

# The Gossip-grapevine: Using ‘Gossip’ as a Tool of Surveillance in Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

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## Abstract

Agatha Christie was of the opinion that men mostly tried to marginalize women by labeling ‘gossip’ as harmful and sinful. What concerned them primarily was women’s breaching of trust by exposing their familial secrets in the process of ‘grapevining’ the gossip and that could possibly help women outwitting men within the domestic realm. So, Christie in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* wanted to justify that women, in possession of secretive information, used ‘gossip’ as a means of resistance through which the minority could overshadow the ‘majority culture’. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the novel, unlike Poirot, both Roger Ackroyd and James Sheppard detested the excessively curious nature of Caroline Sheppard, the older sister of Dr. James Sheppard who finally proved to be the culprit. On the other hand, Poirot not only accepted Caroline’s assistance in solving the crime, but also admitted the fact that more valuable information was available to Caroline than to him. In the said novel, Christie portrayed Caroline as an intuitive elderly woman with a keen power of observation, and a thorough understanding of human nature. She depicted Caroline as a spinster in order to question power and gender relations and at the same time to challenge the status quo. Both Caroline and her literary successor Miss Marple were spinsters and used gossip-grapevine as part of their vigilance and detection. Their edgy status gave them the provision to observe the people without being noticed or taken seriously. However, the problem with Caroline was that she could not utilize gossip as a tool of detection; it only remained as a mode of surveillance for her; whereas Miss Marple used it efficiently both in surveillance and detection and thus stood out. This paper would like to explain how Christie has revived feminine methods of surveillance and detection through intuition and gossip-grapevine using the character of Caroline Sheppard who revealed many secrets of King’s Abbot to Hercule Poirot with her well-knit gossip network and thus helped him in detection.

**Keywords:** *Gossip-grapevine; intuition; surveillance; observation; Caroline, the spinster.*

If we look for the origin of the word ‘gossip’, we will find out that it has been taken from an Old English word, ‘godsibb’ which refers to god-parent

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of either sex. A gossip was hence 'bound in spiritual kinship to both the god-child and its parents.'<sup>1</sup> A woman's gossip was supposed to aid her in labour and child-birth and also had an important role in rituals like baptism. A gossip 'forged a mutually beneficial alliance with the child's mother'<sup>2</sup> and that became a reason for a child's spiritual well-being. Though the word 'gossip' should be a gender-neutral word, it started involving the women specifically for its gendered implication and later it just meant 'idle talk' for women gathering around; for instance, 'women visiting other women for help and advice and to borrow kindling, food, utensils or money and developed an elaborate network of credit and debt.'<sup>3</sup> Hence, 'gossip' became a major source for exchange of information. But 'gossip' was condescended to be 'a sin of tongue'<sup>4</sup> and it became an agent of social control in order to maintain a comradeship in a community. Patriarchy always considered this networking of women unsettling as it hindered their modes of control over the community. In Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, we find the narrator and culprit Dr. Sheppard thwarting all the attempts of Caroline, his sister, of coaxing information out of him. He was quite disturbed with Caroline's inquisitive nature and power of observation as that could have been threatening to him. He mentioned, 'I told her firmly that her whole idea was nonsense... I wasn't going to encourage that sort of thing. She would go around the village airing her views, and everyone will think that she is doing so on medical data supplied by me.'<sup>5</sup>

What concerned men mostly was women's breaching of trust by exposing their familial secrets in the process of disseminating the gossip and that could possibly help women outwitting men within the domestic realm. Critic Bernard Capp observed, 'gossip was perceived as the subversive behavior of the subordinates'<sup>6</sup> because it gave the leash to women excluding men from the circle. Women could control the structure of knowledge which was considered to be the male domain. Men tried to marginalize women by labeling 'gossip' as harmful and sinful. So women, in possession of secretive information, used 'gossip' as a means of resistance through which the minority could overshadow the 'majority culture.'<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that unlike Poirot, both Roger Ackroyd and Dr. Sheppard detested the excessively curious nature of Miss Gannett and Caroline. He opined,

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Our village, King's Abbot, is I imagine, very much like any other village. Our big town is Cranchester, nine miles away. We have a large railway station, a small post office, and two rival general stores. Able-bodied men are apt to leave the place early in life, but we are rich in unmarried ladies and retired military officers. Our hobbies and recreations can be summed up in one word, "gossip."<sup>8</sup>

Between the two ways of gathering, organizing and disseminating knowledge, men supposedly possessed more accurate, objective, and reasonable piece of information and women, on the other hand, relied more on the unstructured and unorganized form of gossip. This difference in dominance between men and women is evident from the ways Dr. Sheppard and his sister Caroline deal with the information they receive. Dr. Sheppard, being the objective narratorial voice, never intends to share his opinions with others, rather he keeps a journal which details the murder of Roger Ackroyd and apparently becomes an authentic source of information for us. Later we find out that he has hidden little details from the detective, villagers of King's Abbot and readers as well. Whereas everybody shares the same kind of knowledge with Caroline who never withholds the things she knows. Thus, a gossip vine intends to unravel the secrets which can be helpful for the detective, Poirot. Since she was the spinster sister of Dr. Sheppard, and spinsters were the 'object[s] of ridicule, incentive and pity and have been recurring icon[s] in British literature'<sup>9</sup>, she could exploit this 'spinster problem' to her advantage. Dr. Sheppard mentioned that King's Abbot was 'rich in unmarried ladies'. In literature, spinsters used to challenge the patriarchal hold on the dissemination of knowledge and spinsters also had intrinsic connection with gossip as it was through gossip and grapevine culture, they used to circulate the information. It was popularly believed that unmarried women grew on gossip as they had enough time to indulge. Similarly, Caroline also got hold of information through her 'intensely nosy observation of routine and characters.'<sup>10</sup>

In King's Abbot, rumours used to spread like fire on grass. Auditory power had been used as a way to form gossip in such small towns. People kept hearing and overhearing and repeating those received information or misinformation all the time. Much evidence in the case was supplied based on hearing. Flora Ackroyd assumed that everyone in her family or outside knew about her engagement with Ralph. Raymond, on the night of Roger

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Ackroyd’s murder, had ‘heard his voice in here talking.’<sup>11</sup> Major Blunt also ‘heard Ackroyd talking in his study’<sup>12</sup> around the same time. Caroline too overheard the conversation between Ralph Patton and Ursula Bourne in the woods near Fernly Park which provided an alibi for him in the crime. Caroline was even aware of the details Dr. Sheppard’s patients, she opined: ‘I can see the path up to the surgery door perfectly from this window. And I have got an excellent memory, James.’<sup>13</sup> She also saw an unknown guest coming to her brother’s place who later was found out to be Ralph Patton and that changed the course of events. Thus, Caroline drew pleasure from gathering and spreading information she used to collect.

However, Caroline used to depend on the ‘gossip grapevine’ structure of the servants of the households for an efficient network of information. It worked within the circle of maids or butlers or milkmen who used to meet together and relay what they knew. Bernard Capp points out that, ‘most households of the time had at least one servant but most often the numbers involved was huge.’<sup>14</sup> This becomes evident in Miss Gannett’s insight about Roger Ackroyd’s murder:

By the way, Clara – my maid, you know – is great friends with Elsie, the housemaid at Fernly, and what do you think Elsie told her? That there’s been a lot of money stolen, and it’s her opinion – Elsie’s I mean – that the parlour maid had something to do with it.<sup>15</sup>

Caroline also vouched for the loyalty of her servant Annie: ‘she is an inveterate talker.’<sup>16</sup> Caroline also appreciated the milkman’s interception when he became the carrier of the news of Mrs. Ferrars’s death before her brother informed her about the same. Servants used to indulge in ‘gossip grapevine’ in order to survive and protect themselves against other members of the household and to be in the good book of the employer but this networking caused trouble for the employers and villagers in general. They used to be anxious always that their secrets and personal details will be revealed and they will be scandalized. Mr. Roger, for example, was apprehensive of Parker, the butler at Fernly because he used to eavesdrop a lot. Sometimes the servants used to create their own cock and bull story as observed by Mr. Roger: ‘gossip and talk amongst themselves. And then it gets round- and all the time there’s probably nothing in it at all.’<sup>17</sup>

Melanie Tebbutt believed, ‘gossip may have been a way to gain

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membership within the community and be accepted by it.’<sup>18</sup> Hercule Poirot knew that he didn’t belong to King’s Abbot and was considered to be an outsider. The intimacy a well-knit village community shared among themselves was unavailable to outsiders. The villagers had a hostile attitude towards them and that was primarily the reason for which inspector Davies and Raglan were unable to resolve the crime. The villagers were discreet enough not to share any inside story with such outsiders. But Poirot played smart; he gained access to this closely structured community by befriending Caroline. Unlike Dr. Sheppard, Poirot never maintained a distance from the ‘gossip grapevine’ prevalent in King’s Abbot and that helped him solve the mystery. However, Dr. Sheppard was indignant that Poirot’s inclination towards Caroline gave her further encouragement. According to Poirot, Caroline held a superior position because of her access to local gossip. Hence, he took her into confidence. However, sometimes information can be misheard or misinterpreted. So, the recipient will have to be careful enough to choose what to rely on and what to disregard.

Caroline rightly speculated how Mrs. Ferrars killed her husband by poisoning him and later committed suicide to avoid being blackmailed. She also deduced that the accused Ralph Patton or Parker were not the murderers the police were looking for but what she could not predict was that her own brother could have been the culprit; though Dr. Sheppard was always apprehensive of Caroline’s inference. He was actually aware of his sister’s abilities which made him scared of being exposed. Poirot’s consorting with Caroline in solving the case made him very uncomfortable. It was because of Caroline, Poirot got the clue that the footprints outside Roger Ackroyd’s room were not of Ralph Patton’s. Again, with Caroline’s assistance, Poirot located Ralph who was hiding in a mental hospital with Dr. Sheppard’s help. Since Poirot enjoyed the status of being an outsider, he could suspect anyone in the vicinity unlike Caroline who avoided suspecting her brother because of her familial relationship.

Nicola Parson argued, ‘gossip offered a way of negotiating between the demands of secrecy and openness.’<sup>19</sup> The network of gossip grapevine worked as agents of surveillance and detection. Hence, those who needed to protect their secrets detested this circle of gossip. Secrets had to be

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protected, even if it ensured murders because people's respect and dignity were at stake. That is why Dr. Sheppard ended up blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars and that eventually led to the death of Mr. Ackroyd. The similarity between Caroline and Poirot was that both of them made sure that they got to know everything; 'it was his business to know the little secrets.'<sup>20</sup> When Dr. Sheppard asked Caroline to think wisely before sharing information with others in the village, she retorted: 'people ought to know things. I consider it my duty to tell them.'<sup>21</sup> She was not only satisfied with the knowledge she could gather from her surroundings, but she had to share the same with others through gossip. Thus, the problematic structure of the entire society stood exposed while unraveling the face of the murderer.

In one of the rare voice recordings made in the 1960s, Agatha Christie explained why she never created a scenario where the two of her popular detectives Poirot and Miss Marple encountered each other. Christie herself justified her reason for never letting Poirot meet Miss Marple: 'Hercule Poirot, a complete egoist, would not like being taught his business or having suggestions made to him by an elderly spinster lady. Hercule Poirot – a professional sleuth – would not be at home at all in Miss Marple's world.'<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Poirot had the chance to meet someone similar to Miss Marple, way back in 1926; he met Caroline Sheppard in the village of King's Abbot which was the setting of our text in question. In the Miss Marple series, Christie had aptly redefined and utilized the feminine methods of detection – intuition and gossip. But, before Miss Marple mysteries came into existence, Caroline Sheppard was already ready to meddle in the business of solving murder mysteries. With Caroline, gossip has been treated as a useful tool of surveillance and gathering information. To our surprise, in contrast to Christie's assumption that Poirot would not prefer to work with someone intelligent like Miss Marple, he both welcomed Caroline's assistance and admitted that she had access to more secretive information than him. In this novel, Caroline functioned like a closed-circuit surveillance camera, using which she could monitor and regulate all the people of the village because every little piece of information and even conspiracy theories were circulated through this.

Kathy Mezei stated, 'Christie depicted Miss Marple as a spinster in order to question power and gender relations but at the same time upholding the status quo.'<sup>23</sup> Both Caroline and her literary successor Miss

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Marple were stereotypical spinsters and used the ‘gossip grapevine’ as part of their vigilance and detection. Their edgy status gave them the provision to observe the people without being noticed or taken seriously. Miss Marple of course had more agency and authorial voice than Caroline. The problem with Caroline was that she could not utilize gossip as a tool of detection; it only remained as a mode of surveillance for her; whereas Miss Marple used it efficiently both in surveillance and detection and thus stood out. In 1930 itself, Miss Marple appears in her own detective novel *The Murder at the Vicarage*, where an elderly spinster in a small village, sets out to expose criminals from the comfort of home, while knitting needles, with the gossip-grapevine at her disposal, which she uses efficiently in both surveillance and detection. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, however, the rural Caroline and her culture of gossip-grapevine lose out to the cosmopolitan Poirot in capturing the criminal. Thus, Hercule Poirot proves to be victorious at the end, but of course, not without the assistance of Caroline Sheppard.

### Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Susan E Phillips, *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England* (New York: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), p.6.
- <sup>2</sup> Phillips, *Transforming Talk*, p.10
- <sup>3</sup> Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 55.
- <sup>4</sup> Phillips, *Transforming Talk*, p.7.
- <sup>5</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (London: Harper Collins, 2007), p.5.
- <sup>6</sup> Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, p. 64.
- <sup>7</sup> Phillips, *Transforming Talk*, p.5.
- <sup>8</sup> Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 76.
- <sup>9</sup> Kathy Mezei, ‘Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech: The Case of Miss Marple, Miss Mole, and Miss Jekyll’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 30.2 (2007):103-120, 104.
- <sup>10</sup> Mezei, “Spinsters, Surveillance and Speech”, 105.
- <sup>11</sup> Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 45.
- <sup>12</sup> Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 90.
- <sup>13</sup> Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 113.

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<sup>14</sup> Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, p. 127.

<sup>15</sup> Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 154.

<sup>16</sup> Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 133.

<sup>18</sup> Melanie Tebbutt, *Women’s Talk? A Social History of Gossip in Working- Class Neighbourhoods, 1880-1960* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.89.

<sup>19</sup> Nicola Parsons, *Reading Gossip in Early Eighteenth–Century England* (London: Palgrave University Press, 2007), p.8.

<sup>20</sup> Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 226.

<sup>21</sup> Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Selina Mills, and Rosie Waites. “Dusty Clues to Christie Unearthed”, *BBC-Today*, BBC, 15 Sept. 2008. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_7612000/7612534.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_7612000/7612534.stm). Accessed: 17 June 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Mezei, “Spinsters, Surveillance and Speech”, 103.