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This Paper is about Murderous Bunnies;

Unreliable Narration, its Use and Function in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd and The Little Stranger

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ABSTRACT

Academics have struggled with defining unreliable narration even after Wayne C. Booth proposed a definition in 1961 that is still adhered to today. In order to provide more clarity, Ansgar Nünning devised a methodology for recognizing and defining unreliable narration in works of fiction. Using this proposed methodology, Agatha Christie’s 1929 The Murder of Roger Ackroyd and Sarah Waters’ 2009 The Little Stranger will be analysed in order to not only lend credibility to Nünning’s theory, but also to determine what function the unreliable narrator has in both works, and how both narrators differ from one another.

Keywords: Unreliable narration, Ansgar Nünning, Agatha Christie, Sarah Waters, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, The Little Stranger
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Introduction

Crime fiction appears to still be a relevant genre in literature; as recently as April third 2015, The Guardian posted a “crime fiction roundup” on its website, detailing the best recent crime novels (Wilson). As a genre, crime fiction dates back to the early nineteenth century. Often cited as some of the earlier examples are the tales of Edgar Allen Poe’s Detective Dupin: The Murders in the Rue Morgue (1841), The Mystery of Marie Roget (1842), and The Purloined Letter (1844). The genre has evolved since then, but over the course of its history, the unreliable narrator has returned time and time again. From the works of Poe such as The Tell-Tale Heart (1843) to stories as recent as Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club (1996) or Gillian Flynn’s Gone Girl (2012), unreliable narration leaves its mark, both implicitly as well as explicitly. This thesis will focus on two works of crime fiction specifically, namely Agatha Christie’s The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (1926) and Sarah Waters’ The Little Stranger (2009), paying attention in particular to the way in which these unreliable narrators operate.

First published in 1926, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd by Agatha Christie was named the best crime novel ever by members of the Crime Writers’ Association in 2013 (Brown). The novel describes the investigation into the titular murder of Roger Ackroyd as narrated by Dr. James Sheppard, who is to be the assistant to Hercule Poirot for the duration of the case. In a twist considered very controversial at the time of the novel’s release (Cohen 52), it is Dr. Sheppard who is revealed to be the murderer by the end of the novel; since he was, aside from the narrator of the story, also Poirot’s sidekick, Sheppard was one of the least likely suspects to readers at the time. He was, however, not the last unreliable narrator Christie would employ. Another noteworthy example of unreliable narration in Christie’s works would appear in Endless Night (1967), in the form of Michael Rogers.

Departing from her earlier themes of lesbian and gay fiction, Sarah Waters published her first ghost story, The Little Stranger, in 2009. Despite being marketed as a gothic novel,
the tale bears elements of crime fiction as well. The story is set in a dilapidated mansion called Hundreds Hall in England during the 1940s; the attempts to restore the mansion by the Ayers family living in it are hindered significantly by strange happenings that may or may not be supernatural in nature. Narrating it all is the family doctor, Dr. Faraday, who reports the incidents happening to the family to the readers. Sarah Waters has indicated in a 2009 interview that this means “he essentially becomes a bit of an unreliable narrator” because “he never experiences anything supernatural first-hand and that means we don’t either. We’re getting them reported to us, which does allow for a range of interpretations” (O’Neill). True enough, many reviews of the novel (which will be examined in chapter three of this thesis) and analyses and interpretations of its characters, Dr. Faraday in particular, warrant a closer look at how much of an unreliable narrator Faraday truly is.

By analysing the use of an unreliable narrator both in Christie’s work as well as Waters’, this thesis will show how unreliable narration is a key element in these works of crime fiction, what the function of this form of narration is in both novels, and how their use differs between these tales. To do so, a theory by Ansgar Nünning on recognizing and identifying unreliable narrators in fiction will be used. The first chapter of this thesis will introduce said theory. In his 1997 article “‘But why will you say that I am mad?’ On the Theory, History and Signals of Unreliable Narration in British Fiction”, Ansgar Nünning, Professor of English and American Literature and Culture Studies outlines the general definition of unreliable narration as put forward by Wayne C. Booth in 1961. Nünning considers this definition – which will be explained in the first chapter – to be vague and unsatisfactory, and offers a more concrete theory later in this article. He then moves on to describe the history of the use of unreliable narration, specifically in British fiction and finally provides clues based on his research by which to recognize an unreliable narrator in a work of literature. Nünning highlights a collection of textual clues and verbal tics in different works of
literature to serve as evidence that the narrator in these novels are unreliable. He also argues that all works with an unreliable narrator feature these pointers; by identifying these textual markers, the reader can then identify a narrator as being unreliable. This article and its theory will be the tool by which the two case studies will be measured.

The second and third chapter, then, will be dedicated to Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and Waters’ *The Little Stranger* respectively. Through close reading, an analysis based upon Nünning’s theory and interpretations by academics and non-professional readers, this thesis will show not only how unreliable narration is a key element to the genre of crime fiction, but also how it functions – and functions differently – between the two case studies.
Establishing a methodology: Ansgar Nunning on how to recognize unreliable narrators

In his 1961 work *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth proposed a definition for unreliable narration that is still widely used to this day. Quoted in Ansgar Nünning’s article “‘But why will you say that I am mad?’ On the Theory, History and Signals of Unreliable Narration in British Fiction” (1997) published in the German journal *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, Booth’s definition is the following: “a narrator [is] reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), [and] unreliable when he does not” (85). Booth himself acknowledged that his definition was vague; despite that, as Nünning states, “a comparison […] of standard narratological works, scholarly articles and a wide range of glossaries shows that virtually everyone agrees on what an unreliable narrator is” (85). Multiple scholars have addressed the vagueness of the original definition: in the article *Fictional Reliability As A Communicative Problem*, Tamar Yacob remarked that “There can be little doubt about the importance of the problem of reliability in narrative and in literature as a whole. […] [But] the problem is (predictably) as complex and (unfortunately) as ill-defined as it is important” (113). The problem she refers to is that the accepted definition as put forward by Booth does not give one concrete terms to determine whether a narrator is reliable or not. Another academic, Gerald Prince, provided the following definition in his *Dictionary of Narratology* for the term “unreliable narrator”:

A narrator whose norms and behaviour are not in accordance with the implied author’s norms; a narrator whose values (tastes, judgements, moral sense) diverge from those of the implied author’s; a narrator the reliability of whose account is undermined by various features of that account (101).

His explanation though, as Nünning points out, merely summarizes what was already accepted, and is still “a mixture of vagueness and tautology” (Nünning, 86). The problem, he
argues, is the inclusion of the implied author in these definitions. The implied author, as described in the Living Handbook of Narratology, has become a widespread term for a concept referring to the author evoked by, but not represented in a work (Schmid). In other words, the author does not intend to create an image of themselves in their work, but a reader can perceive certain aspects of the work to be representative of an author’s norms and values. The way in which an author structures a world and introduces characters, for example, can indicate what an author finds important and what is negligible. Nünning believes that the implied author is not important in identifying a narrator as being unreliable, an opinion he shares with Mieke Bal. In her article “The Laughing Mice: Or: On Focalization” she observes that the implied author is “a remainder category, a kind of passepartout that serves to clear away all the problematic remainders of a theory” and that the tenacity with which narratologists cling to the implied author to explain unreliable narration is misplaced (209).

In an attempt to solve the vagueness surrounding the definition of unreliable narration, Nünning puts forward a theory and methodology for identifying unreliable narrators based on textual clues rather than making assumptions to the norms and values of the implied author. It is this theory and methodology that is at the basis of this research into unreliable narration in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd and The Little Stranger.

Booth, and many of the scholars that came after him, consider the implied author to be the most vital part to define the unreliable narrator; in his article, Nünning proposes to disregard the concept entirely. He reasons that, since the concept of the implied author is almost as “notoriously ill-defined” (86) as Booth’s definition of unreliable narrators, taking the implied author into account merely “shifts the burden of definition” (86) to a different concept. He goes on to argue that “the implied author’s norms are impossible to establish and [that] the concept of the implied author is eminently dispensable. The implied author is neither a necessary nor a sufficient standard for determining a narrator’s putative
unreliability” (87). To instead arrive at a conclusion regarding the reliability of a narrator, Nünning proposes we look at the concept of structural or dramatic irony:

In the case of an unreliable narrator, dramatic irony results from the discrepancy between the intentions and value system of the narrator and the foreknowledge and norms of the reader. For the reader, either the internal lack of harmony between the statements of the narrator or contradictions between the narrator’s perspective and the reader’s own concept of normality suggests that the narrator’s reliability may be suspect (87).

In short, the reader him/herself is responsible for determining the reliability of the narrator of a story. If the reader has norms and values similar to those of the narrator, the reader is less likely to judge a narrator as being unreliable. However, if the narrator’s vision or actions are at odds with the views of the reader, or if the narrator in anyway subverts the reader’s perception of ‘normality’, the narrator is more likely to be perceived as being unreliable. This manner of definition is not set in stone: as Nünning points out, most theories leave unclear what unreliability is exactly, and whether the narrator’s shortcomings are moral or epistemological in nature (88).

After establishing the history of unreliable narration in British fiction, Nünning proposes that, in order to explain how readers determine whether a narrator is unreliable or not, there has to be a “development of a systematic account of clues to unreliable narration” (95); what textual and contextual signs alert readers to the fact the narrator of the story might deserve their suspicion? “The identification of an unreliable narrator” Nünning argues, “does not depend solely or even primarily on the reader’s intuition or ability of ‘reading between the lines’,” as other scholars have proposed (95). Instead, there are textual signals like internal inconsistencies, and contextual hints, like discrepancies between the world presented in a text and the reader’s concept of “normality”, that make readers aware of the fact they might be
dealing with unreliable narrators. Nünning continues his article by pointing out a number of these textual and contextual “red flags”.

The most prominent textual pointers, according to Nünning, are internal contradictions within the narrator’s discourse and discrepancies between his or her utterances and actions (96). He illustrates this concept with the following passage from Ian McEwan’s *Dead as They Come*:

I prefer silent women, […] My ideal conversation is one which allows both participants to develop their thoughts to the fullest extent, uninhibitedly, without endlessly defining and redefining premises and defending conclusions. […] With Helen I could converse ideally, I could talk to her. […] I made money, I made love, I talked, Helen listened. (McEwan 63)

In this passage, the narrator’s preference for silent women is at odds with his idea of an ideal conversation: both sides should be able to fully formulate their thoughts, without any kind of inhibition stopping them. It should be noted that the Helen the narrator mentions is, in fact, a mannequin. Not only can she not participate in the ideal conversation the narrator describes, she cannot participate in any conversation whatsoever. The narrator’s actions continue to conflict with his thoughts on what an ideal conversation should be like by emphasising he “could talk to her” and that “[he] talked, Helen listened”.

Another example of textual hints to the potential unreliability of the narrator Nünning points out are conflicts between story and discourse, between the narrator’s representation of events and the explanations and interpretations of them the narrator gives (Nünning, 96). This means that the way a narrator comments on a scene contradicts the evidence presented in the scene he or she comments upon. In the case of the previously mentioned passage from *Dead as They Come*, the character’s comments and remarks are at odds with the way events and characters are described and represented. He refers to Helen as a silent woman when in fact,
she is a mannequin (and thus unable to speak at all), and he continues to treat her as if she were a live person when he speaks of her.

Verbal habits, or ‘tics’ may also be a clue to the unreliability of the narrator. As Nünning argues, most unreliable narrators are compulsive monologists and egotists: “The vast majority of their utterances are indeed speaker-oriented expressions beginning with their favourite word ‘I’” (97). Similarly, unreliable narrators keep addressing the person they are narrating to, usually through the use of phrases like “you will perhaps understand”, “you will perhaps excuse”, “you will no doubt agree” or “you will not dispute” in an attempt to justify their behaviour and world-view (97). Especially in Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger* can we see this trait, as ‘protagonist’ Dr. Faraday frequently uses these phrases in his explanations of events, examples of which will be addressed in chapter three.

A third clue Nünning mentions is the way in which many texts self-consciously raise the question of the narrator’s unreliability. According to him, this can be done “either […] indirectly, that is by alluding to a narrator’s faulty memory or limited knowledge” – again, a trait very much visible in Dr. Faraday’s account of the events at Hundreds Hall – “or the issue of unreliability can be directly thematized” (Nünning, 98). The latter is often done by using certain words and phrases that give away the cognitive limitations of the character, which Nünning illustrates through a character by the name of Dowell in *The Good Soldier*, a work by Ford Madox Ford: “His repeated use of such words as ‘think’ or ‘guess’ and, even more, his acknowledged ignorance, indicate a very weak degree of certitude, something that is underlined by the phrase “I don’t know”, arguably the most prominent leitmotif in the novel” (Nünning, 98). Nünning adds that, like many other unreliable narrators, Dowell repeatedly admits he doesn’t remember exactly what happens which makes him suspect at best: we can see this trait not only in Waters’ Dr. Faraday, but in Christie’s Dr. James Sheppard from *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* as well, as chapter two will demonstrate.
Nünning concludes his article by pointing out that verbal clues are not enough; as mentioned earlier, the reader largely determines whether or not a narrator is unreliable by comparing a narrator’s words and actions to their own norms and values. He is supported in this by Kathleen Wall, whom Nünning describes as being “the only critic to date who has at least briefly discussed the importance of contextual information for recognizing an unreliable narrator” (Nünning 99). In her article “The Remains of the Day and its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration”, Wall argues that “Part of the way in which we arrive at suspicions that the narrator is unreliable [is through] using what we know about human psychology and history to evaluate the probably accuracy of, or motives for, a narrator’s assertions” (Wall 30).

Nünning recognizes four referential frameworks, the first of which is the reader’s empirical experience and criteria of verisimilitude: “These frames depend on the referentiality of the text, the assumption that the text refers to or is at least compatible with the so-called real world” (100). In short, when a narrator deviates in his words or actions from what is considered by the reader to be “common sense” or “general world knowledge”, this can be an indication of the unreliability of the narrator.

The second referential framework Nünning identifies is psychic normality. Narrators who violate the standards that a given culture holds to be constitutive of normal human behaviour are generally considered unreliable. In Western European culture, for example, it is not considered normal for a person to commit suicide upon bringing dishonour to their family. A narrator from a Western European country set in present time would be seen as unreliable for holding and enforcing such an opinion. In a country and time where such an action would be the norm, that same narrator would not violate the standards constituting normal human behaviour of the given culture, and therefore would not be seen as unreliable. Nünning explains that what is involved here are psychological theories of personality or implicit models of normal behaviour: narrators that are clearly insane fall within this framework (100).
The third framework concerns generally agreed-upon moral and ethical standards. Nünning illustrates this with an example from Ian McEwan’s novel *The Cement Garden*, in which the narrator speaks of the death of his father as if it did not affect him at all and has no real bearing on the rest of the story. The narrator later remarks “I am only including the little story of his death to explain how my sisters and I came to have such a large quantity of cement at our disposal” (McEwan 9). The reader, because of their generally agreed-upon moral and ethical standards, would expect the death of a family member to have a great impact upon a person. The narrator, however, in treating the passing of his father as a simple explanation to why he and his siblings have so much cement, goes against the reader’s expectation and is thus viewed as unreliable.

Fourthly and finally, Nünning identified literary frameworks designed specifically to make the reader perceive the narrator as unreliable. These include general literary conventions, conventions and models of literary genres, and stereotyped models of characters such as the picaro, the *miles gloriosus*, or the trickster (Nünning 101). A picaro is a roguish character and the protagonist of a picaresque novel; these are usually humorous or works in which the protagonist gets by through mischief and trickery rather than through being good and kind (Wheeler, “Literary Terms and Definitions: P.”). The *miles gloriosus*, Latin for ‘glorious soldier’, is a stock character in classical Roman drama. He is cowardly but boasts of his past deeds, and he becomes involved in sexual catastrophes, bullying, and thievery. The *miles gloriosus* is frequently of low morals (Wheeler, “Literary Terms and Definitions: M.”). Finally, a trickster is a character often found in myths and folklore, who plays tricks or otherwise does not display commonly accepted behaviour. Later incarnations of the trickster are often clever creatures or people who use trickery and deceit as a form of defence, to protect them from the dangers of the world (Wheeler, “Literary Terms and Definitions: T.”). Nünning emphasizes it is important to not forget about these literary or generic
considerations: “A narrator that is considered to be unreliable in psychological or realistic terms may appear quite reliable if the text belongs to the genre of science fiction” (101).

It should be added, as Nünning concludes, that there are no generally accepted standards of normality. A narrator may appear to one reader as perfectly normal, while to the other reader they are perceived as unreliable:

A pederast would not find anything wrong with Lolita; a male chauvinist fetishist who gets his kicks out of making love to dummies is unlikely to detect any distance between his norms and those of the mad monologist in McEwan’s Dead As They Come; and a porn-freak and fast-food-addict would not even find the norms and values propounded by the money-loving egotist John Self, the awful narrator of Martin Amis’s novel Money, in any way objectionable. (101)

With his article, Nünning offers a methodology for recognizing unreliable narrators in fiction. While he states that much more work still needs to be done in order to “come to terms with the complex set of narrative strategies that ever since the days of Booth have been subsumed under the wide umbrella of the term ‘unreliable narration’,” his proposed theory is extensive enough to analyse the narrators in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd and The Little Stranger (102). In order to account for the different standards of normality, which Nünning marks as possibly problematic in his article, different reader interpretations will be used in the analysis of the two novels. By using interpretations from a range of readers, both non-professional and academic, a wide selection of standards will be covered. As the following chapters will show, the narrators in the novels by Christie and Waters tick many, if not all, of the boxes Nünning proposes.
Case study: The Murder of Roger Ackroyd and Dr. John Sheppard

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, written by Agatha Christie, was published in 1926 and was Christie’s sixth novel. The novel stood out, though, because of its plot twist: in the last chapters, detective Hercule Poirot revealed the novel’s narrator, Dr. John Sheppard, to be the killer of Roger Ackroyd. Readers and critics were outraged (Cohen 52). Throughout the novel, Sheppard had appeared as normal, and never once gave any indication of having committed the crime. What was more, Sheppard was the narrator of the story and thus assumed to be a trustworthy source of information (Owen). Christie, however, had the doctor conceal important information from the reader and distribute misinformation instead, making the reveal at the end of the novel all the more unexpected. Using Ansgar Nünning’s methodology as outlined in the previous chapter, however, certain hints and clues regarding Sheppard’s unreliability as a narrator can be identified and serve as indicators of his part in the eponymous murder of Roger Ackroyd.

The story of The Murder of Roger Ackroyd opens with the death of Mrs. Ferrars, in the fictional town of King’s Abbott in England. Mrs. Ferrars was a wealthy widow expected to marry the widower Roger Ackroyd. She was also rumoured to have poisoned her husband. Dr. James Sheppard, the town doctor and narrator of the story, rules her death an accident. Later, after Roger Ackroyd informs Sheppard that Ferrars was being blackmailed about her husband’s death, Ackroyd is found dead in his study. Hercule Poirot, who has moved into the house next to the one Sheppard shares with his sister Caroline, comes out of retirement to investigate the case. While the police believes Ralph Paton, Ackroyd’s stepson, to be the killer, Poirot thinks otherwise, even though Paton has been suspiciously absent since the murder. Sheppard assists Poirot with his investigation, looking into various other members of Ackroyd’s household in an attempt to identify the killer. In the final chapter, it is revealed that, while all suspects had a motive to kill Ackroyd and no alibi for the time the murder took
place, it was actually Dr. Sheppard who not only murdered Ackroyd, but also blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars. While Sheppard refuses outright to explain why he committed the crime, Ackroyd had been too close to discovering Sheppard had been blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars. Sheppard had also been ‘helping’ Paton hide the entire time, though by sheltering him, Sheppard actually helped increase the suspicions cast upon Paton. The book ends with Sheppard confessing to the deed and explaining how, through clever wordplay, he kept his involvement a secret from the reader.

One of the first indications of an unreliable narrator Nünning offers up for his methodology is the fact that most, if not all unreliable narrators are “compulsive monologists and egotists” (Nünning 97). While both *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *The Little Stranger* are written from a first person perspective (or perhaps because they are written from a first person perspective), it is not a stretch to say that not only Dr. Sheppard, but Dr. Faraday as well possess and express at least hints of these two characteristics. It is true that, through a first person perspective, the readers becomes more aware of the thoughts and personality of the character telling the tale. This also means, however, that said character’s most private thoughts are touched upon, which can be quite revealing as to their true nature. In Sheppard’s case, he makes his distaste for other characters apparent. Instead of describing how, for example, Mrs. Ackroyd is generally perceived, Sheppard explicitly states “I am sorry to say I detest Mrs. Ackroyd” (Christie 50) and continues to describe exactly why he does not like her. His negative perception of her is never balanced out or nuanced in any way; Sheppard makes it clear that this is his vision of Mrs. Ackroyd and, since it is his tale, his vision matters most. Sheppard narrates his feelings toward the other characters or events in similar ways, foregrounding his own perception, sometimes even at the cost of others. Moments after stating his dislike of Mrs. Ackroyd, she addresses him. Her speech, however, is never directly quoted:
She gave me a handful of assorted knuckles and rings to squeeze, and began talking volubly. Had I heard of Flora’s engagement? So suitable in every way. The dear young things had fallen in love at first sight. Such a perfect pair, he so dark and she so fair.

(50)

Instead of letting Mrs. Ackroyd speak directly, Sheppard lays claim to her words and makes them his own, hinting at his egotistical side. He can be observed paraphrasing other characters on multiple occasions as well, as early as the first chapter, in which not only his sister (“Caroline says that proves less than nothing” (21)) but a neighbour, Miss Gannett, is subjected to this treatment as well:

Wasn’t it sad about poor dear Mrs. Ferrars? A lot of people were saying she had been a confirmed drug-taker for years […] She, Miss Gannett, had proof positive of that. Of course, I must know all about it – doctors always did – but they never tell? (24)

It should be noted that throughout the novel Sheppard rarely paraphrases the men of the story. That treatment seems to be reserved for the women alone, usually when they speak to Sheppard on matters that do not appear to really interest them – hence why he paraphrases them in the first place, instead of quoting them directly. Sheppard does not appear to have a high opinion of women, evident as well when he says, in regards to Mrs. Ferrars’ suicide, “Women, in my experience, if they once reach the determination to commit suicide, usually wish to reveal the state of mind that led to the fatal action. They covet the limelight” (21).

This becomes poignant when Sheppard is revealed as the murderer: he never tries to explain his actions until the very last chapter and never tries to “reveal the state of mind that led to the fatal action” (21). Even more telling, perhaps, is when Sheppard states, in a conversation with his sister, that “Surely if a woman committed a crime like murder, she’d be sufficiently cold-blooded to enjoy the fruits of it without any weak-minded sentimentality such as repentance” (14). In these two excerpts Sheppard not only foreshadows his role in Ackroyd’s
murder, but egotistically boasts about his superiority to women: he, a man, would never reveal something as trivial and dumb like why he committed a crime.

Continuing the analysis according to Nünning’s methodology, we will look at several textual clues next. Keeping in mind that the novel is essentially Dr. Sheppard’s written account of the murder and the investigation that follows, clues that might have gone unnoticed during the first reading of the novel suddenly grow in prominence when the reader becomes aware of Sheppard’s guilt. The aforementioned quote by Sheppard regarding Mrs. Ferrars’ suicide is one of these textual clues that seems to become more important and telling upon a second reading of the novel. Knowing that Dr. Sheppard is the killer also sheds a different light on the numerous times he mentions feeling uneasy about certain events that take place. Early in the novel, just after Mrs. Ferrars’ suicide, Dr. Sheppard reflects on what could have been her reasons for taking her own life. He describes a meeting between Ferrars and Ralph Paton, Roger Ackroyd’s stepson, that came off as suspicious because Paton had not been seen in town for the past six months. “I think I can safely say,” Sheppard explains, “that it was at this moment a foreboding of the future first swept over me. Nothing tangible as yet – but a vague premonition of the way things were setting. That earnest tête-à-tête […] struck me disagreeably” (22). On a first reading, this observation and comment might suggest Paton’s involvement in Mrs. Ferrars’ death somehow. Unbeknownst to the reader at this point, however, Dr. Sheppard has been blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars: he knew that she had poisoned her husband to be able to marry Roger Ackroyd and was extorting money from her in order to keep her secret. The framing of this particular piece of information, then, can either be seen as an attempt by Sheppard to cast suspicion upon Paton or can hint at a different reason for Sheppard’s feelings of unease. Later in the novel, just prior to the murder, Roger Ackroyd confides in Dr. Sheppard that he knows Mrs. Ferrars was being blackmailed and wants to see justice done: “How am I supposed to get to the scoundrel who drove her to death as surely as
if he’d killed her? He knew of the first crime, and fastened onto it like some obscene vulture. She’s paid the penalty. Is he to go scot free?” (60). Sheppard, the ‘obscene vulture’ in this scenario, has his earlier feelings of unease come true: he is in the same room with a man who wants to see him pay for his crimes, but may or may not yet know he is the blackmailer. The doctor’s unease about being ousted as the blackmailer becomes apparent even before Ackroyd attempts to address the subject: upon entering Ackroyd’s study and seeing the distress the man is in, Sheppard described feeling “very uneasy. All sorts of forebodings assailed me” (55). Sheppard’s discomfort might seem to have been born from genuine concern for his friends during an initial reading of the novel. However, upon the revelation that he blackmailed Ferrars and murdered Ackroyd, these feelings appear to be more selfish in nature.

Another textual clue can be found in Sheppard’s meticulous timekeeping around the time of the murder. Leading up to his meeting with Ackroyd to discuss Mrs. Ferrars’ blackmailer, Sheppard rarely keeps track of the precise time. His timekeeping usually does not extend past “at lunch” (24) or “yesterday” (21) unless the situation requires him to be specific: when he is called to examine the body of Mrs. Ferrars at the start of chapter one, he accurately describes being sent for “at eight o’clock in the morning of Friday the 17th” (9), as his profession would ask of him. This makes it all the more strange when Sheppard starts meticulously keeping track of time in the chapter where Ackroyd is murdered, without something regarding his job as the town’s doctor prompting him to do so. His description bears resemblance to an alibi for the time of the murder: “The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread” (63); “The village church clock chimed nine o’clock as I passed through the lodge gates” (64) and finally “Ten minutes later I was at home once more” (65). Sheppard then details the time he and his sister went to bed and explicitly states he wound the clocks in the house (65), which could be seen as an explanation for why he was so particular about the
time. The chapter closes with the news of Ackroyd’s murder reaching Sheppard at a quarter to ten (65). It is this detailed account of events that at first stumps Detective Poirot and later all the more confirms Sheppard’s guilt. Poirot points out there is a discrepancy in time in Sheppard’s statement he never could have pointed out had Sheppard not been so meticulous in his timekeeping:

You will remember that everyone agreed – you yourself included – that it took five minutes to walk from the lodge to the house – less if you took the short cut to the terrace. But you left the house at ten minutes to nine – both by your own statement and that of Parker, and yet it was nine o’clock when you passed through the lodge gates. […] why had you taken ten minutes to do a five minutes’ walk? (359)

Not only does Sheppard’s detailed account of the murder seem out of place, ultimately it is also instrumental in proving his guilt. Thanks to Sheppard’s meticulous time keeping, Poirot – and by extension, the reader – is able to point out the discrepancy in Sheppard’s statements. Finally, his identity as the killer revealed, Sheppard even points out this textual clue to the reader. In the final chapter, where Sheppard confesses to the crime, he refers back to his original statement:

‘The letters were brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread’. […] All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in the blank ten minutes? (367)

Sheppard not only points out the textual clue, he explains in three sentences how he used clever wording and textual layout to conceal his involvement in the murder while never outright lying to the reader about it.

It is difficult to call Sheppard an unreliable narrator when one first reads The Murder of Roger Ackroyd because of this aspect of his narrative. Because Christie has Sheppard hide
his involvement by simply not mentioning it, the reader is under the assumption that Sheppard is a reliable narrator until he is revealed as the murderer. Unlike the narrator in Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger*, there is little ambiguity surrounding Sheppard’s version of the tale until the very end - the clues pointed out thus far are largely implicit until the reader is aware of the plot twist. Since there is so little to fault Sheppard on initially, it is hard to interpret his actions as going against any kind of social norm or value. As such, it is difficult to find readers and reviewers of the novel who offer any kind of interpretation other than the reliable narrator he makes himself out to be. This is also, perhaps, what made the reveal of the murderer’s identity so jarring when *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was first published. Christie lets Sheppard masterfully conceal his true identity by showing the readers what they want to see: a normal doctor in a small town who gets wrapped up in the murder investigation of a friend. Because Sheppard portrays himself as adhering to the social norms and values of his time, it is more difficult to paint him an unreliable narrator based on reader interpretation of social values and norms alone. His habit of paraphrasing some of the women in the story, for example, would be considered as a breach of social norms nowadays, but not for the time in which the story takes place. Simply put, Sheppard might not be a reliable narrator, but because the readers only know what he tells them and that *what* he tells them adheres to the norms and values of the time, they never know any different.
Case study: *The Little Stranger* and Dr. Faraday

Sarah Waters’ 2009 novel *The Little Stranger* tells of Dr. Faraday, a doctor in a small town in rural England set after the first World War. Faraday is enamoured by Hundreds Hall, a mansion on the outskirts of the town, and becomes the doctor to the Ayres family – widowed Mrs. Ayres, daughter Caroline and son and war veteran Roderick – that lives there. As Faraday spends more time around the mansion, however, strange things seem to be happening – whether these occurrences are paranormal in nature or just figments of the family’s imagination is really up to the reader’s interpretation. As opposed to Christie’s novel, Waters never directly points to Faraday as the cause of the problems in the Ayres’ mansion. While admitting she wrote him to be an unreliable narrator (O’Neill), Waters leaves Faraday’s involvement ambiguous; the reader can decide whether the doctor is an innocent bystander simply incapable of properly understanding and putting into words what is wrong with the mansion and the people that live in it, or whether he is more sinister or even paranormal in nature. Once again, through applying Nünning’s methodology, some light can be shed on the reliability of Dr. Faraday as a narrator.

The novel opens with Dr. Faraday describing his first interaction and infatuation with Hundreds Hall, when he was still a boy and his mother was employed there as a maid. Later, after the war, Faraday runs a clinic with a colleague for whom Faraday harbours contempt: the man is happily married, owns his own property and treats the more prestigious families of Warwickshire. It is, however, Faraday who gets a call from the family at Hundreds Hall to check on the (only) maid there, who has fallen ill. From then on, Faraday becomes the family’s doctor and spends more and more of his time around his beloved mansion, which, he notes, is steadily falling into disrepair. He also grows close to daughter Caroline. Slowly but surely, strange events begin to happen inside Hundreds Hall. During a house party, the docile family dog viciously attacks a young girl. Roderick swears the cause of the incident is an evil
‘thing’ that upset the dog; it also attacked him in his room. Later, when a fire breaks out in Roderick’s room while he lies unconscious after consuming copious amounts of alcohol, Roderick is committed to a mental institution. The strange happenings continue, however; sounds are heard when there is nobody there to make them, and childish scribbles appear on the walls. Mrs. Ayres believes these events are caused by the spirit of her first child, Susan, who died when she was eight years old. After a violent episode in which Mrs. Ayres is locked in the old nursery, she hangs herself in her bedroom. On the day of Mrs. Ayres’ funeral, Faraday and Caroline decide to marry six weeks from then. However, Caroline calls the wedding off and announces her plans to sell Hundreds Hall. On the day of their would-be wedding, Dr. Faraday arrives as the mansion to find Caroline has killed herself; when she went to investigate a sound in the dark hallway, she apparently saw something. After crying out “You!”; she flung herself down the stairs to her death. The novel ends three years later, with Dr. Faraday still visiting the mansion; like the reader, he is unable to determine what Caroline saw that caused her to commit suicide.

Like Dr. Sheppard, Dr. Faraday relates the events of the novel to the reader from a first person perspective. We are offered a little more insight into his character than Christie offered us for Sheppard; Faraday, throughout the novel, describes events to the best of his abilities while also acknowledging either his knowledge might be limited or his scepticism toward the event itself. In one example, Faraday describes only hearing of an event at Hundreds Hall “…from one of [his] evening patients, who in turn had had the damage reported to him by a tradesman who’d been out at the house that morning. I didn’t believe him at first” (Waters 209). Faraday’s explanations feel more open and inclusive because of this. Still, he frequently draws attention to himself and does not shy away from a monologue. Instead of letting characters speak directly, many of the descriptions of the events that have happened are filtered through Faraday’s perception. When Faraday gets Roderick to open up about one of
the possibly paranormal phenomenon he has experienced, for example, Faraday relates this tale to the readers for him, instead of letting Roderick do so himself. The description of this particular tale is notably prefaced by Faraday stating “[...] And when he had drunk that he began, slowly and haltingly, to tell me exactly what had happened to him on the night the little Baker-Hyde girl was hurt” after which, instead of quoting Roderick directly, Faraday continues with “He had, as I knew [...]” (157). The entire encounter is Faraday relating Roderick’s story from his own point of view, clearly indicating a selfish streak and a need to make the story more or less revolve around Faraday rather than the person who originally experienced it. This is not an isolated phenomenon: later, at the start of chapter seven, the Ayres’ mansion has caught fire, and Faraday begins the chapter by stating: “The story, as I pieced it together afterwards, was this” (201). He continues to describe events he was not present for to have witnessed; like with Roderick’s story in the previous example, Faraday nevertheless narrates these events. It is useful to note that here, Faraday explicitly mentions these are the events as he managed to piece them together. The reader perceives these events not directly from the source – in this case, this source would be Roderick’s sister, Caroline – but rather, from Faraday: the event he describes is one he was not present for, and thus his description is merely his interpretation. The way in which Faraday regales the reader with these tales suggest not only that he enjoys monologues (which, as was previously established, a trait commonly shared by unreliable narrators) but also that his knowledge of the events he describes is limited. This essentially makes his descriptions of events unreliable and him, by extension, an unreliable narrator.

Another prominent clue to Faraday’s unreliability as a narrator are his verbal tics. As was alluded to in the first chapter, the doctor has a few particular sets of words he inserts into most of his conversations, whether speaking to other characters or to the reader. The most prominent one appears to be ‘I suppose’. When the Ayres’ dog, Gyp, attacks a young girl at a
house party, Faraday uses the phrase at least once per page over the course of six pages (96-102); later, when he relates the story of Roderick’s room catching fire, he again uses it multiple times, although somewhat less than the earlier instance mentioned (201-209). By his repeated use of ‘I suppose’, Faraday casts a certain doubt over his own words. He acknowledges that he does not know exactly what happened or how either because the situation prompted him to act out of reflex - “I found myself at his side without being aware of how I got there. I suppose my professional instincts had taken over” (98). - or because his knowledge simply didn’t reach that far: “She found the call-bell, and rang and rang on it – much, I suppose, as I’d seen Roderick ringing, a few hours before” (203). Faraday’s frequent use of ‘I suppose’ is not the only verbal tic we can attribute to him, however. Another significant hint is Faraday’s apparent need to excuse his actions to the reader and have the reader sympathise with him, another tic Nünning associates with unreliable narrators (Nünning, 97). The earliest occurrence of this tic is in the very first chapter of the novel, when Faraday recalls seeing Hundreds Hall for the first time, at the age of ten. After wandering around the halls of the mansion for a while, Faraday comes across a decorative plaster border on the wall, depicting reliefs of acorns and leaves:

I had never seen anything like it, outside of a church, and after a second of looking it over I did what strikes me now as a dreadful thing: I worked my fingers around one of the acorns and tried to prise it from its setting; and when that failed to release it, I got out my penknife and dug away with that. (Waters 3)

Faraday excuses his action before even describing what the action is. By prefacing the actual act of vandalism by saying ‘I did what strikes me now as a dreadful thing’, Faraday appears as though he wants to explicitly show the reader he knows this action was wrong, even though the reader has no reason yet to suspect him of having done anything terrible. Faraday then continues trying to excuse his behaviour to the reader:
I didn’t do it in a spirit of vandalism. I wasn’t a spiteful or destructive boy. It was simply that, in admiring the house, I wanted to possess a piece of it – or rather, as if the admiration itself, which I suspect a more ordinary child would not have felt, entitled me to it. I was like a man, I suppose, wanting a lock of hair from the head of a girl he had suddenly and blindly become enamoured with. (3)

Faraday attempts to tell the reader time and time again that, while vandalising a house is against the accepted social norms, the reason he did try to pry the acorn off the wall was ultimately good. He was not out to actively destroy something; rather, he felt such an attraction to the house he simply had to have a piece of it. Note not only the use of ‘I suppose’ in this passage, but Faraday distancing himself from ‘more ordinary children’ as well. In a single, simple sentence, Waters offers us a glimpse at a darker, more egotistical Dr. Faraday. He was different from other children for enjoying the mansion more than they would have – surely that would put his destructive action in a more positive light?

The above example of Faraday trying to excuse his vandalism is not only a verbal clue to his unreliability as a narrator. It illustrates a discrepancy between his actions and the accepted social norms as held by the reader as well. Even Faraday himself acknowledges this by explicitly referring to the act as “not being in the spirit of vandalism” (3), indicating he knew – or at least knows now, as he describes a memory – his actions would undoubtedly be frowned upon, had he been caught in the act. He tries to excuse himself to the reader for the same reason: Faraday is aware of the fact his actions clash with social norms – namely not to destroy another person’s property – and then attempts to relativize the act to the reader. His very infatuation with the mansion can be considered another example of him breeching social norms, or conflicting with the reader’s concept of normality. Despite being only ten years old at the time, Faraday cares more about the mansion than the people that inhabit it:
[The Ayreses] must have made a very handsome family, but my memory of them is vague. I recall most vividly the house itself, which struck me as an absolute mansion. I remember its lovely ageing details: the worn red brick, the cockled window glass, the weathered sandstone edgings (1).

While some readers may argue that having a certain admiration for a piece of architecture is nothing out of the ordinary, nor the fact that one might not remember every little detail of a memory with the same amount of clarity, it should be pointed out that Faraday was only ten years old at this time. This, coupled with his own admission that ‘a more ordinary child’ (3) would not have shared in his admiration for Hundreds Hall, is a clear indication of Faraday’s behaviour clashing with what most people would consider ‘normal’ behaviour to be.

Unlike Dr. Sheppard in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, it is much easier to doubt Dr. Faraday’s narration. As established previously, he continues to undermine the reliability of his stories through his frequent use of ‘I suppose’; aside from that, Sarah Waters herself has acknowledged she purposefully wrote Faraday to be an unreliable narrator (O’Neill).

However, the sheer ambiguity of her work has caused academics and non-professional readers to question what kind of unreliable narrator the doctor really is. Waters claims she intended Faraday to be unreliable because of his limited knowledge, stating that “[Faraday] never experiences anything supernatural first-hand and that means we don’t either. We’re getting them reported to us, which does allow for a range of interpretations” (O’Neill). Some readers appear to be in support of this theory. John Mullan, professor of English at University College London, points out a verbal tic of Dr. Faraday’s in his review “The Little Stranger by Sarah Waters”: a simile that uses the phrase ‘as if’. “Though his vocabulary is restricted, and his idea of description sometimes pedantic, he likes figures of speech that imagine what he cannot know”, Mullan argues. Because Faraday uses this phrase so often, and uses similes that become stranger as the novel progresses, his unreliability becomes more and more apparent.
Notable examples from Mullan include “It was as if the house were developing scars of its own, in response to his unhappiness and frustration” (148) when Faraday discusses the “paranormal” burn marks that appear in Roderick’s room, which he likens to Roderick’s own scars and burns, and “It is as if the house has thrown the family off, like springing turf throwing off a footprint” (498), when Faraday observes Hundreds Hall at the end of the novel. Because Faraday’s scepticism toward paranormal happenings, and because his knowledge of the events are lacking, Mullan claims, Faraday uses the “as if” construction to reconcile his scepticism with his professional view. At the same time, Faraday acknowledges he does not know or does not understand all the facts, thereby making him an unreliable narrator.

Another interesting theory regarding Faraday’s role as an unreliable narrator paints Faraday as the antagonist. A favoured theory of the non-professional readers – in reading various reviews, this theory (as well as variations of it) was put forth most often – it states that Faraday either is the paranormal entity that haunts Hundreds Hall, or that his desire to own the mansion manifests itself as the entity. As phrased by Goodreads user Sara:

My theory has been that Faraday, a totally unreliable narrator (it's unclear if he believes what he's telling, but it's clear that a lot of it is untrue), manifested the “little stranger” i.e. something with otherworldly powers because he had such a need to “possess” (I use that word advisedly) the house¹ (Sara)

In addition to Kat’s observation, user Jantien adds that

[…] the strange occurrences never happen when Faraday is around, which is quite a coincidence, especially since, at the end of the story, he spends quite some time at Hundreds. […] And, regarding that, he does give a very vivid and description of the activities of the little stranger - e.g. when Mrs. Ayres gets locked up in the attic - almost if he was present at the time² (Jantien)
Most telling of all, a reviewer by the name of Gabrielle points to a specific passage of Faraday dreaming in his car when Caroline dies. In it, Faraday says “[...] and in slumber I seemed to leave the car and press on to Hundreds. I saw myself doing it with all the hectic [...]” (page number); this, according to the reviewers, confirms that Faraday is, in fact, the cause of the problems at Hundreds Hall. Faraday’s description of events, then, appear to be in the same vein as Dr. Sheppard’s in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*: both narrators downplay or outright neglect to mention the part they play in certain events because they are at the centre of the problem. Their concealment of their involvement, therefore, makes them unreliable narrators.

In another review, posted on the website *The New York Times*, this strategic concealment of Faraday’s involvement in certain events is briefly touched upon:

> Throughout the novel, Dr. Faraday claims to be giving us the objective facts about what he sees in front of him, and making “sensible deductions,” because “that’s what doctors do.” That he does not quite do this, and that the Ayreses come to such sticky ends, will no doubt be a source of great delight to some. (Thomas)

Even though reviewers cannot quite agree on what exactly Faraday’s role in the story is (is he the antagonist or merely a confused doctor trying to make sense of the situation?), they do agree that Faraday is an unreliable narrator. Judging by Nünning’s methodology, however, the theory that Faraday is the driving force behind the paranormal activity at Hundreds Hall is the more credible one. The reviewers that propose this theory all emphasise Faraday’s obsession with the mansion, reasoning that this is where the haunting stems from. By emphasising this so heavily as the cause of all the misfortune that happens throughout the book, the reviewers appear to classify Faraday’s obsession as an abnormal thing. In other words, Faraday’s infatuation with Hundreds Hall goes against the social norms held by these people. As Nünning indicates in his article, when a narrator violates the social norms that a reader considers to be “normal” behaviour, the reader is more likely to perceive the narrator as
unreliable; this is precisely the reason why so many reviewers consider Faraday to be an unreliable narrator.

A final interesting thing that reviewers of *The Little Stranger* have noticed is that, like Dr. Sheppard in Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the narrator of the story is a doctor. Doctors are generally perceived to be trustworthy people because of their profession—Faraday even goes as far to state that his profession is all people really see about him (Waters page number)—as such, they are not often thought to be unreliable. As we have earlier established with Dr. Sheppard, however, is that this supposed trustworthy appearance can be deceiving. Reviewer John Self draws parallels between Faraday and the narrator of Patrick McGrath’s 1996 novel *Asylum*: both are, he says, “medical men, authority figures in whom we automatically place our trust” (Self). This similarity can be extended to Dr. Sheppard: all men are in a position of authority where we, both as readers as well as people, are inclined to automatically trust them based on this position. As we have already concluded at the end of the second chapter, however, this trust may very well be misplaced. Whether this applies to Dr. Faraday as well is all up to the reader’s interpretation.
Conclusion

Even though academics are generally in agreement on when a narrator is unreliable, the definition of the term ‘unreliable narrator’ is still rather vague. First put forward by Wayne C. Booth in 1961, many scholars have since attempted to redefine his definition. However, many attempts at doing, if not all, still have a certain degree of vagueness to them. Through suggesting a methodology for identifying unreliable narration based on textual clues, rather than the intentions of an implied author, Ansgar Nünning tries to steer toward a clearer definition of unreliable narration in his article “‘But why will you say that I am mad?’ On the Theory, History and Signals of Unreliable Narration in British Fiction”. Some of the clues Nünning highlights as being telling of a narrator’s unreliability include, but are not limited to verbal tics, referential frameworks and the reader’s perception of what is and is not considered to be “normal” behaviour (acknowledging that “normal” is a subjective term). By using his theory on two case studies – Agatha Christie’s 1929 novel The Murder of Roger Ackroyd and Sarah Waters’ 2009 The Little Stranger – this thesis aimed to show not only the credibility of Nünning’s proposed methodology, but also highlighted the different ways in which an unreliable narrator can function within a story.

In Christie’s The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Dr. Sheppard is not revealed to be an unreliable narrator until the very last chapters of the novel. This twist was considered particularly shocking at the time of the novel’s release, mainly because Sheppard was the narrator as well as the sidekick to Hercule Poirot and a doctor; the combination of these traits made readers believe Sheppard was a trustworthy narrator. Using clever wordplay to conceal his involvement, Sheppard is actually an implicit unreliable narrator; the reader does not discover his true nature until the end of the book. Upon a second reading, Sheppard’s involvement in the murder of Ackroyd becomes more apparent. Discrepancies in his behaviour are more noticeable, like the sudden meticulousness with which Sheppard keeps
track of time when the murder is committed, or how he paraphrases the speech of women in the story he finds annoying or uninteresting. Likewise, many of the seemingly innocent phrases Sheppard utters throughout the novel, while initially perceived as born from a genuine concern for the other characters, take on a more egotistical form once the plot twist is revealed. By confessing to the crime in the final chapter of the novel, and by expressing no regret over his actions, Sheppard also goes against social norms and values readers consider to be a part of ‘normal’ behaviour, further solidifying his role as an unreliable narrator.

Dr. Faraday, the narrator of Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger*, is also unreliable, but in a different way than Dr. Sheppard. Like Sheppard, Faraday’s occupation makes readers naturally want to place their trust in him. However, Faraday reveals himself to be unreliable through his use of various word combinations, such as “I suppose” or a simile containing “as if”. In using these phrases, Faraday explicitly acknowledges the limits of his knowledge, making him, as opposed to Dr. Sheppard, an explicit unreliable narrator. Instead of actively retelling a story to conceal his involvement, Faraday goes out of his way to insert himself into events he was not originally there to experience. He does so by retelling descriptions provided to him by other characters; filtering these events through his own perception, Faraday provides the reader with a coloured, unreliable report of what happened. Like Dr. Sheppard, Faraday also breaches social norms and values: as hinted at by various reviewers, both academic as well as non-professional, Faraday’s need to own Hundreds Hall is unnatural and, most likely, the cause of the problems that occur within the mansion.

While Nünning’s proposed methodology offers a clearer idea of what an unreliable narrator is than suggested by Booth and his contemporaries, he acknowledges that his definition still does not perfectly encapsulate exactly what an unreliable narrator is. Certain aspects, like what ‘normality’ means, differ from person to person, as Nünning states in his article:
A pederast would not find anything wrong with *Lolita*; a male chauvinist fetishist who gets his kicks out of making love to dummies is unlikely to detect any distance between his norms and those of the mad monologist in McEwan’s *Dead As They Come*; and a porn-freak and fast-food-addict would not even find the norms and values propounded by the money-loving egotist John Self, the awful narrator of Martin Amis’s novel *Money*, in any way objectionable. (Nünning 101)

While indeed not perfect, this thesis aimed to show there is truth to Nünning’s methodology and that there is benefit in analysing a text using his standards and clues. In learning to recognize unreliable narrators based on the actual text as well as reader interpretation can lead to a better understanding of not only the characters in question, but of the concept of unreliable narration itself as well. Once this understanding is obtained, we can work toward a better, clearer definition of what an unreliable narrator actually is.
Notes

1 This quote was taken directly from the discussion board. Any grammatical or spelling errors were made by the original poster.

2 See previous note.
References


