

STACEY HALLS' *MRS ENGLAND* OR A WELL-WOVEN MYSTERY PLOT

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the way in which Stacey Halls' novel, Mrs England, provides an instance of a well-woven mystery. This is achieved by reviewing the sources of enigma in the story, starting with the most controversial of them, namely the protagonist giving the title of the book. Then, the other characters are put under a lens (and dedicated separate sections), through the investigation of which we show how suspense and mystery are built. The conclusions reveal the fact that the secrecy constructed around them is the main mechanism to accomplish a suspense plot, through ambiguity and open possibilities, but that there are also other details that contribute to the build-up and which play a secondary role, completing the feeling nevertheless. The approach is cultural and identity studies.

Keywords: identity, mystery plot, Gothic novel, femininity

JEL Classification: Z10

1. Introduction

Ruby May is a Norland-educated nanny, having therefore the best possible background in tending to children of wealthy families. The opening of the novel finds her quitting a good position with the Radletts, because she does not want to emigrate to Canada with them, although she is invited to. The reason for this refusal from her part – we are made to understand – is something suspicious related to her family, with whom she is not really in close contact, this constituting the first element of mystery introduced in the story. We get the notion that something significant is amiss and troubling her in her family situation, something having occurred in the past which has made things tense and awkward among family members.

Then, Ruby is offered by Mrs. Sim, her teacher and manager at Norland, a position with a some people living in rural Yorkshire, at Hardcastle House, in a distant area near a wild scape, where she needs to take care of four children – a handful and a challenge even for an experienced nanny. We are misled to believe that this may be a problem, but we soon realize that the children are angels, and the master of the house is affable and lacks any arrogance. However, the mistress of the house, Mrs. England, acts strangely and is volatile as a personality, which makes mystery lie with her for the best part of the novel.

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This is the setting that Ruby starts her journey with the family in – and us along with her.

In what follows, we shall look at the sources of mystery in Stacey Halls' novel, which we consider to be mainly the characters, through ambiguity characterizing their personalities and actions. Since enigmas get built in this way, we have therefore dedicated sections in which we investigate them one by one below, following the natural construction and manner proposed by the author. As pointed out by critics, Mrs England has a "touch of Gothic", but, although employing some usual "tropes" of this genre, such as dramatic beginnings, "hidden letters, a secret identity and a fire", it reinvents it, using "twists", one being that it is "devoid" of "any supernatural element" or ruses (Booker Talk, 2022). Some have even pointed out physical details of the book playing a part in the way readers relate to the story, and to how the atmosphere gets created from incipient stages, setting the right expectations among the audiences; one such opinion discusses the "emotional connection to the book as an object" achieved through the "clever design" on the front cover, which is kept throughout editions in various languages (Godsell, 2021).

2. Mrs. England

From the onset, Mrs. England baffles through her personality. At first, we see a shut-in woman, a bit strange and withdrawn, and we assume that a shyness towards people and avoidance of social contexts is one of her defining personality traits, out of which a certain clumsiness, awkwardness, air-headedness and inattention as well as confusion stem as natural consequences. She hardly eats, is fatigued, often physically weak or indisposed and a bit agoraphobic, always preferring to remain cloistered in her room, not up to any event or visit outside her home. She seems not to be preoccupied with the things of the world because she has a dreamy nature. However, her behavior is odd beyond the possibility of merely being explained fully and solely by such a predisposition, as it soon becomes obvious.

The night Ruby May arrives at the mansion, accompanied by Mr. England, who has picked her up at the train station – something that she has already found peculiar – Mrs. England seems taken by surprise by her being there, and acts confused before finally accompanying the guest to the children's room, hesitant as to what she is supposed to do, as if she has not even given it a thought beforehand. In the first conversation Charles England has with the nanny, he characterizes his spouse as forgetful, when Ruby wonders before him about his wife's confusion. Moreover, it turns out that the mistress of the house was the one to book Ruby's train tickets, which makes her slip of the mind even stranger. When a photographer is contracted to take a family picture, and is due in at nine one morning, soon after Ruby's arrival, Mrs. England mixes up the time, thinking that they are expecting him at ten, and therefore is not dressed

when he comes in, all the members of the household having to wait for her to get ready.

To her surprise, Ruby is summoned to a discussion with the master of the house, Charles, about the children's program and her future chores, which is strange as well, as these duties and knowledge would normally fall to the lady of the household. Mrs. England appears as uninvolved, and the first hints to her incompetence arise. It is already evident that the lady spends most of her time secluded in her room, and seems strangely and expressly eager to retreat in there if she accidentally bumps into Ruby in the hallway. There are clear signs that her behavior is not just extravagance, a mere predilection of her personality, but something more serious than that. One night, Ruby smells gas and alerts everyone in the house, saving their lives and the mansion by getting them outside and opening all windows, and we infer that Mrs. England may have been the one to leave the gas valve open in her room. Everybody suffers from gas poisoning, including the lady, being dizzy and sick for days afterwards. At this point, her forgetfulness appears as the result of a condition rather than anything else, a fact that gets confirmed by Mr. England in a subsequent conversation with Ruby, when he acknowledges the potential need for specialized treatment for his wife, but admits to having left things the way they are in order to avoid stressing the children and his spouse. His gesture of locking her in her room at night is justified by this condition and a tendency to sleepwalk, according to his claims.

In relationship with her children, Mrs. England seems just as oblivious of them as of everything else (at least initially). She almost never tends to their needs, nor seems to know or care what these are. She seldom even comes to their room, does not interact with them, and when she does, encouraged by Ruby, she seems clumsy in her gestures and verbal interactions, hardly finding anything to say, acting out of place and relieved once she manages only a few words or a short activity together, as if she has completed a tricky task, and is happy to get out of the situation. The impression she gives is that she does not know her own children, as she needs to be explained about their likes, preoccupations and talents. Her awkwardness with her own kids points to her as an inept mother. She apparently cannot make any decisions regarding the children either, seeming unable to make up her mind or think logically about something, even if it appears as obvious. For instance, Saul, the oldest of them, has the problem of wetting the bed from time to time. Ruby proposes to Mrs. England to buy and use a plastic cover for the bed to solve the incidents more efficiently, but the mother cannot decide to agree even though it is a sensible and rational solution.

The first details that get introduced to contradict the carefully designed personality above as disconnected and incompetent refer to Mrs. England's relationship with the children. There are small gestures of tenderness, such as

taking her daughter Millie in her arms while sitting, or touching Decca's shoulder, which are mainly performed by her absent-mindedly, or apparently so. These are subtly slipped in the narrator Ruby's descriptions of the mistress' actions, here and there, noticeable, but still details existing under the overall umbrella of carelessness, which gets pointed out as the main attitude and constant. Presenting them as performed under absent-mindedness diminishes their relevance, making them somewhat mechanical in nature and thus depriving them of the value and weight of intentional, conscious and heartfelt gestures.

However, as the story advances, other, more forceful and undeniable evidence of mystery in Mrs. England's character emerges, letting us know that there is more to her than what initially meets the eye. While the Englands are visiting the extended family from Lilian's part, the Greatrexes, at Crow Nest, Saul has an asthma attack, which Dr. Powell confuses for gastric symptoms, prescribing the patient to lie down, and injecting a drug in his neck, despite Ruby's protests, who recognizes the affliction and claims that steam and heat would relax the boy's airways and help him breathe, whereas lying down would only make him worse. Mrs. England proves presence of mind and courage, locking herself in the room with Saul and Ruby, keeping all the others, including the doctor and her husband outside, and following Ruby's advice rather than the professional's, so making the right decision against all odds and despite appearances. Ruby's training at Norland included a three-month medical internship in a hospital, but cannot, theoretically, compare to the experience and knowledge of the Greatrex family doctor who has professed all his life. However, Lilian England follows her intuition and trusts Ruby, going against everyone else, including her husband's express indication. Moreover, as she thinks it best to remain with the boy at Crow Nest for a few days to give him time to recover, but is unsure whether she would be heeded by Charles and supported in this endeavor, she instructs Ruby to lie to Mr. England regarding the decision to stay, telling him that it is the doctor's suggestion and manipulating him into believing the final decision is his, which Ruby does effectively. Lilian collects her wits and stands up to everyone, be they her family and two representatives of male authority that practically exercise a lot of influence and pressure on her. Her concern with Saul and stress over his health issue brings out a mother side that we have only gotten a pale glimpse at, which proves how she loves her children, if she is willing to put herself at risk for them by neglecting the whole family's instructions, if it is her belief that it would help Saul. Doing something like this also requires a strength of character that this woman has shown to apparently lack, through her debilitating conduct so far.

On principle, Lilian England prefers to avoid contact with other people, as we have already seen. Even her voice is always low and hushed, as if she were

afraid to even speak. This leads us to believe that she suffers from an enhanced timidity with everyone around her. However, to Ruby's astonishment, she knows Tommy Sheldrake the blacksmith, with whom she appears to exchange letters, or at least receives mail from him, stealthily using her oldest daughter, Decca, as an unofficial mail carrier. The nanny catches the girl hiding such a letter in her clothes before giving it to her mother. Given the secrecy, we suspect romantic involvement, and thus Mrs. England appears in a whole new light. The shy, antisocial woman who seems afraid of her own shadow may actually turn into an adulteress. Blaise, the maid, confirms to Ruby that she has seen Tommy a couple of times not only wandering about the premises of the mansion, but also eerily standing still outside, watching it.

Also, Mrs. England is not exactly the feeble, fragile, sickly woman that she appears to be at the beginning of the book. When she finally does decide to venture outside for a walk with Ruby and the children, subsequent to the visit to Crow Nest and to Saul's health episode, she takes the untrodden and more dangerous path, and acts as if she knew her way around the area, which is surprising for a woman who has spent most of her days bedridden. She is even bold enough to cross a river with the baby carriage on an apparently unsafe bridge where even Ruby hesitates, pushing the stroller herself, and then climbing to reach a plateau, and thus showing unusual strength and stamina for an ill-disposed woman, and qualities of dealing with the natural environment that are not necessarily top-of-the-list for a lady of the high society. As Ruby points out, she is "not at all like someone who forgot things, who left valves leaking and misplaced her servants' post"; "not the pale moth glancing off the edge of conversations, [...] not the preoccupied, distracted creature inspecting her gloves", but "whole" (Halls, 2021: Ch. 18)

The weak being, dependent on her husband, apparently unable to decide anything for herself, let alone contradict him with something, is not entirely who she is at all. This first became apparent when she plotted to have her way and stay at her parents' mansion for her son, also determining Ruby to follow her orders and do the same with regard to the master. There may be an element of not only trickery but also slyness to Mrs. England. One other situation where this is visible concerns Ruby's correspondence. Lilian England progressively forges a bond with her children's nanny; she pulls Ruby on her side, determining her to keep secrets with which the nanny betrays her master's trust – as with the letter received by the mistress from the blacksmith – and listens to Ruby's family problems and childhood situations, making Ruby confide in her, appearing as sensitive and empathetic. Nevertheless, it turns out that Mrs. England has kept Ruby's letters – from home, from Decca's school and from Mrs. Sim at Norland Institute – in her drawer for days on end, despite knowing how important they are for her employee. Ruby was waiting for news from her sister Elsie, who was unwell, having contracted a new kidney disease besides

her spine affliction, as well as from Decca, who had had to leave for school in tears and with vehement protests, and for whom an answer from her nanny would have probably meant avoiding depression. Apart from the fact that maintaining a dialogue with these people through written messages was crucial under the circumstances, which Mrs. England knows very well, Ruby had specifically and repeatedly been inquiring whether she had any mail, which basically makes the chances of the situation being simply an overlook, an honest mistake from Lilian's part, very slim. On the other hand, Mrs. England's forgetfulness is proverbial, even though highly unlikely in this particular case. Yet again, when Ruby lets her know about the news from Decca in the letter, Mrs. England remarks that her daughter has not written to her as well, which may leave for us room for suspicion that she may be jealous of Ruby for the attention the nanny gets from the girl, and suggests perhaps the possibility that the mother may have hidden the letters out of spite. The question is whether the lady is capable of deviousness and meanness, or is merely her usual unmindful self. Another comment from Mrs. England's part introduces even more doubt into the picture, pointing that something else is amiss, sending Ruby on a different lead, as she remarks on the position of the mailbox in their yard being close to Mr. England's room, indirectly suggesting that her husband may have been the one to hide the letters.

Blaise's observations to Ruby pinpoint Mrs. England's personality once more, and her word weighs a lot, since, as a maid, the servant spent a lot of time close to her mistress. She says that understanding Lilian England is "difficult", "Like catching smoke." and states that she has often wondered if the lady is not "more clever than she makes out" (*ibidem*: Ch. 19).

3. Mr. England

Mr. England appears as a likable man, full of qualities and understanding and caring with his wife despite her obvious shortcomings. He picks Ruby May from the train station, reins the carriage himself, is deprived of any superiority, excuses his wife before the nanny and respects her whims, covering up for her moods and flaws. He lacks haughtiness, invites Ruby to have suppers with him, heeds her advice and gives her a raise, acknowledging her merits and help. He is open to discussing his wife's condition without being disrespectful to her in the process, explaining simply and plainly that he does not want to put her or the children through the stress of being institutionalized. He has a close relationship with the children, sometimes tending to their needs and thus performing tasks that would normally be his wife's duty (especially in Edwardian times), not only allowing them around him to play, but playing with them. He appears to have forged a stronger emotional bond with the kids than their mother, in the presence of whom they are usually stiff and unresponsive, unlike the exuberant manifestations they have towards him. All these features

make him very congenial. He does not have the stiffness or rigidity of male role models of his time, who are supposed to be dominant characters, masters and providers, “breadwinners”, kings of their castles, keeping the family somewhat at bay in order to preserve their status of superiority, whereas women are “dependant” and homebound (Dyhouse, 2013, Ch. 1). He can, however, hold “coercive control” over his wife, as also deemed normal in that age (emmasbibliotresures, 2021). The power distance is not as far as etiquette would normally impose in the Edwardian era, when “social relationships were strictly defined, and interactions among and between the classes were governed by a series of complex and rigid rules” (The Manners of the Edwardian Era, 2016). He proves more flexible and atypical in this respect.

This impression changes a bit, however. There are dents and cracks in the general ideal picture painted to the man of the house. The first appears with the situation of Decca’s departure to St Hilda school. It is unclear whose idea or decision it is, even though Mr. England claims it is his wife’s, but Lilian’s devastation, hesitance and apparent helplessness says otherwise (and she later denies it to Ruby). The timing is also special, right after Decca has helped her mom with the secret letter, about which Mr. England has found out something, so the girl’s sending away may as well be his punishment for both his wife and daughter, to separate them.

This begs the question of how he really feels about his wife. As Ruby notices initially, he is very concerned about Lilian. He accepts all her peculiarities, strangeness, dispositions, inabilities and absence in matters that a wife, mother and mistress of a household is supposed to manage successfully, especially in Victorian times. This may point to the fact that he has strong feelings for her, loving her a lot, being so accepting and caring. On the other hand, there is that strange episode when he asks Ruby to act like a care provider and put him to bed – as if he were his children, but, of course, not quite like that, as the sexual innuendo is present – and Ruby does it, also planting a kiss on his forehead upon his request, surprising even herself for obeying.

The action of sending his eldest daughter far away to school, despite her obvious fear, lamentations and sorrow for having to go, comes in contrast with his love of his children that he displays on every occasion. His insensitivity to the girl’s desperate cry looks a lot like cruelty. He does not act out of concern for her studies, or having her best interests at heart, as, at the beginning of the novel, while presenting the children’s education to Ruby, when mentioning that his girls have been taught only how to read and write whereas Saul still enjoys private tutoring, he seems perfectly at peace with this idea. His calm depiction of this inequitable state of affairs, gender-wise, renders the feeling that he sees it as utterly normal. He does not even fathom the possibility of a potential inadequacy or unfairness, seeming to take for granted the notion that the rudimentary knowledge tools he has provided for his daughters are fit and quite

enough for them. At the historical time of the novel, girls often received their education at home and then a boarding school, and the purpose of this education was “not academic”, the deed being more a “tribute” to the parents’ social standing (Bryce qtd in Dyhouse, 2013, Ch. 2). It then follows that a female’s schooling is not the reason why he is preoccupied to send his daughter away, which would raise the odds that it is rather out of revenge.

Another aspect that may contradict the view that Mr. England is as perfect as he seems is the idea that strikes Ruby while having that audacious stroll with Mrs. England, the one in which the lady acts liberated from the confinement of the house, and a much better, revigorated version of herself, namely that the woman is “desperately unhappy” (Halls, 2021: Ch. 19). Also, one day, Ruby visits the Booths – the former maid, Blaise, and tutor Eli – and the woman tells her that Conrad Greatrex, Mrs. England’s father, gives Charles England a significant monthly allowance; as Blaise puts it, they (the Greatrexes) pay him to take care of his wife. Hence, his tenderness does not come for free. Facts seem to gather that cloud his initial solar image.

4. Ruby

Ruby is a controversial personality herself, but in a much more subdued manner. There are clues as to the fact that she is hiding something traumatic from her past, and which is related to her family. We infer this much from cues that are subtle enough not to be decisive. There is an air of unease whenever she thinks about her family, but nothing concrete at first for us to be able to either understand that there is a problem or make up our minds in this regard. Then, the way she feels very connected to her relatives, so much so as to renounce the opportunity to go to Canada as a nanny in a family that she likes and who like her, as they have had a contract and relationship for some time, is a bit odd. What we sense is not necessarily emotional closeness to her relatives, as she is somewhat sad to pass the opportunity of leaving; it is not essentially affection that keeps her in the country (that is, if we leave out Elsie, her sister, whom she clearly really loves), but rather a sense of duty, which comes along with an unpleasant or peculiar feeling – and we shall understand only in the end why. Moreover, she only keeps in touch with her family through the letters she writes to Elsie. Later, we are told that she has not opened the mail from her father, and that there is a box which she avoids looking into, which contains something equally valuable and disagreeable. Hence, there is something eerie in her childhood or adolescence that remains unexplained for the longer part of the novel.

She has chosen to activate in the public sphere in the only domain that was deemed as respectable and acceptable for women in the late Victorian and Edwardian times, i.e. teaching and caring for children. Proper women had to avoid becoming abominable or “dreadful”, like the suffragettes, wanting too

much to be part of the active, public sphere, so they had to be involved in the only job that did not damage their reputation – “child welfare was seen as consonant with woman's proper sphere in private and domestic life” (Martin, 1999: 30). From this point of view, Ruby still observes convention, but is on the brink towards employment and independence, so on the threshold towards masculine attributes.

Ruby's relationship with men is ambiguous, more precisely her containment and naivety. When she arrives at the Englands' home, she meets Mr. Booth, who will soon make a comment on this to her face, saying that she is innocent as a lamb. Nevertheless, she not only follows Mr. England in his room in the dark to put him to bed and kisses his forehead when invited to do so, but then fantasizes and thinks about how she would take care of him if she were married to him, and how he deserves a wife who would do so instead of the one he has. Also, she agrees to take walks in the woods with Booth, accepting his compliments and feeling attracted to him, even after he is married to Blaise. Even Tommy Sheldrake, the blacksmith, has in her perception a magnetism that she feels, but, in his case, she senses this attraction as combined with something menacing. The description of her encounters with these men creates suspense and mystery in the story, as every one of them represents a possibility of development for a different scenario, and we do not know what to believe of both what will happen with Ruby and how she is as a person (either more or less respectable).

5. Disentanglements

When Ruby comes back to Hardcastle House from a visit to the Booths, during which relevant ideas are exchanged with Blaise (some of which we have presented above), she stumbles upon a fight Charles England has with Conrad Greatrex, in which the latter threatens to put an end to the financial arrangement that they have – the one in which Charles is the beneficiary. Conrad leaves, and an enraged Mr. England takes the kids to Crow Nest with him, disallowing both his wife and Ruby to accompany him, as punishment for the fact that the nanny has taken the liberty to visit the Booth family. Ruby realizes that this outing has made him mad because he tells her that she can now go back and continue the visit without the kids. At this point, from the way the plot has been constructed, we suspect that Charles may even be jealous.

Mr. England's outburst shocks Ruby and brings back bad memories, of how her own father tried to kill her and Elsie, and Ruby passes out. When Ruby was twelve, he pushed the girls off a high bridge, subsequent to having suffered from depression caused by financial troubles and having progressively lost his wits. The girls miraculously survived both the fall and drowning, as a boat passing by fished them out of the water. This is how Elsie got her permanent damage to the spine, as she was only three then. All this comes back to Ruby in

her fretful sleepy and dreamy state induced by the violence of the master of Hardcastle. Mrs. England takes care of her while she recovers, and confirms that she was not the one to have taken her letters.

Mrs. England remains in Ruby's room not only to look after her, but also to escape to the woods at night. Ruby follows her, finds her and finds out that Lilian was actually married to Tommy, and that her daughter Decca is his. The Greatrex family has practically sold her to Charles, paying him a lot of money to accept a pregnant woman as his wife and to keep the secret. Lilian describes him as egocentric, tyrannical and manipulative, having estranged her from her children, making them prefer their father, with her allowing it so as to deter him from starting to hate them, as a result to feeling that he is competing with the little ones for her affection and attention. When Charles finds the two women in the forest, he means to push Lilian into a precipice rather than allow her to leave him, and Ruby, reviving in her memory the danger she once was in from a similar fall, and reliving the fear and revolt, pushes Charles to his end instead, with Lilian's help.

Mystery as to the denouement is kept until the very last regarding the two women's future. Lilian decides to go to Australia, where she had her romance with Tommy – and we assume that he will relocate there as well, only to find out that they will not be a couple after all, as they have shared and gone through too much together, and their paces of evolution have been different since. Ruby is invited to join Lilian to the continent, but decides against it, as she receives the news of her father's death right before giving Lilian an answer. Since she has never forgiven her father and has kept her distance from the mother because of him as well, we tend to think that she might consider returning there, but this is not what she chooses either, opting for going back to Norland for the time being. Here, she receives a job offer from Mrs. Sim, who wants to open a daycare business, and the lady lets her know that Mrs. England has left her forty pounds – her wages for a whole year. The end shows us a confident Ruby, who retires to a house on the seacoast, free to weigh all the possibilities before her, able to decide for herself and live in liberty for the first time in her life.

These last life choices are perhaps unexpected, for the main characters in the story, i.e. Mrs. England and Ruby, and we do not know until the very last moment what lies ahead for each one. Through this, Stacey Halls shows once again her mastery of creating a mystery plot. Also, by placing two heroines at the forefront, we may infer a feminist vein in the otherwise patriarchal context, where men have the power over women's lives and well-being to a great extent, where gestures such as locking a woman in her room are not frowned upon and can be deemed to make sense. The two women prove both cleverer than a clever man, Charles England, and capable, independent and powerful. Therefore, the voices that wonder whether the placement of the story in 1904, around the time when the "Suffragettes' struggle to win the vote for women

was becoming militant”, contains a symbolical message, in the directing line of a statement of women’s power, may be right (Godsell, 2021).

Also, throughout the story, there is a feeling of well-crafted suspense, of being held in waiting. Although nothing much happens, practically speaking, we get a sense of shocking things looming, about to be revealed. Open possibilities and the very feeling of apparent peacefulness and stillness in action contribute to the tension that gets created. One of the hanging developments is related to Ruby’s past, when we know that something bad happened, because she avoids looking at the letters and items in her box of personal belongings, but we are kept guessing. Another unknown advancement is connected with her romantic involvements, Booth, Charles England and even Sheldrake having meaningful encounters with her and functioning as potential scenario threads in this respect. Mrs. England’s personality is controversial, mystery stemming and brimming from her character as well. Halls appears to also know how to use dosage, as minimum clues are thrown in a paced manner and just to the extent to which they make us wonder about the next step. Contradictory hints are also dropped, especially related to Charles and Lilian’s characters, as we are led to believe that either one is either good-natured or devious. The friction Ruby has with the servants, especially Blaise, who dislikes her from the beginning – and we are told she wanted the position of a nanny for herself, but was deemed unfit – creates a bit of tension as well. The natural environment is an element from which mystery emerges, through the proximity of the forest and high rocks and plateaus, which suggest a certain amount of peril, especially in the context of Mrs. England’s habit of sleepwalking, and as we have a description of a few of the characters’ walks taking place in the dark, coupled with depictions of sounds, smells and images of the surroundings that compose an eerie atmosphere. This is why we can say that the milieu where Hardcastle House is placed plays a role in the makeup of mysteriousness in the novel. Hence, we may conclude that the characters are indeed the main sources of ambiguity and thus mystery, but other details and elements contribute to it and complete the picture, enhancing this feeling and rendering it complexity and weight. Taking all these factors into account, we may consider the novel a sample of a well-crafted mystery plot.

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