who seems to be a good commentator on the social and moral scene in little King’s Abbot. He is a doctor, which immediately establishes his credibility for most readers, and he is knowledgeable and a little cynical about the chattering elderly ladies who dominate his world. We like him. But as we discover, he is not to be trusted. As your plot drawings revealed, the narrator tells the story truly but leaves out small details. He places himself in the victim’s presence, he gives the essence of the conversation, but he omits his deed. The way he comes so close to the truth, but leaves it to the reader to figure out his omission, is
masterful. It’s interesting that our narrator never lies, just omits. He tells us exactly what happened in fact and where he was all the time. We are duped, yes, but it’s a good duping.

As Griffith tells us, authors choose lots of different kinds of narrators to tell their stories, from this unreliable 1st person narrator in Agatha Christie’s novel to the omniscient God-like narrator who is not a character at all and who knows all the workings of characters’ minds and describes their actions from a great height, much like Poe’s narrator. We trust this narrator completely, but the narrator lets us know that she is completely knowledgeable. Often, the omniscient narrator writes in third person as a signal of how distant she is from the action and how much she knows. Listen to this opening, from a novel that isn’t classified as a mystery but has a mystery within it, Toni Morrison’s Sula:

*In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom. One road, shaded by beeches, oaks, maples and chestnuts, connected it to the valley. The beeches are gone now, and so are the pear trees where children sat and yelled down through the blossoms to passersby.*

How can you tell the narrator is omniscient from reading this opening? What can you tell about the narrator’s attitudes toward the subject she is going to write about?

Other times, a narrator is not omniscient at all, but limited in his understanding of others’ motivations or thoughts. He may understand the mind of one character but not the others, and as readers, we get only that character’s take on the vents of the plot. The limited narrator may be in third person, staying far from the story, or a first person narrator, as here:

*You don’t know me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.*

Do you recognize that opening? It’s the beginning paragraph of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* (Using your repertoire, you might have linked Mark Twain and Tom Sawyer mentioned in the paragraph to Twain’s most famous novel.) Huck is going to be a limited narrator because he sees everything only from his own perspective; he can’t read the minds of others—Jim and Miss Watson and the collection of strange characters he meets on his ride down the Mississippi—but as readers we trust Huck to tell us the truth as far as he knows it.

But in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* we have a narrator we can’t trust. But we don’t know we can’t trust him until we get near the end of the novel and figure out the crime. It’s a deliberate twist, and quite an unexpected one for the reader.
Activity 1: Discussion Board: First and Third Person Narrators

Find a story or novel you’ve liked in the past that has a third person limited narrator or one that has a first person narrator and post the first few lines to your group. Respond to one another about the differences you note between third and first person narrators.

All this talk about narrators suggests the truth that you’re already being introduced to, that your role as a reader is crucial in making the story work. In a mystery, you’re actively playing along with the writer and the narrator to make sense out of the narrative as it emerges. If you can’t play, the story loses its punch. What’s the point of the author dropping little clues if you as the reader can’t pick any of them up? In mysteries your involvement in making the story work is especially dramatic. You’ve got to see the detective and be the detective.

You brought lots of information with you as reader when you began both the Poe story and Christie’s novel even though you live far away in place and time from the settings of those pieces. Your experience with mysteries, our previous discussions, what you knew about authors—those were all elements you used to begin reading. And after you began reading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, you used more: what you knew about England, about villages, doctors, sisters and brothers, and lots of other things as well. As we’ve said, as a reader you use all your experience, your repertoire, to guide you as you interact with the words on the page. It’s that combination—what you bring to what the text offers—where you find meaning.

In our next novel, *Little Scarlet*, you’ll use your experience as an American, as a reader of social and cultural politics, and other knowledge to enter the fictional world that novelist Walter Mosley presents to us. *Little Scarlet* has a first person narrator like *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. You’ll have to decide as you read whether Easy Rawlins is reliable or not. You may be suspicious after having Dr. Shepard as your narrative guide!
Lesson 1 Assignments

If you have not already done so, make sure you complete the following readings and activities.

Reading

- None

Activity 1: Discussion Board: First and Third Person Narrators

Find a story or novel you’ve liked in the past that has a third person limited narrator or one that has a first person narrator and post the first few lines to your group. Respond to one another about the differences you note between third and first person narrators.
Lesson 2: Plotting Out a Mystery: Time, Place, Criminal, Victim. . .

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Look at your developing original mystery. Who’s your narrator? First or third person? Omniscient or limited? Reliable or unreliable? These are good questions for writers, especially mystery writers, since the answers will often lead directly to plot events and to the murderer.

Setting is also crucial in many mysteries because setting gives clues to motives for crimes or for characters’ actions. Look back at the paragraph from Toni Morrison’s Sula in the last lesson. Notice how vivid the setting is, the details of plants and people, of business and play, that make up the small community of the Bottom. The question might be why this setting is so important.

Remember the cloze test you did last week that was the opening paragraph to Little Scarlet? In that paragraph, and in your filling in the blanks of it, you began to get a sense of the setting—and it’s not a pretty one. It’s Los Angeles at the time of the Watts Riot in 1965. As you begin reading, you need to think about what you remember or know of that time and place, since it will help you enter Easy Rawlins’s world.

Activity 1: Group Post: The Importance of Setting

Look at Toni Morrison’s paragraph and at the first paragraph or two of Little Scarlet. Post a response to your group about the importance of setting, and the words the writers use to get that importance across as well as how you think the narrators feel about the settings they describe. Are there similarities? Once your group talks about responses, post a response to the class at large.

The importance of setting

Setting—time and place—assume a lot of importance in many mystery stories. It’s hard to imagine Sam Spade, the detective in Dashiell Hammett’s famous novels, in any place but 1930s San Francisco; hard to see Poirot in San Francisco at all. Of course, some mysteries depend upon stock settings, places that we’re familiar with because of our own reading and viewing experience. Think about the settings that provoke us to consider that what we’re about to read is a mystery: a scary old house, a dark night, a fierce thunderstorm beginning. That’s why Snoopy always begins his stories with “It was a dark and stormy night.”
Det Fict/Unit 3 master_ Lure of the Mystery.doc
Tuesday, September 20, 2005

Stock settings call for stock responses. That’s what the Clue game counts on. You’re in a big house. Maybe it’s haunted. It’s probably raining outside. In some ways, the setting of Christie’s novels is stock as well as you’d see if you read others of her novels.

In Mosley’s story, the setting of Los Angeles in the sixties is very particular in the way it’s evoked, which you can see from the first paragraph. Consider why a writer uses very specialized settings or very generalized ones. Mosley has a point to make with the setting as well as with the murder he’ll describe. Part of your work as a reader of this novel will be to uncover that point: how does setting become part of the crime and its solution? How is it part of what the narrator wants us to understand?

“The Guilty Vicarage”

Before we talk about your reading of the first half of Little Scarlet, we want to take a look at the essay you’ve read about the way mysteries work, “The Guilty Vicarage.”

WEBLINK: W.H. Auden is an English poet. Click here to read a great poem of his, “Funeral Blues.”

As he confesses at the beginning of this essay, he has an addiction to mysteries. Notice how he begins with an epigram from the New Testament and then the subtitle, A Confession. Consider how that opening affects your initial response to Auden’s commentary. He confesses, a word that carries connotations of guilt for one thing, although readers can tell he’s not truly serious about feeling guilt for reading mysteries.

Art vs. not-art. But Auden does distinguish the detective story from what he calls art, and it’s that distinction that occasions his guilt. He should be reading something that’s art, not not-art. It’s interesting that readers, and people in English departments, continue to make these distinctions between what is regarded as real literature and popular literature, and Auden’s piece is useful for the way it exposes how (he thinks) popular literature, like the detective story, works.

As we’ve said, mysteries often work with stock settings, and some would say stock characters as well: the unemotional detective, the beautiful woman in trouble, the butler (who, in stock stories, would have done it). It’s the formulaic quality of mystery—and of other genre fiction like science fiction, the Western, romance novels—that seems to separate them from art, which has less predictable formats and thus calls up less predictable responses from readers. Part of what you’re doing as a reader of mystery fiction is looking at how writers manipulate all the elements, those that you might call stock elements and those that are more particular. The novels we’re reading might not fit Auden’s categories at all; in fact, might, in our opinion, be considered art.

At any rate, Auden gives some useful information that helps us look at both the novel and story we’ve read and the one we’re in the process of reading:

The milieu

This is the setting for the novel. Auden suggests that the setting must be a relatively closed community; the murderer must—or usually must—come from among that group, be one of them. Auden suggests that the community might be in some way innocent before the murder occurs, be
a place where murder is unheard of and therefore completely shocking. Think of Agatha Christie and the small village of King’s Abbot. Places where murder is uncommon—college campuses, nice neighborhoods, churches, villages—make good mystery settings because the community within them seems connected and somehow innocent. (Look back at Auden’s epigram as you read his line “a society in a state of grace; i.e., a society where there is no need of the law. . .”)

Auden suggests that the more open (natural) setting is less susceptible to the good detective story. Using the detective writer Raymond Chandler as his example, Auden suggests that Chandler is not interested in writing detective stories but “serious studies of the criminal milieu”, works of art, not escape literature.

Activity 2: Journal: Auden’s Objection

In your journal, you might consider Auden’s objection to Chandler as a detective writer and apply it to Mosley. Is Mosley interested in writing detective stories with the stock situation and milieu? If not, what is he interested in? Is his society innocent, in a state of grace?

The murderer

Always the same, the murderer has a deep desire for power. Importantly, the writer has to conceal that desire for power from readers, or they’ll get the murderer’s identity too quickly, but often the writer will leave small clues about the way the murderer responds to, or shows a need for, power, that can lead to the solution. Look back at Dr. Shepard’s statements in Christie’s novel and you’ll see instances where Shepard reveals his desire for omnipotence and his resentment at his lack of power and control.

As Auden says, “To surprise the reader when the identity of the murderer is revealed, yet at the same time to convince him that everything he has previously been told about the murderer is consistent with his being a murderer, is the test of a good detective story.” Did you feel that after finishing The Murder of Roger Ackroyd? You might think of Auden’s statement when you finish Little Scarlet.

The murderer will always be caught and punished. Consider Dr. Shepard’s end. Is he punished do you think?

The suspects

If the plot works well, all the characters who are not the murderer must in one way or the other look guilty. Interestingly, Auden suggests that the innocent must be guilty of something so that readers suspect that their actions or will conflict with the law or with ethics. They could be murderers. Some mysteries suggest that we all could be murderers.

The detective

Auden considers Sherlock Holmes a perfect detective and few others. The detective has to be the opposing force to the murderer, the representative of innocence or of the law. He can be a professional or an amateur, but he should be able to restore innocence and order. Consider the detective in Little Scarlet as a restorer of order.
Why do people love to read mysteries? Auden believes that readers read mysteries to find an orderly, innocent world where guilt and sin are punished, where evil is exposed, where some person—with deep understanding of humans but perhaps little sympathy for them—can restore a sense of peace to a world that is momentarily chaotic.

**Activity 3: Discussion Board Post: Why Do People Read Mysteries?**

For the class, post a comment about why people read mysteries, agreeing or taking issue with Auden’s notion that we read so as not to identify with suffering and to escape back to innocence. Look again at the very end of his essay before you post.

**Activity 4: Journal: Consider Auden’s Chart**

Look at Auden’s chart of how the mystery plot works from peaceful and innocent back to that state at the end of the novel. Consider that movement as you read Mosely.

Post your thoughts to your journal.
Lesson 2 Assignments

If you have not already done so, make sure you complete the following readings and activities.

Reading

- Read Auden, “Guilty Vicarage.”

Activity 1: Group Post: The Importance of Setting

Look at Toni Morrison’s paragraph and at the first paragraph or two of Little Scarlet. Post a response to your group about the importance of setting, and the words the writers use to get that importance across as well as how you think the narrators feel about the settings they describe. Are there similarities? Once your group talks about responses, post a response to the class at large.

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Post your thoughts to your journal.
Lesson 3: Easy Does It

**Preview**

Read first section of Mosley, *Little Scarlet.*
Research and post to class on Watts in the 1960s.
Post to group on reactions to detective and to me.
Post to class on flat and round.
Post draft of your original mystery to group and me.

Walter Mosley is a contemporary African American mystery writer who lives and works in California. He has written nine Easy Rawlins mysteries, and *Little Scarlet* is his latest.

**WEBLINK:** Check out Walter Mosley’s official website for more information.  
http://www.twbookmark.com/features/waltermosley/index.html

The most famous of the Easy Rawlins’s mysteries is *Devil in a Blue Dress* because it was made into a movie starring Denzel Washington as Easy. Here’s a small film clip of that movie. You can rent it almost anywhere should you want to see Easy as a younger man and Los Angeles in the early fifties.

**VIDEO:** Click here to see a clip from *Devil in a Blue Dress.*

As you’re reading *Little Scarlet,* you might be thinking about what actually happened before and during the riots in Watts. Knowing information about the context for the novel enriches your reading and allows you to understand characters’ motivations more clearly.

**Activity 1: Research and Discussion Board Post: Watts in the 1960s**

Find some information about the riots by accessing newspaper files from the time or locating historical accounts and share with your group. After you pull together information about Watts and the aftermath of the riots, post some facts to the class to see what you all have discovered.

After you’ve read through Chapter 25, about half way through the book, consider how Mosley makes use of his detective. What is his role in the community?

**Activity 2: Group Post and Journal: How Do You See Easy?**

Post a response to your group about your attitude toward Easy. Use one quote from the book to help you frame your response. Discuss the different reactions to Easy with your group.

Send your comments to me for your journal.

One of the striking characteristics of Easy Rawlins is his complicated response to the world around him. He doesn’t always do what detectives do—at least what Poirot would do—and so he surprises us.
Types of characters. If you’ll look back at *Aspects of the Novel*, remember Forster’s discussion of types of characters as either flat or round. A flat character is one who always acts according to type, or maybe who has characteristic gestures that make him easily identifiable, or they embody one quality or idea that they are always fixed on. The flat character is a kind of character—the stuffy old dowager, the haughty butler, the sly young woman (these are all types used often in mysteries—maybe in your own!).

Flat characters. Flat characters are useful for a writer because they are dependable for the reader. As Forster says, they are easily recognized whenever they come in—easily recognized by the reader’s “emotional eye,” and that’s a help when a writer is trying to write a complicated plot with red herring clues and a murderer lurking somewhere and a detective on the trail. They are also easily remembered by the reader after they’ve been introduced.

Think about movies or television shows where the characters are flat. In comic movies or television shows, there are a lot of flat characters. They act according to type, they have identifiable characteristics—physical features or gestures—, and they are defined by one basic idea or issue. Floyd the barber, Barney Fife, and Aunt Bee are all flat characters in the “Andy Griffith Show.”

Round characters. But Andy himself and Opie are not really flat. They do have some identifiable characteristics—Andy is wise and Opie is curious—but they sometimes surprise us in a way that Floyd the barber never does. They are, in Forster’s terms, round characters. The round character has dimensions that make readers respond to them emotionally, especially if they’re in tragic situations. Forster notes that only round characters have the ability to perform tragically for any length of time, and that’s because readers have to see more than one dimension in order to empathize and connect with their struggles.

Of course, Andy and Opie aren’t tragic characters. And maybe they’re only round-ish. But they do exhibit the ability to change, they can’t exactly be summed up in a sentence, and most of all, they can surprise us and convince us that what they’ve done still fits their character. That’s Forster’s famous definition of the round character, one who is able to “surprise convincingly.”

Easy Rawlins is a different kind of detective from Dupin and Poirot because he’s rounder than they are.

Activity 3: Discussion Board Post: Flat and Round Characters in *Little Scarlet*

Post to the class a small comment about who you consider to be a flat character and a round one in *Little Scarlet*. After you’ve read others’ posts, see if you’ve altered your position. Consider together why Mosley uses the kinds of characters he’s using.

Activity 4: Group Post: Beginning Draft of Your Original Mystery

Post the beginning draft of your original mystery for the group and me for suggestions and comments now.
Lesson 3 Assignments

If you have not already done so, make sure you complete the following readings and activities.

Reading

• Read first section of Mosley, *Little Scarlet*.

Activity 1: Research and Discussion Board Post: Watts in the 1960s

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