

The First Two Pages: “In A Glass Darkly” by Agatha Christie
From *The Last Séance: Tales of the Supernatural* (William Morrow)
Analysis by Art Taylor

Agatha Christie’s “In A Glass Darkly” was first published in the December 1934 issue of *Woman’s Journal* and has been reprinted twice—in 1939’s *The Regatta Mystery and Other Stories* and in 1979’s *Miss Marple’s Last Case and Two Other Stories*—before its inclusion in the new anthology *The Last Séance: Tales of the Supernatural*.

Nearly 80 years after its first publication, the story still startles and surprises—and heaps on the suspense from the first line:

I’ve no explanation of this story. I’ve no theories about the why and wherefore of it. It’s just a thing—that happened.

All the same, I sometimes wonder how things would have gone if I’d noticed at the time just that one essential detail that I never appreciated until so many years afterwards. If I *had* noticed it—well, I suppose the course of three lives would have been entirely altered. Somehow—that’s a very frightening thought.

Even before the narrator’s identity becomes clear, the reader is already buffeted with questions: This story? What story? What was the essential detail that went unappreciated? Who were the three lives at stake? What happened to them—and what might *otherwise* have happened if...? That “if” circles us back to the other questions, of course, but before we have time to consider any of them, the short introductory paragraphs end with “a very frightening thought”—again

purposefully abstracted and unclear and (I'd argue) making the reader all the more uneasy because of it.

While the abstraction and lack of clarity might be the chief reason readers might conjure up questions and find their curiosity piqued, other specific moves are worth mentioning as well. First, that distinctly ungrammatical em-dash in the sentence "It's just a thing—that happened" suggests a stumble, a hesitation, a moment's consideration of how to explain better—and possibly a bit of apprehension even at the line-level.

Second the emphasis on "so many years afterward" sets up this story as one that's been reflected on extensively, perhaps even obsessively—upping the stakes again. And now, finally, it's going to be told—to us.

I'm ready for what's coming. Are you?

After that compulsive opening, the pace slows and lingers, a purposeful delay. The narrator—ultimately unnamed—is a man surveying the course of his life, quickly (the story is a mere seven pages) and mixing summary with specific examination of several significant moments. The first of these incidents (half the full story) details the narrator's summer 1914 visit to schoolmate Neil Carslake's family home—Badgeworthy, "an attractive, rambling old house"—and his introduction to Neil's sibling Alan and Sylvia and to Sylvia's new fiancé Charles Crawley.

Which of these characters might be among the “three lives” at stake? That question is bound to linger. But even before the narrator meets them—before we meet them ourselves—Christie adds some additional suspense. The narrator arrives early evening, and “Everyone had gone to his room to dress for dinner”—meaning we all have to wait for those introductions—and the narrator admits (to us) that he felt “a little shy at the prospect of meeting [his friend Neil’s] people for the first time.” The house itself is detailed in the same passage: “full of little steps up and down, and unexpected staircases” and “the sort of house in which it’s not easy to find your way about.” En route to the guest room, the narrator talks about his impressions of Badgeworthy:

I remember saying with a laugh that it was the kind of house one expected to meet ghosts in the passages, and [Neil] said carelessly that he believed the place was said to be haunted but that none of them had ever seen anything, and he didn’t even know what form the ghost was supposed to take.

Needless to say, this is likely not the reassurance that the narrator was looking for.

In one swift paragraph, Christie sketches out the setting as a labyrinth (another puzzle to be solved perhaps?), offers a dash of the narrator’s interiority (already anxious about the meeting ahead), and presents a bit of indirect dialogue that lays a loose foundation for what’s next: As the careful reader recognizes, Neil’s comment about not knowing “what form the ghost was supposed to take”

suggests a promise on the author's part—a promise that we might soon gain that knowledge for ourselves.

After that, Neil “hurried away,” and the narrator is left alone to get ready for dinner—and we're left alone with him in this creepy, potentially haunted house.

Christie doesn't keep us waiting long for the next troubles. Here's the rest of the passage that closes out the published story's first two pages:

Well, I'd just got to the stage of tying my tie. I was standing in front of the glass. I could see my own face and shoulders and behind them the wall of the room—a plain stretch of wall just broken in the middle by a door—and just as I finally settled my tie I noticed that the door was opening.

I don't know why I didn't turn around—I think that would've been the natural thing to do; anyway, I didn't. I just watched the door swing slowly open—and as it swung I saw into the room beyond.

It was a bedroom—a larger room than mine—with two bedsteads in it, and suddenly I caught my breath.

For at the foot of one of those beds was a girl and round her neck were a pair of man's hands and the man was slowly forcing her backwards and squeezing her throat as he did so, so that the girl was being slowly suffocated.

There wasn't the least possibility of a mistake. What I saw was perfectly clear. What was being done was murder.

I could see the girl's face clearly, her vivid golden hair, the agonized terror of her beautiful face, slowly suffusing with blood. Of the man I could see his back, his hands, and a scar that ran down the left side of his face towards his neck.

It's taken some time to tell, but in reality only a moment or two passed while I stared dumbfounded. Then I wheeled round to the rescue...

The suspense here may seem obvious—inherent in the act of violence unfolding right before the narrator's eyes. That's surely where our attention

goes—and rightly so, since what’s witnessed here becomes the core for the entire story. But I’d also argue that what’s come before this scene adds additional tremors of trouble. To revisit some of the earlier elements: Are these then the three lives at stake—the narrator and the couple glimpsed in the mirror? If so, what’s the identity of the strangler here, and who is his victim? Or are they real people at all, or perhaps the ghosts that we’ve heard about? Isn’t it curious that when the narrator asks later where the door leads, it doesn’t go where he expects? In the midst of all that, what “essential detail” has the narrator missed that he won’t appreciate until later? And can the careful reader spot it before the narrator does?

I wrote above that the scene is “unfolding right before the narrator’s eyes,” but a couple of things need correcting about that comment. First, the scene isn’t unfolding in front of him, but behind him, seen through that “glass darkly” that Christie chose for her title—and the look behind echoes the larger structure of the whole story too, a narrator looking backward over his life, seeing what hadn’t been seen before. Related, a second point is what happens when the narrator turns around to try to confront the scene more directly, to take action. It’s worth noting that the ellipses at the end the passage are Christie’s, not mine. As for what the narrator turns to see, with readers turning around alongside him...

Well, *those ellipses are* mine—and part of my encouragement that you check out the full story, which displays once more Christie's expertise at navigating suspense and surprise and at keeping us from seeing what's happening, even as she's dangling the truth right in front of us.

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Agatha Christie is the most widely published author of all time, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Her books have sold more than a billion copies in English and another billion in a hundred foreign languages. She died in 1976.

Art Taylor won the 2019 Edgar Award for Best Short Story for "English 398: Fiction Workshop," originally published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. His fiction has also won the Agatha, Anthony, Derringer, and Macavity Awards. He is an associate professor of English at George Mason University.