

The Tony Award-Winning



The Mousetrap

A Study Guide

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The Mousetrap

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Background Information

By Christine Frezza

From *Insights*, 2007

By 1947, Agatha Christie was a much-published writer of mysteries and an occasional playwright, with two productions to her credit. Ira Levin, in his introduction to *The Mousetrap and Other Plays*, said that Christie felt other playwrights who adapted her novels made the mistake of “following the books too closely” (Agatha Christie, 1978, p. viii). She felt that “a detective story is particularly unlike a play. . . . It has such an intricate plot, and usually so many characters and false clues, that the thing is bound to be confusing. . . . What was wanted was simplification” (viii). Feeling she understood the genre, when the BBC called her with the request that she write a brief radio drama, she readily accepted, especially after learning that the request originated with the Dowager Queen Mary.

Christie quickly produced a “little radio sketch” called *Three Blind Mice* which was so well received that requests came in for her to turn it into a short story. However, pleased with her previous forays into playwriting, she thought of turning it into a stage play instead, and expanded it from the twenty-minute sketch into a full three acts. “It wanted a couple of extra characters, a fuller background and plot, and a slow working up to the climax” (Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*, 1977, p. 498). Christie gives credit for the title to her son-in-law; the change was made because another play called *Three Blind Mice* already existed.

On November 25, 1952, *The Mousetrap* opened at the Ambassador Theatre, starring Richard Attenborough and his wife, Sheila Sim. At this point, one usually writes, “The production closed on . . .” but this time the date must be left blank, as *The Mousetrap* is still running more than fifty-four years later.

Statistics abound about the show, including: three entries in *The Guinness Book of World Records*; longest-running theatrical show in the world; complete cast, set, curtains, and theatre change—the only piece remaining from the original is a clock on the mantelpiece (*An Autobiography*, 498).

More interesting than the numbers is its truly universal appeal, having been presented in forty-one countries, and translated into twenty-one languages, the play speaks to some qualities we all possess. Christie herself modestly attributed its success to luck and “there is a bit of something in it for almost everybody. . . . Young people enjoy it, elderly people enjoy it” (*An Autobiography*, 499). She then repeats her initial belief that having a skeleton of the radio sketch to work with, means the play is well constructed. “The thing unfolds so that you want to know what happens next, and you can’t quite see where the next few minutes will lead you” (Dick Riley, and Pam McAllister, eds., *The New Bedside, Bathub, and Armchair Companion to Agatha Christie*, 2nd ed., 1986, p. 203).

Much of the charm of the piece comes from Christie’s skill at developing character. Everyone in *The Mousetrap* has a secret, some of which are innocent, but Christie gives us the possibility of each person being the villain, without ever caricaturing any of them. The recognizable types: the “masculine” woman, the disapproving elder lady, the “suspicious” foreigner, are all present but all made human through their brief displays of weaknesses or good humor.

Credit must also be given to the setting, a country house which has been turned into a genteel hotel. This type of British detective story is known as a “cozy” to avid mystery readers; its comfortable and familiar furnishings, its sense of being shielded from the hustle and bustle of urban life, help the reader (in this case the viewer) focus more easily on plot developments. In the case of *The Mousetrap*, urban life is completely shut off: the hotel is cut off from all outside interference by a snowstorm which conveniently also downs the phone, but not the power lines. Although our minds tell us we should pay attention to the radio announcement of a local murder, it is much

more tempting to sink back in one of the comfortable armchairs without which no country house is complete, and contemplate our fellow travelers, even as more and more of them are revealed as possible murderers.

Christie makes the audience part of the world of the play by revealing nothing to them before the characters learn it. Every clue and every red herring are given equal time, as the final revelation is prepared. To reveal the conclusion of the play would be to ruin it for everyone; indeed, at each London performance, the audience is requested to keep the ending secret so as not to spoil the pleasure of those (surely by now!) very few who don't know "who done it."

One such was of royal blood. On November 26, 2002, Queen Elizabeth II, granddaughter of Queen Mary, attended another "command performance," the fiftieth anniversary of the show, and its 20,807th performance. Both had been running for fifty years, since this was also the monarch's Golden Jubilee year, and according to CNN, the Queen was a first-time viewer: "She doesn't know whodunit,' a spokeswoman said. 'So, yes, she's looking forward to seeing it'" (<http://cnn.entertainment.com>). Presumably Her Majesty has kept the secret of the ending to herself.

Synopsis

The news on the radio at Monkswell Manor relates a murder that has recently taken place. Mollie and Giles Ralston, the young, newly-married owners of the once-regal estate which they recently converted into a guest house, hardly notice the news. They are far too busy preparing for the arriving of their first guests—and concerned that the blizzard raging outside may hamper their arrival. Christopher Wren arrives first. He is an obviously neurotic young man who speaks to the Ralstons with a familiarity that makes them rather uncomfortable.

The next to arrive is Mrs. Boyle, a generally unpleasant person who is dissatisfied with just about everything and everyone.

Next comes Major Metcalf, a middle-aged man who is very military in manner and bearing.

Miss Casewell, a young woman who is just a bit masculine, is the next to arrive. She relates more details about the murder that recently took place.

Then an unexpected guest, Mr. Paravicini, arrives announcing that his car has overturned in a snowdrift. He is just happy to have found someplace to get in out of the weather.

The next day finds Mrs. Boyle generally getting on everyone's nerves. Mollie announces that a phone call from the police has informed her that an officer is being sent to the manor, in spite of the weather. She was given no indication as to why the officer is coming. Several of the guests are obviously unnerved by the announcement. It becomes apparent that the Ralstons really don't know much about their guests. Gradually, everyone is becoming a bit suspicious of everyone else.

Soon the police detective, Sergeant Trotter, arrives on skis. He relates that the murdered woman was once a resident of a nearby house. A few years back, the courts sent several children there for care and protection. The children had been terribly abused at the house, and one of them had died before the courts had the other children removed. The murdered woman was the one who had abused those children. A note had been left on the body claiming there were "three blind mice" who would be murdered, and the name Monkswell Manor was also on the note. Sergeant Trotter believes that someone at the manor had a connection of some sort to the murder victim. The murderer, he says, may well be among them even now. Each of the guests, as well as the Ralstons, denies having any knowledge of the situation whatsoever.

Mrs. Boyle, however, recalls privately with Major Metcalf that she was once a magistrate on the bench. In fact, she was the one who had sent those children to the place where they were so miserably abused. Suspicion at Monkswell Manor is growing rapidly, and the telephone no longer works.

Mollie hears a scuffle and a scream coming from the library and enters to find Mrs. Boyle has been strangled.

Sergeant Trotter assembles everyone for questioning. Each accounts for his or her whereabouts, but none satisfactorily. Soon, everyone becomes suspicious of everyone else. Giles accuses Christopher Wren of being the most likely to be the killer since he is about the same age the oldest of the remaining children would be now. Mollie points out that the killer may be the father of the abused children and therefore wouldn't necessarily be a young person at all. Trotter casts suspicion on Giles Ralston, producing a London newspaper from the pocket of Giles's overcoat. Trotter is also suspicious of Miss Casewell, who, in turn, sees something strange in his behavior. Everyone realizes a murderer is among them—and two

more victims, the other bind mice, are in danger.

So, who is the next victim? Will the murderer be unmasked in time to stop more deaths? *The Mousetrap* has kept audiences guessing about these answers and many more for over five decades in this classic whodunit by the master of British murder mysteries.

Characters

Mollie Ralston: the wife of Giles Ralston, Mollie is the young owner of Monkswell Manor, a Victorian era estate that has recently been converted into a guest house.

Giles Ralston: Mollie's husband of one year, Giles is the co-host of Monkswell Manor.

Christopher Wren: A flighty, obviously neurotic young man, Christopher Wren is a guest at Monkswell Manor.

Mrs. Boyle: Stern and generally unpleasant, Mrs. Boyle is a guest at Monkswell Manor.

Major Metcalf: A typical retired British military officer, Major Metcalf is a guest at Monkswell Manor.

Miss Casewell: A bit masculine in her demeanor, Miss Casewell, another guest at Monkswell Manor, remains mysteriously aloof from the other guests.

Mr. Paravicini: An unexpected guest at Monkswell Manor, Mr. Paravicini is there only because of his car became stuck in a snowbank during a terrible blizzard.

Detective Sergeant Trotter: A late arriving guest at Monkswell Manor, Detective Trotter is trying to establish a relationship between any of the guests and a murder already committed at another location.

About the Playwright: Agatha Christie

By Howard Waters

From *Insights*, 2007

The most popular novelist in history with over two billion of her books sold, Agatha Christie (Agatha Miller) was born in County Devon, England in 1890, and was still writing until the time of her death in 1976. She was educated largely at home and was encouraged by her mother to write, even from a young age. She studied singing and piano in Paris at the age of sixteen.

Her first detective novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, introduced the chocolate loving Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot. He, together with his logic and rational methods and his “little grey cells,” was to be a staple character for Christie in over forty books, the last of which, *Curtain*, appeared in 1975.

Christie produced another famous character in the person of the elderly spinster Miss Marple, who relied on her feminine sensitivity to solve crimes. Marple was featured in seventeen novels from *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) to *Sleeping Murder* (1977). Both characters have been readily adapted for movies and television. Marple likely provided the inspiration for the Jessica Fletcher character in the *Murder She Wrote* television series.

In fifty-six years Christie wrote sixty-six detective novels, including *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*. She was most noted for the innovative ways in which she revealed the guilty parties in her stories. It might have been the narrator, a group of people, a serial killer, but never, ever the butler.

Christie wrote several plays, including *The Mousetrap*, which has run continuously for fifty-two years in London, longer than Queen Elizabeth II has been on the throne. During that time, there have been at least 336 actors and actresses appearing in the play. Just imagine, 101 miles of shirts have been ironed, and 395 tons of ice cream have been sold, according to *The Mousetrap* website (“The Legend Continues,” <http://www.the-mousetrap.co.uk/>, 3 February 2007). The play first entered the record books in April, 1958, when it became the longest running show of any kind in the history of British theatre. For the past thirty years, the St. Martin’s Theatre has been the home of *The Mousetrap*.

The film *Agatha* was based on a real life adventure in 1926 when Christie disappeared, probably due to the break up of her marriage and the death of her beloved mother. During that time she lived in a Harrowgate hotel under the name of Mrs. Neele.

It was during WWII that she worked in the dispensary of University College Hospital in London. After the war she wrote more prolifically than ever, gaining success both on the stage and in the movies. *Witness for the Prosecution* was named the best foreign play of the 1954–55 season by the New York Drama Critics Circle.

In 1971, she received the rare honor of having been made a Dame of the British Empire.

Many of Christie’s quips and quotes have become memorable in their own right.

“I have enjoyed greatly the second blooming . . . suddenly you findóat the age of fifty, say—that a whole new life has opened before you.”

“Curious things, habits. People, themselves, never knew they had them.”

“I’ve always believed in writing without a collaborator, because where two people are writing the same book, each believes he gets all the worries and only half the royalties.”

“I like living. I have sometimes been wildly, despairingly, acutely miserable, racked with

sorrow, but through it all I still know quite certainly that just to be alive is a grand thing.”

“If one sticks too rigidly to one’s principles, one would hardly see anybody.”

“One is left with the horrible feeling now that war settles nothing; that to win a war is as disastrous as to lose one.”

Mathew Prichard, the host of the Agatha Christie website and her grandson, had this to say: “It is important to find ways of showing new audiences the continuing relevance of my grandmother’s timeless stories of moral corruption, murder, and deceit and the ease with which she can speak to modern society.”

From all indications, readers and playgoers will continue to be fascinated by all those very elements of which he spoke.

Activities

Status Game

Adapted from *IMPRO, Improvisation and the Theatre*, by Keith Johnstone

Objective: To allow students to explore status in relationships.

Materials: Slips of paper numbered one to four

Initial Format: Four students are each given a slip of paper with a number (one, two, three, or four) which they are to keep as their status number. They are not to tell anyone else their number. They are then given a situation in which the group must make a consensus decision, such as choosing a movie to see or video to rent, planning the menu for a party, or selecting one of the group to run for class office. In pursuing the objective, each member of the group is to maintain his or her own status number and to determine the status number of the others, without asking or divulging. In playing their status the numbers work as following:

1. Always in charge.
2. Participates in leadership, but defers to number one. May offer mediation.
3. Offers suggestions, but not leadership, and defers to numbers one and two.
4. May offer suggestions, but always defers to the rest of group.

After the scene is played, ask each player to identify what the status numbers of the others were before divulging his or her own. Ask audience members if they concur or differ in their perceptions of the status chain of command that they observed.

Variation/Progression: Four students are each told to secretly choose their own status number. Then they are given a situation in which the group must make a consensus decision, as suggested above. In pursuing the objective, each member of the group is to maintain his or her own status number and to determine the status number of the others, without asking or divulging. After the scene is played, ask the audience to identify what they perceived as the status chain of command. Then ask each player to identify how he or she perceived the status of their scene partners before divulging his or her own.

Assessment: The initial format tends to provide a clear status chain and, once status of each member has been established, a fairly smooth achievement of the group objective. The variation format may also provide a clear status chain if there is a one, two, three, and four in the group. However, interesting conflicts and impasses may arise if there is more than one number one or there may be a comic “spinning of wheels” if no one has chosen to take on the number one status.

The Life Box

Devised by Linda G. Wolford

Objective: In this lesson students will create life boxes based on the text of any play and present these boxes to the class. A life box is a container with everyday items that relate to a character. Choosing items to represent elements of a character will necessitate careful reading of the text. Using details from the text to explain their choices will require students to use critical thinking. Sharing their creations will expand all of the students’ understanding of the characters.

This lesson plan will take two class periods after the students will have read at least halfway through the play.

1. Explain the concept of a character life box. A life box is a container of carefully chosen items that represent a particular character in a play. The box must contain six to eight things the character might use daily or have as a keepsake. A line from the

- play must be cited to justify each item. The lines can be either spoken by the character or by another character in the play. No photos—items only.
2. Assign students to work in pairs. The students pick a character and gather items to put in their box. They find text to support each item choice and record a description of the item, an explanation of why it was chosen, and a corresponding phrase or sentence from the play. This list will be handed in.
 3. The students bring in the finished projects and present them to the class. They share their items and explanations by holding up and describing each item and reading or telling what lines of text support their choice.

Assessment: Did the students find six to eight items? Did the items represent the character appropriately? Could the students support their choices with text?

A discussion of which items clearly defined each character helps students differentiate and understand character motivation and development. If you choose to start this project when the students are only halfway through a play, you could extend the project by having them add more items to the box as they finish the play.

Examining *The Mousetrap*

By Kelli Allred

Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* has kept audiences guessing for five decades. Now in its fifty-fifth incredible year, this world record-breaking production continues to attract audiences to the St. Martin's Theatre from every corner of the globe. The Utah Shakespearean Festival is thrilled to present *The Mousetrap* during its 2007 season. For most audience members, this will be their first time to experience a theatrical piece by Agatha Christie.

Dame Agatha Christie

Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller Christie Mallowan (1890–1976) became one of the best-selling writers of all time. She enjoyed a pleasant childhood, which included home schooling by tutors. Throughout her formative years, she learned to play the piano, read voraciously, dance, sing, and speak German and French. With such a wealth of performance skills, it's a marvel Agatha Christie was not the one *on* the stage. However, her natural tendency was toward shyness, and eventually she found her education most useful as a writer.

Shortly after she turned eleven, her father died and her mother's health began to deteriorate. The family rented out its English manor and used the proceeds to travel to Cairo, Egypt, where her mother was able to recover in the warm, dry climate. Throughout her life, Agatha Christie shunned the spotlight. She kept from the public her struggles with depression and isolation.

After returning to England, Agatha met and married R.A.F. Lieutenant Archibald Christie in 1914. They had one child together, but later divorced. In 1930 she married archaeologist Max Mallowan, who would remain with her until her death in 1976 (http://flfl.essortment.com/agathachristie_rlxx.htm).

Agatha wrote her first and second novels in the early 1920s. From that time on, she would never want for money. Her vast body of written works was to provide her with a steady and ample income for the rest of her life. Her grandson, Mathew Prichard, inherited all royalties from *The Mousetrap*.

The Advent of the Murder Mystery

A new literary genre—*mystery fiction*—originated in England during the late 1700s but did not become widely accepted until the first great group of American writers emerged in the 1830s. Many of them wrote mysteries, as well as science fiction, adventure stories, sea stories, and realistic novels. The earliest mysteries—still much read today—were written by Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and Jules Verne.

By the 1860s, British authors had begun writing *sensational novels*, such as *The Woman in White* (Wilkie Collins). These were followed by fairly realistic crime stories about the police who hunted criminals. Sensational novels were the forerunners of the *detective fiction*, in which policemen often made clever deductions based on physical evidence at crime scenes. By the late 1800s a new writer of mystery stories emerged: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle created Sherlock Holmes, the great detective, and starred him in a series of short stories.

Doyle's puzzle-plot stories ushered in the *intuitionist writers* of the early twentieth century. The period from 1920 to 1945 is known as the Golden Age of mystery fiction, when the intuitionists wrote of detectives who solved mysteries through pure thinking. Their mystery plots tended to be extremely clever puzzles, with tricky, surprising solutions. Their books and plays remain entertaining reads, and they include the greatest mystery writer of all time—Dame Agatha Christie, sometimes called “The Queen of Crime” (<http://www.agathachristie.com>).

Plot devices

In a murder mystery, the playwright utilizes various *plot devices* to engage viewers and to keep them guessing. Most writers face the challenge of making the plot “seem real without appearing contrived.” (Henry, Laurie, *The Fiction Dictionary* [Ohio: Story Press], p.222). Audiences might enjoy using the following list to ask which plot devices Agatha Christie used in *The Mousetrap*:

- A character notices something odd, but can't identify it.
- Attention is drawn to something that should be there and isn't.
- The detective draws an inference from something overheard or unconnected.
- The murder proves to be a crime of opportunity which complicates the story.
- A significant item is hidden in plain sight.
- Identities are concealed.
- A character considered to be unreliable tells the truth, but no one listens.

Twist endings

The *twist ending* is another of the literary devices used by playwrights to keep audiences guessing until and through the last scene. The play will end when the audience's “desires for the characters are satisfied” (ibid). Which of the following twist endings apply to *The Mousetrap*?

- The murderer appears to be the victim.
- The murder has been committed by all of the suspects.
- The murderer is the narrator, or the policeman, or the child, or the detective.
- The conspirators in a murder appear to hate one another.
- The murders are unconnected.
- The murder takes place after the corpse is discovered.
- The murderer is exactly who it appears to be.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plot_devices_in_Agatha_Christie's_novels.)

The Play

The Mousetrap, a two-act play, could be considered a forerunner to today's television drama, “Crime Scene Investigation.” Christie borrows from Doyle the idea that a murder has taken place and that the murderer lingers amid a gathering of innocents. This perpetuates a game-like atmosphere tainted by mystery and suspicion.

In Act One the police investigator reveals to the guests that—“a notebook was picked up near the scene of the crime. In that notebook was written two addresses. . . . Below the two addresses was written ‘Three Blind Mice,’ and on the dead woman's body was a paper with ‘This is the First’ written on it, and below those words, a drawing of three little mice and a bar of music.” One can already see the confluence of plot devices used by the playwright.

In the final scene, the theme song—Three Blind Mice—signals the commencement of the play's climax: the detective assembles the surviving characters in the mansion's parlor with a plan to set a trap for the suspected murderer—or murderers. No one is above suspicion, and Trotter reminds the surviving guests, “This isn't a game. . . . One might almost believe that you're all guilty by the looks of you.” A major character continues the music by eerily whistling the tune, and warns the others of “the last little mouse in the trap.”

Audiences will find *The Mousetrap* to be delightfully engaging and entertaining. The play is rich with vivid characters and plot devices. While the setting and time period may seem a bit antiquated, both will serve to transport audiences to a bygone era well worth the price of admission.