

Possible topics for *The Death Of Roger Ackroyd* papers – ENGL 1158.107 - Lennon

- One of Christie's great achievements as a mystery novelist is to show how a crime, and its solution, is often the product of class tensions and resentments. Analyze *Roger Ackroyd's* observations of social class.

- Both the victim and murderer in this novel are unmarried men under the influence of powerful spinster sisters. And much of the plot revolves around the way men and women interact and depend upon one another– for money, service, and love. You could investigate the way gender lines unify and divide the characters here, and how they fuel the plot.

- This book is a rather sneaky example of an unreliable first-person narration– a story in which our only source of information, a narrator whom we assume to be trustworthy, is in fact being strategically dishonest. There's a neat twist to this formula near the end, when Poirot intrudes upon the narrator's self-serving telling, and influences its progress. Write an essay that examines the complexities of Christie's narrative method.

- Hercule Poirot is quite different in character from the detectives we've encountered so far– he lacks the brash physicality of Homes, Dupin, or the Continental Op, and appears quite reluctant to engage in detection at all. Indeed, we don't even meet him until the story is well underway, and even then we're not immediately aware of who he is. Is Poirot's lack of interest real, or a put-on? Does he, like the Op, engage in dishonesty to catch his prey?

- For most of the book, we are convinced that Poirot's ad hoc partnership with Doctor Sheppard is straightforward. But at the book's end, we realize that this arrangement was strategic– Poirot has kept Sheppard close so as not to spook him. Discuss the psychology behind this partnership, and the sneaky narrative tricks that Christie employs to keep us in the dark about its true nature. Take careful note of the way Poirot flatters Sheppard's intelligence– at one point Sheppard tells us, “I do not see why I should be supposed to be totally devoid of intelligence. After all, I read detective stories.”

- At one point, Sheppard says, regarding his supposed careful stewardship of his sister's irrepressible personality, “It is well at any price to have peace in the home.” This line seems innocent at the time, but takes on greater meaning once the book's ending has been revealed. Show the ways in which this book is about the establishment and maintenance of order– social, domestic, and moral.

- We might think of Christie's books as fairly conventional stories, intended for a mainstream audience. But this book employs a fair amount of the kind of self-referential convolution we might now call postmodernism. Talk about the ways this book is “on to itself”: its experiments with genre convention, its references to the clichés of crime fiction for which Christie herself is generally thought to be partially responsible.

- This book is not, strictly speaking, a work of realism– there is much in it that is quite implausible, in real-world terms. You could make a case for the idea that Christie's goal is not to

create a convincing mirror of the real world, and of human psychology, but to create an artificial puzzle intended to blind and mislead us. (Note: I am ripping this off from Pierre Bayard, whose book about this novel is quite intriguing— you might give it a read.)

- We've read enough now so that you could begin to make generalizations about crime fiction— why it appeals to us, what makes it tick (or, alternate, what makes *us* tick). One thing that all these puzzles have in common is a series of signs and symbols that must, in the end, lead to one single answer— qualities that few real-life problems embody. The complexity of the crime story is an artificial one, and the simplicity of its conclusion is artificial, too. But we love this kind of artifice— it delights us, and flatters our intelligence, in much the way Poirot flatters Sheppard's. Talk about what human psychological traits the crime story appeals to, and its writers manage to distract and amaze us.

- This novel is full of examples of lies of omission, and what Pierre Bayard calls “double-edged discourse.” The former occurs when someone tells a partial truth, concealing the elements of it that would incriminate him. The latter refers to statements that could be taken more than one way. Find examples of these manipulations of language, and show how Christie uses them to deceive us.

- One could argue that there are two ways of hiding the truth, aside from explicitly lying. One is to conceal something or otherwise distract our attention from it; the other is to hide it in plain sight, surrounded by other, less relevant, truths. Christie indulges in both of these forms of misdirection in *Roger Ackroyd*; find examples of each, and discuss their import to the story.

- This novel takes place at a time when the old English system of social order was in transition— after the initial wave of European industrialization and the first World War, when poverty, labor unrest, and violent dictatorship were on the rise. Think about how Christie's prototypical English village, with its closed, orderly society, is both an escape from these changes, and a reaction to them.

- Agatha Christie was often referred to (along with her contemporary, Dorothy L. Sayers), as one of the “Queens of Crime.” She was at the forefront of a wave of crime fiction by British women that would last for a century— indeed, British women remain strong players in the field today. Look into the social and historical forces that shaped these writers and their work, and investigate why their books have held sway for so long over this diverse and popular field.

- Poirot is only one of Christie's famous literary detectives— she was also known for a second protagonist, the demure Miss Jane Marple. Write an essay comparing the two— their personalities and detection methods, and, more importantly, the differing purposes for which they have been used.

- There are some good books and essays out there debating whether or not Agatha Christie was a feminist, or, I suppose, a proto-feminist. On the one hand, women in Christie are lodged firmly in dependent roles in a conservative society. On the other, they are unfailingly clever, and find agency in all kinds of unexpected ways. Discuss.