

# GUILT TRIPPING IN AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD*

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Received: 2025-04-15

Accepted: 2025-05-08

Published: 2025-05-28

## Abstract

This study examines the use of guilt-tripping as a form of psychological manipulation in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. The analysis centers on identifying both the causes and the types of guilt-tripping enacted by the novel's manipulative character. Employing McPhillips' (2022) theoretical framework on manipulative behavior, the research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach, with a focus on character and narrative analysis. The findings reveal that the primary motivations for guilt-tripping include emotional dependency, a desire to manipulate and control others, and underlying feelings of low self-esteem and insecurity. In addition, two specific types of guilt-tripping behaviors are identified: love bombing and direct guilt inducement. These manipulative strategies are not only critical to the progression of the plot but also offer deeper insight into the psychological construction of the characters. The study contributes to the field of literary psychological criticism by illustrating how emotional manipulation is intricately embedded in the structure of detective fiction.

**Keywords:** *guilt-tripping; manipulation; emotional dependency; psychological fiction; qualitative analysis*

## 1. Introduction

Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is one of her most acclaimed and controversial detective novels, renowned for its unexpected ending and psychological depth. Christie, born in Torquay in 1890, is widely celebrated as the best-selling novelist of all time, having authored 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections. Her works, including *The Mousetrap*, the world's longest-running play, have sold over two billion copies worldwide (Christie, 2018). Among her many contributions to the detective genre, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* stands out for its unique narrative perspective and complex character development.

The novel follows the story of Dr. James Sheppard, who befriends Roger Ackroyd and later becomes central to the murder investigation. Initially perceived as a trustworthy narrator, Sheppard is ultimately revealed to be the murderer—a twist that challenges readers' assumptions and narrative reliability. A particularly striking moment occurs when Sheppard, after committing the murder, deceptively reflects, "On leaving the room, I saw Roger asleep in a strange position. But I didn't have the heart to wake him up." This statement underscores the manipulative nature of his character and prompts a deeper psychological analysis.

This study is motivated by the need to examine how guilt-tripping—a subtle but powerful form of psychological manipulation—is represented in the novel. While Agatha Christie's works have been extensively analyzed for their intricate plots and detective techniques, less scholarly attention has been devoted to the emotional and psychological strategies employed by characters to control or deceive others. Drawing on McPhillips' (2022) theory of manipulative behavior, particularly guilt-tripping, this research investigates how emotional manipulation operates within the narrative framework of the novel.

The central objectives of this study are twofold: first, to identify the specific types of guilt-tripping behaviors employed by the manipulative character, and second, to explore the psychological motivations underlying such behaviors. The findings are expected to enhance readers' understanding of both the moral dimensions and the psychological intricacies embedded in Christie's fiction.

Theoretically, this study aims to contribute to literary criticism by enriching interpretations of psychological manipulation in fiction. Practically, it encourages readers—particularly students of literature—to engage more critically with character development and moral complexity in literary texts. Additionally, the analysis may offer general readers insight into how emotional manipulation can function in real-life social interactions, thereby broadening the impact of literary reflection.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Guilt-Tripping**

Guilt-Tripping is one of 5 types of manipulative behavior. They are gaslighting, silent treatment, guilt-tripping, flattery, and love bombing McPhillips (2022). Mandara and Pikes (2008) stated that guilt trips along with manipulative strategies that tempted under psychological control patterns. According to Humeny (2013), holding a guilt trip is about someone holding a burden to change their actions opposing what they want. Guilt trips is a form of manipulative behavior aimed at making other people feel guilty or responsible for changing certain behavior or decisions. On the other hand, the perpetrator also seems to want to control other people's actions. Because the feelings of guilt that arise can make the perpetrator control the thoughts, behavior and feelings of the victim.

According to McPhillips (2022), guilt-tripping is a phenomenon when a person attempts to modify their behavior and acts as if they are trying to meet the expectations of the victim. The occurrence of guilt-tripping is because they have expectations to avoid negative emotions about the subject. Victims who feel guilty will feel they must take responsibility so that their behavior and emotions can be controlled by the perpetrator. Manipulators attempt to manipulate the victim's feelings by acting as if it is not their fault and psychologically manipulate the victim by using quality, reality, and ownership to make the victim feel guilty. This can lead to social control, which makes this phenomenon also a sociological phenomenon if it occurs in numerous people to lead them into the manipulator's desires (Scholz et al., 2021). Guilt-tripping has several factors, namely intersection and natural obligation. Guilt-tripping has the goals of social exclusion, anxiety and empathic arousal, both of which are interpersonal (Baldassar, 2014). Guilt is found to be adaptive and strengthens relationships. It triggers empathy in the observer, reduces conflict, encourages moral behaviours, interpersonal sensitivity, and good social adjustment, Leith & Baumeister (2008), Tangney (1994).

## **2.2 Types of Manipulative Behaviour**

According to McPhillips (2022), there are 5 types of manipulative behavior. Those are gaslighting, silent treatment, guilt-tripping, flattery, and love bombing.

Gaslighting is psychological abuse that aims to make victims feel so wrong by creating a "surreal" interpersonal environment to capture the public attention (Sweet, 2019). The cause of gaslighting is the gaslighting perpetrator who wants to get recognition from the victim in order to satisfy the desire to be fulfilled. This happens when somebody starts to use their manipulated reality to fight against their victims. As a victim, you will feel helpless because you have shown weaknesses and strengths through manipulation.

Silent Treatment is relational violence that often occurs in a disappointment in communication or an interpersonal relationship (Rittenour et al., 2019). The feeling of disappointment and dissatisfaction in a relationship is often seen when communication rarely ends up well.

Guilt-tripping is a phenomenon when the person is trying to modify their behavior and acts like they are trying to fulfill the victim's expectations. The occurrence of guilt-tripping is caused because they have expectations in order to avoid negative emotions of about the subject. Victims who feel guilty will feel like they have to be responsible so that their behavior and emotions can be controlled by the perpetrator (McPhillips, 2022).

Flattery is a manipulative strategy that involves the feeling that the other is believed to be special by consistently complimenting the victim out of nowhere and too much (McPhillips, 2022).

Love Bombing is an act of manipulation where the manipulator gives a feeling to their victims in the form of blossoming love in a massive amount of it. It makes the victim feel loved and forget about what just happened (Deck, 2017).

## **2.3 Reasons of Guilt Tripping**

There are three reasons of guilt tripping that will be described below:

### **2.3.1 Emotional Dependency**

Emotional dependency is a form of emotional needs that are not met but always strive to be met, causing maladaptive behavior towards others. It refers to a chronic pattern of affective demands, which individuals desperately seek to meet through close interpersonal relationships (Castello, 2005).

### **2.3.2 Power to Manipulate**

Guilt may become a powerful tool for controlling other people's emotions in the context of the power to manipulate them. These manipulators could use this technique to get what they want or maintain their position of power in the relationship.

### **2.3.3 Low Self-Esteem and Insecurity**

Low self-esteem refers to a negative perception of oneself and a sense of worth. It involves having a critical and often inaccurate view of one's abilities, appearance, and value as a person. Insecurity refers to a persistent feeling of uncertainty, self-doubt, and unease about oneself or relationships. Insecurity often contributes to low self-esteem but can also extend beyond self-perception to affect how individuals view their relationships with others.

### 3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research method to analyze the manipulative behavior of guilt-tripping as portrayed in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. As stated by Bogdan and Biklen (1998), qualitative research is inherently descriptive, focusing on the interpretation of data in the form of words, narratives, and contextual meaning rather than statistical figures. Accordingly, this study does not aim to measure phenomena numerically, but rather to explore and interpret psychological patterns embedded in literary texts.

The primary data source for this research is the novel itself, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (Christie, 2018). The analysis emphasizes close reading of the narrative, with particular attention to the speech, behavior, and inner thoughts of the characters, especially Dr. James Sheppard. The researcher identifies and categorizes instances of guilt-tripping based on McPhillips' (2022) typology of manipulative behavior.

The study applies character analysis and narrative interpretation to uncover the psychological motivations and interpersonal tactics employed by the manipulator. The goal is to draw meaningful conclusions about the role of guilt-tripping in the development of the plot and the characterization within the novel. All findings are presented in the form of detailed descriptions, supported by textual evidence, to ensure analytical depth and academic rigor.

### 4. Discussion

#### 4.1 Types of Guilt-Tripping Committed by The Manipulator Found in the Novel

The forms of guilt-tripping in novels are seen in every chapter. Dr. Sheppard as the manipulator to hide what he had done to Roger Ackroyd. According to McPhillips (2022), there are 5 types of manipulative behavior. Those are gaslighting, silent treatment, guilt-tripping, flattery, and love bombing, but in this research only some are discussed.

##### 4.1.1 Love Bombing

There is a scene shows that Sheppard really cares about Ackroyd, like a mother who really cares and loves her son. Sheppard spoke and answered questions from Ackroyd. At that time, Ackroyd was discussing it with him and asked who the blackmailer was who had blackmailed Mrs. Ferraris. He alleged that the perpetrator was one of the people in the house, and it was true that the perpetrator was Sheppard, but Sheppard pretended not to know. It is seen in the following quotation:

“What did you say to her?” I asked.

“What could I say? She saw, of course, the awful shock it had been to me. And then there was the question, what was my duty in the matter? She had made me, you see, an accessory after the fact. She saw all that, I think, quicker than I did. I was stunned, you know. She asked me for twenty-four hours—made me promise to do nothing till the end of that time. And she steadfastly refused to give me the name of the scoundrel who had been blackmailing her. I suppose she was afraid that I might go straight off and hammer him, and then the fat would have been in the fire as far as she was concerned. She told me that I should hear from her before twenty- four hours had passed. My God! I swear to you, Sheppard, that it

never entered my head what she meant to do. Suicide! And I drove her to it” (Agatha Christie, 2018: 53)

The quote above clearly shows that Sheppard stole Ackroyd's heart with the intention of pretending to be good and instead of being someone who seemed to care about his problems. Ackroyd asked who the blackmailer was, and he turned out to be someone who always thought well of him.

#### 4.1.2 Guilt Tripping

Sheppard had committed murder against Acroyd, because he did not want Ackroyd to find out that he had blackmailed Ms. Ferrars who made Mrs Ferrars commit suicide. Then he called the police on behalf of Parker, one of the residents and servants at the Ackroyd house. This can be seen in the quote below.

“Your master. Mr. Ackroyd. Don’t stand there staring at me, man. Have you notified the police?”

“The police, sir? Did you say the police?” Parker stared at me as though I were a ghost.

“What’s the matter with you, Parker? If, as you say, your master has been murdered—”

A gasp broke from Parker.

“The master? Murdered? Impossible, sir!” It was my turn to stare.

“Didn’t you telephone to me, not five minutes ago, and tell me that Mr. Ackroyd had been found murdered?”

“I, sir? Oh! no indeed, sir. I wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing.”

“Do you mean to say it’s all a hoax? That there’s nothing the matter with Mr. Ackroyd?”

“Excuse me, sir, did the person telephoning use my name?” “I’ll give you the exact words I heard. ‘Is that Dr. Sheppard?

Parker, the butler at Fernly, speaking. Will you please come at once, sir. Mr. Ackroyd has been murdered.’”

Parker and I stared at each other blankly.

“A very wicked joke to play, sir,” he said at last, in a shocked tone.

“Fancy saying a thing like that.”

“Where is Mr. Ackroyd?” I asked suddenly.

“Still in the research, I fancy, sir. The ladies have gone to bed, and Major Blunt and Mr. Raymond are in the billiard room.”

“I think I’ll just look in and see him for a minute,” I said. “I know he didn’t want to be disturbed again, but this odd practical joke has made me uneasy. I’d just like to satisfy myself that he’s all right.”

“Quite so, sir. It makes me feel quite uneasy myself. If you don’t object to my accompanying you as far as the door, sir—?”

(Agatha Christie, 2018: 60-61)

The above quote clearly describes who Sheppard is. He is a master manipulator and very dangerous. He killed Acroyd and called the police on someone else's behalf. Everything is manipulated by him and is like a director who is very good at making up stories that will happen next, full of calm as if he is innocent.

## 4.2 The Reasons of Guilt Tripping

The Reasons for Guilt-Tripping in novel are seen in every chapter of the novel. The perpetrator of the guilty trip was Dr. James Sheppard did this to the people around him in order to be free from accusations of the alleged perpetrator of the murder of Roger Ackroyd.

### 4.2.1 Emotional Dependency

The first quotation shows Sheppard has an emotional dependency on Dr. James Sheppard, as the murderer of Roger Ackroyd, always tries hard to keep his disgrace of killing. Because he was a doctor, James was able to hide all kinds of crimes against Mrs. Ferrars and Mr. Ackroyd. It makes him be a manipulative person. A manipulative man has an emotionally dependent character on everyone. At the end of the story, Hercule Poirot tries to reveal who the perpetrator of Roger Ackroyd's murder was by presenting Ralph Paton and his wife. Previously, Ralph was accused of being the perpetrator, but in this detective part, Poirot did not find the murderous side of Ralph and his previous statements. In this part, Ralph tells who Dr. Sheppard, actually as seen in the following quotation:

“It was a very uncomfortable minute for me. I hardly took in what happened next, but there were exclamations and cries of surprise! When I was sufficiently master of myself to be able to realize what was going on, Ralph Paton was standing by his wife, her hand in his, and he was smiling across the room at me.

Poirot, too, was smiling, and at the same time shaking an eloquent finger at me”.

(Agatha Christie, 2018: 328)

From the quote above, Dr. Sheppard hung up on his feelings for someone. In this quote it is very clear that Hercule Poirot has revealed that he was the perpetrator of the murder of Roger Ackroyd.

The next emotional dependency, when Ralph Paton told the truth, Dr. Sheppard began to be cornered and admitted the truth of the story he had told. This made him a little annoyed, which was proof that Dr. Sheppard came into view. It is seen the following quotation:

“I did,” I said ruefully. “I suppose I might as well make a clean breast of things now. I went to see Ralph that afternoon. At first he refused to take me into his confidence, but later he told me about his marriage, and the hole he was in. As soon as the murder was discovered, I realized that once the facts were known, suspicion could not fail to attach to Ralph—or, if not to him, to the girl he loved. That night I put the facts plainly before him. The thought of having possibly to give evidence which might incriminate his wife made him resolve at all costs to—to—”

I hesitated, and Ralph filled up the gap.

(Agatha Christie, 2018: 329)

The quotation above clearly shows that Dr. Sheppard began to feel sorry for his cunning and deception in keeping all the secrets of this murder case. Actually, on the other hand, based on what Ralph Paton told him, he still had good feelings towards Dr.

Sheppard. However, on the other hand, it was Hercule Poirot who studied and listened to Ralph's speech carefully and wisely. Until he forced Ralph to tell him detail by detail what had happened, which made Sheppard anxious and regretful. This makes his emotions chaotic and raging.

Next quotation, when Poirot seriously corners Sheppard to admit his actions. That's when Sheppard begins to become more unable to control his emotions. She is marked when Poirot discusses the notes written by him. In this part, Sheppard really regrets having helped him. It is seen in the following quotations:

I looked at him ruefully. "Caroline's Home Office expert," I murmured. "And to think I never guessed!"

"You see now why I drew attention to the reticence of your manuscript," murmured Poirot. "It was strictly truthful as far as it went—but it did not go very far, eh, my friend?"

I was too abashed to argue.

(Agatha Christie, 2018: 331)

The quotation above clearly shows that Sheppard's emotional dependency has been revealed. When he is pressured to confess all his actions by Poirot, he begins to be unable to escape and always feels remorse and remorse for having helped Poirot.

#### **4.2.2 Power to Manipulate**

Dr. James Sheppard is a great manipulator. At the beginning of the novel, he appears as if he were the main character in the story. Readers will also not suspect that he is the real murderer in this story. Part by part of the novel, the reader will be guided to know who Sheppard is. A man who has the power to manipulate everyone in Kings Abbot. He acts as a hero who helps Hercule Poirot as the detective to clear the murder of Ackroyd case. In the first chapter of the novel, Dr. Sheppard debates with his sister Caroline. Caroline argues that Mrs. Ferrars committed suicide and that was the real truth, but because he didn't want to be found out by Dr. Sheppard denied this by saying that Mrs. Ferrars died from drinking too much Veronal. It is seen in the following quotation:

My sister continued: "What did she die of? Heart failure?" "Didn't the milkman tell you that?" I inquired sarcastically.

Sarcasm is wasted on Caroline. She takes it seriously and answers accordingly.

"He didn't know," she explained.

After all, Caroline was bound to hear sooner or later. She might as well hear from me.

"She died of an overdose of veronal. She's been taking it lately for sleeplessness. Must have taken too much."

"Nonsense," said Caroline immediately. "She took it on purpose. Don't tell me!"

(Agatha Christie, 2018: 9)

From the quote above, it can be explained that Dr. Sheppard really wanted to keep the mystery of Mrs. Ferrars' death. Caroline had already suspected that she had heard the true cause of Mrs. Ferrars' death, but because Dr. Sheppard didn't want to

find out what he had done to Mrs. Ferrars, so he easily refuted his sister's opinion on that.

Next quotation, at the end of the story. Poirot tells the people who Sheppard tells. He is telling the results of his investigation into the Ackroyd murder case. There were many people watching and waiting for Poirot's words. He revealed the details and determined that the perpetrator of the murder was Sheppard, as it is seen in the following quotation:

"There was silence for a minute and a half.

Then I laughed.

"You're crazy," I said.

"No," said Poirot calmly. "I am not angry. It was that small difference in time that first drew my attention to you—right at the beginning."

"Time difference?" I asked, confused.

(Agatha Christie, 2018: 344)

The above quotation shows that Mr. Sheppard is truly an accomplished actor. He laughed and was not worried even though he was in an accused state. In this part, he tries to convey the facts so that Poirot really misjudged him. Sheppard's power of manipulation really made the situation even more raging. In this position he is always trying to explain what Poirot said about him. If Poirot tries to reveal the truth, then he will also try to manipulate Poirot's statements.

The next quotation shows the power of manipulation of a Dr. Sheppard. In this scene, he speaks with self-understanding to Poirot not to easily accuse him of being a murderer. In fact, he completely defended himself and emphasized that he was innocent. It is seen in the following quotation:

"My dear Poirot," said I in a voice that sounded strange and forced to my own ears, "you have been thinking about this case too long. What good would it do me to kill Ackroyd?"

(Agatha Christie, 2018: 345)

The above quotation shows that Dr. Sheppard is a master at manipulation. He distorts the facts as if he were innocent and exonerated by Hercule Poirot. In the quote above, it is very clear that he is denying himself and his efforts to counter Poirot's opinion by asking questions and making sure that he is not as evil as Poirot claims.

Again, in the next quotation, it shows the power of manipulation of a Dr. Sheppard. Poirot continues to pressure Sheppard to admit his cruel actions, saying that it is Sheppard who really knows the cause of his patient's death, Mrs. Ferraris. Despite this, he continues to criticize and continues to ask Poirot to defend himself. It is seen in the following quotation

"Safety. It was you who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars. Who could have had a better knowledge of what killed Mr. Ferrars than the doctor who was attending him? When you spoke to me that first day in the garden, you mentioned a legacy received about a year ago. I have been unable to discover any trace of a legacy. You had to invent some way of accounting for Mrs. Ferrars's twenty thousand pounds. It has not done you much good. You lost most of it in speculation— then you put the screw on too hard, and Mrs. Ferrars took a way out that you had not expected. If Ackroyd had learnt the truth he would have had no mercy

on you—you were ruined forever.” “And the telephone call?” I asked, trying to rally. “You have a plausible explanation of that also, I suppose?”  
(Agatha Christie, 2018: 346)

The quote above makes it very clear that Sheppard is trying to defend himself against Poirot's accusation of being the perpetrator of the murder. Poirot repeatedly tries and proves the truth, he also repeatedly denies it for various reasons, even arguing with each other. The quote above shows Poirot's skill as a detective in asking for detail after detail in the case of Mrs. Ferrars against Sheppard. Sheppard tries to manipulate everything and argue with Poirot so that he is exonerated and not proven to be the perpetrator of the murder.

#### **4.2.3 Low Self-Esteem and Insecurity**

Even though Sheppard is able to manipulate quite well and has emotional dependence, the feeling of guilt is incomplete if Sheppard does not have an insecurity of himself. In this part, Hercule Poirot, a detective who has just retired from his job, is forced to investigate the case of Roger Ackroyd's death. He went to see Sheppard and the others. It made him uneasy. This is the first time Sheppard's low self-esteem shows. It is seen in the following quotation:

I was a little nervous when I rang the bell at Marby Grange the following afternoon. I am very curious about what Poirot wants to know. He had entrusted the job to me. Why? Was it because, as in questioning Major Blunt, he wanted to remain behind the scenes? That desire, understandable in the first case, seems to me meaningless here. My meditation was interrupted by the arrival of an intelligent parlor maid.  
(Agatha Christie, 2018: 161)

From the quote above, it can be explained that it was very clear that Dr. Sheppard was starting to feel restless and less confident that what he was hiding would stay up forever. He was worried that Poirot would find out the real truth sooner or later. The low Self-Esteem and Insecurity of Sheppard shows that in the Guilt Trip theory, humans also have weaknesses.

### **5. Conclusion**

Based on the analysis conducted in this study, it can be concluded that guilt-tripping is a significant psychological and narrative element in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. The manipulative character, Dr. James Sheppard, demonstrates various tactics of emotional manipulation that align with McPhillips' (2022) framework of guilt-tripping behavior. The findings reveal two primary types of guilt-tripping in the novel: love bombing—where affection is used to manipulate trust—and direct guilt inducement, where the manipulator makes others feel responsible for outcomes they did not cause. These behaviors are instrumental in concealing the character's true motives and maintaining control over others. Furthermore, the study identifies three core psychological motivations behind the guilt-tripping: emotional dependency, the desire to manipulate and control, and low self-esteem coupled with insecurity. These psychological traits deepen the complexity of Sheppard's character

and contribute to the novel's enduring intrigue. This research underscores how psychological manipulation operates not only as a narrative strategy but also as a lens for understanding human behavior in literature. By examining such elements, readers and scholars alike can gain greater insight into the moral ambiguity and emotional dynamics that shape fictional and real-life interactions.

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