Ten Little Indians Study Guide

Ten Little Indians by Agatha Christie

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Introduction

In 1939 mystery lovers eagerly awaited the publication of Agatha Christie's new novel, *Ten Little Indians.* They were not disappointed. The novel soon became a best-seller, gaining critical success along with its popularity. First published in England as *Ten Little Niggers,* the book was renamed *And Then There Were None,* from the closing line of the nursery rhyme, for publication in the United States. The original title was deemed too offensive for the American public. Later, the title would be changed to *Ten Little Indians.*

The novel focuses on a group of people invited by a mysterious Mr. Owen to enjoy a holiday on Indian Island. After the guests start turning up dead, the mystery deepens. Tension mounts as the remaining guests attempt to discover the murderer's identity before they are all killed. After Christie adapted the novel for the stage, it enjoyed successful runs in both England and America and was twice adapted for film. It has also been translated into several different languages. Critics praise the novel's intricate plotting and innovative technique, noting that in it, Christie adds new twists to the mystery genre. Most scholars, along with her devoted fans, consider *Ten Little Indians* to be one of the best mystery novels ever written.

Author Biography

Agatha Christie sets *Ten Little Indians* on an island that lies off the coast of Devon, England, where she grew up. She was born on September 15, 1890, in Torquay, a resort town on the Devon coast. Her parents, American Frederick Miller and Clarissa Boehmer Miller, born in Ireland, raised her and her two siblings in an upper-middle-class atmosphere. She grew up among a mix of landed gentry, retired military officers who had served in remote British colonies, and farmers. Robin Winks in *British Writers* notes that Christie "drew upon the reality, and even more the memories and myths, of her childhood for many of her settings and characters." This appears true, also, in her creation of the mix of characters in *Ten Little Indians.*

In 1914, she married Colonel Archibald Christie, a member of the Flying Corps, and soon after worked as a nurse during World War I. Fourteen years later the marriage ended in divorce. While traveling in the Middle East, Christie met and later married archaeologist Max Mallowan, whom she accompanied on many archaeological digs. On a dare from her sister, she wrote her first detective novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles,* published in 1920. That and the four other novels that followed were well received, but it took the publication of her next novel, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd,* in 1926 to gain her the reputation of one of the world's most popular writers. Known as the "Grand Dame" of mysteries, or as she preferred, the "Duchess of Death," Christie was also a most prolific writer. Her works include almost one hundred mystery novels and short-story collections, six romantic novels under the pen name Mary Westmacott, twenty-one plays, and a two-volume autobiography. Many of her works have been translated into more than one hundred languages.

Christie earned several awards and honors during her career, including the Mystery Writers of America Grand Master Award and the honor of D.B.E. (Dame Commander, Order of the British Empire), conferred upon her by Queen Elizabeth. When she died on January 12, 1976, at her home in Wallingford, Oxfordshire, London theatres dimmed their lights, offering a fitting tribute to this internationally acclaimed author.

Plot Summary

Part I

In *Ten Little Indians* Christie creates a masterpiece of mystery and murder. After ten strangers gather together on an isolated island off the coast of Devon, England, one by one, they each are discovered murdered. As those remaining frantically search for the murderer, their own guilty pasts return to haunt them.

Mr. Justice Wargrave, lately retired from the bench, travels by train to Devon where he will be taken by boat to Indian Island. Seven others are also on their way there, most invited by a Mr. or Mrs. Owen. Vera Claythorne, a young, attractive teacher was hired through a letter from Una Nancy Owen for a short stint as a secretary. Captain Philip Lombard is not sure why he has been assigned to the island, other than to hold himself "at the disposal of a client." Miss Emily Brent, an elderly woman, has been invited by letter by someone she met years ago at a guesthouse. General Macarthur, retired from service, was invited by "a man named Owen" to "chat about old times" and Dr. Armstrong was asked by letter to treat Mrs. Owen's medical condition. Dashing young Tony Marston also received a letter from the Owens inviting him to the island. None of them, however, are very clear about who the Owens are. While Mr. Blore travels by train to the island, he writes down the names of the seven people we have just met along with two servants, Mr. and Mrs. Rogers, and decides to pretend to be a Mr. Davis. As Fred Narracott, a local sailor, takes them all to Indian Island by boat, Vera notes "there was something sinister" about it and "shivered faintly."

After they arrive at the island, Mr. Rogers, the butler, tells them that Mr. Owen has been "unfortunately delayed" and will not appear until the next day. Mrs. Rogers, the cook, shows them to their rooms and they later reunite for dinner where they discover ten little china Indians on a table. They also note that the "Ten Little Indians" nursery rhyme is framed in each of their rooms. After dinner an "inhuman" voice penetrates the comfortable silence surrounding the group, charging that each of them has been responsible for a death and concluding with, "Prisoners at the bar, have you anything to say in your defense?"

When asked, Rogers tells the rest that he put on the record, *Swan Song,* as per instructions written in a letter from Mr. Owen. Justice Wargrave immediately takes charge and converts the room into "an impromptu court of law." Rogers explains that he never met Owen and that all orders were sent by letter. The guests decide to pool their information about how they were invited, but Lombard doesn't reveal why he is there. When pressed, Blore, an ex-policeman who now runs a detective agency, admits he was hired by Owen to watch his wife's jewels. Wargrave concludes that the person who invited them is unknown to them and "no doubt ... is a madman□probably a dangerous homicidal lunatic."

The guests then claim to be innocent of the charges leveled against them. Wargrave insists his conscience is perfectly clear about passing sentence on Edward Seton "a rightly convicted murderer." Armstrong, however, remembers hearing comments about how the judge was against Seton and so turned the jury around to a guilty verdict. Vera explains that she was hired as nursery governess to Cyril Hamilton who one day swam out too far and drowned before she could reach him. The General declares there to be no truth to the accusation that he murdered Arthur Richmond, one of his officers. He explains that he sent Richmond on a reconnaissance where he was killed "in the natural course of events in war time."

Lombard, on the other hand, admits the story about him is true. While in the bush, he left a group of natives behind to die as a "matter of self-preservation." He justifies his actions by arguing that "natives don't mind dying.... They don't feel about it as Europeans do." Marston decides that John and Lucy Combes "must have been a couple of kids I ran over near Cambridge" and insists the incident was "pure accident." Rogers explains that he and his wife called the doctor for Miss Brady, whom they cared for, but the doctor didn't come in time.

When pressed, he admits that after she died, they received an inheritance from her. Blore confesses that he got a promotion from providing evidence to convict James Landor, who later died in jail, but asserts that he "was only doing [his] duty." Dr. Armstrong tells the others that he can't remember Louisa Clees, but thinks about the night he got drunk and operated on her, acknowledging to himself, "I killed her." Emily insists, "I have nothing with which to reproach myself."

Part II

After they all agree to leave in the morning when Narracott comes in the boat with supplies, Marston gulps down his drink, chokes, and falls down dead. The others decide he must have committed suicide by putting something into his drink. After they go to bed, some think about the accusations against them. Wargrave insists Seton was guilty, but Macarthur admits that he deliberately sent Richmond to his death after discovering his affair with his wife. In the morning they discover Rogers's wife dead and only eight Indian figures left on the table. They note that the deaths of Marston and Mrs. Rogers fit the descriptions in the nursery rhyme. When the boat doesn't come, they realize they are trapped on the island. Emily later admits to Vera that when Beatrice Taylor, her servant, got pregnant, Emily fired her and she committed suicide. Emily, though, reiterates her own innocence. Lombard, Blore, and Armstrong search the island and the house for Mr. Owen but find nothing. When they conclude that there is no one else on the island except the eight of them, they become terrified and start to suspect each other.

In the afternoon the General is found dead, hit on the back of the head. That evening as a storm rages outside, they eye each other suspiciously. The next morning they find Rogers murdered while chopping wood and note that after each murder, an Indian figure disappears. Later, Blore admits to Lombard that Landor was innocent and that he

had been coerced into framing him. After breakfast they find Emily dead from an injection and that evening discover the judge shot through the head. The next day Lombard pressures Vera into admitting she engineered Cyril's death so that Hugo, her lover, could inherit a great deal of money and be free to marry her. Later when they discover Blore and Armstrong have also been murdered, they turn on each other and Vera shoots him. Exhausted Vera goes to her room and finds a rope fashioned into a noose hanging from a hook in the ceiling. She thinks, "that's what Hugo wanted," and hangs herself.

Part III

The narrative then shifts to a conversation between Sir Thomas Legge, Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard, and Inspector Maine about what happened on the island. Inspector Maine recounts how each died and tells the Commissioner that Isaac Morris, an "unsavory" man mixed up in drug dealing, made all the arrangements at the island and covered his employer's tracks. Morris was later found dead of an overdose of sleeping medication. Maine reviews the accusations from the record and can clear only Wargrave absolutely, noting Seton was "unmistakably guilty." However, Maine has not been able to uncover the murderer's identity.

The novel ends with a transcript of a manuscript found stuffed in a bottle by a fishing trawler and sent to Scotland Yard. The manuscript, a written confession by Wargrave, explains how his contradictory desires for justice and murder prompted him to plan something "stupendous ... something theatrical." Through conversations with people he met, he learned of the guilty past of each of the nine. After he discovered himself to be terminally ill, he bought Indian Island and lured the others there and one by one, murdered them. With Armstrong's help, he faked his death so the mystery would not be discovered. Morris, whom he poisoned before he came to the island, was his tenth victim. After arranging for the deaths of the others, Wargrave shot himself in the same manner in which he appeared to be shot earlier. His desire to show off his ingenious scheme prompted him to place his confession in the bottle.

Characters

Dr. Edward Armstrong

Dr. Armstrong is coming to Indian Island to examine and treat Mrs. Owen after receiving a letter from her husband. He takes pleasure in a reputation as "a good man at his job" and so has enjoyed a great deal of success. However, "he was very tired.... Success had its penalties." As he travels to Devon, he alludes to a past incident that occurred fifteen years ago that "had been a near thing." During that period, he notes that he had been "going to pieces," and the shock of the traumatic event prompted him to give up drinking. Later his thoughts about the incident reveal that his drunken performance in the operating room killed Louisa Clees. While on the island, Armstrong is a bundle of nerves. His gullibility leads him to help Wargrave carry out his plans, which include murdering Armstrong.

William Blore

William Blore pretends to be Mr. Davis, a "man of means from South Africa," sure that "he could enter into any society unchallenged." His true identity as a detective hired to watch Mrs. Owen's jewels is quickly and easily exposed soon after he arrives at Indian Island. The narrator describes him as "an earnest man" and notes that "a light touch was incomprehensible to him." Lombard observes his lack of imagination. After discovering that Blore committed perjury during the bank robbery trial that resulted in the conviction of an innocent man, Inspector Maine declares him to be "a bad hat."

Miss Emily Brent

Miss Emily Brent, a "hard and self-righteous" sixty-five-year-old woman, received a letter signed "UN" from someone claiming to have met her years ago at a guesthouse. Her repressed nature becomes immediately apparent as she sits "upright" in the train, because she "did not approve of lounging." She agrees with her father, "a Colonel of the old school," who thought "the present generation was shamelessly lax□in their carriage, and in every other way." She sits in the compartment, "enveloped in an aura of righteousness and unyielding principles." Since her income has been lately reduced, she looks forward to a free holiday at Indian Island. When she hears the voice on the record accuse her of murder, she becomes "encased in her own armour of virtue," and insists "I had nothing with which to reproach myself." When Vera asks her whether she has been affected by the murders that have been taking place on the island, Emily responds, "I was brought up to keep my head and never to make a fuss." Vera concludes that this confession proves that Emily must have been repressed in her childhood and so explains her inability to respond normally to what has happened on the island. Emily eventually admits to Vera that when Beatrice Taylor, her servant, got

pregnant, Emily fired her and she committed suicide. Emily, though, reiterates her own innocence.

Vera Claythorne

Vera Claythorne is an attractive young woman who comes to Indian Island expecting employment as a secretary after receiving a letter from Una Nancy Owen. Lombard describes her as "a cool customer ... one who could hold her own□in love or war," an ironic foreshadowing of her composure as she fatally shoots him. She shows an ambitious nature when she hopes that this temporary job will lead to a more desirable permanent position and so allow her to leave the "third-class school" where she has been teaching.

Throughout the novel, she appears troubled about an incident in her past, which we later learn is the drowning of Cyril Hamilton, a young boy in her care. Her first thoughts reveal her love for and sorrow over her dissolved relationship with Hugo Hamilton, the boy's uncle. She also appears to feel guilt over the boy's death. Soon though we learn of her cruel and selfish nature when she finally acknowledges her part in Cyril's death. She admits that she encouraged the "whiny spoilt little brat" to swim out too far into the water, knowing he would not be able to make it back to shore. Trying to justify her actions, she notes, "if it weren't for him, Hugo would be rich" and able to marry her.

Wargrave finds her to be an "interesting psychological experiment" after all the other guests have been murdered. He wondered, "would the consciousness of her own guilt, the state of nervous tension consequent on having just shot a man, be sufficient, together with the hypnotic suggestion of the surroundings, to cause her to take her own life." Vera proves Wargrave's hypothesis when she hangs herself. He deems her crime to be the most heinous, because he plots her demise only after she experiences the murders of all the others.

Mr. Davis

See William Blore

Sir Thomas Legge

Sir Thomas Legge, Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard tries to solve the mystery of what happened on Indian Island with Inspector Maine, who has been investigating the case. Legge becomes infuriated when he cannot.

Captain Philip Lombard

Captain Philip Lombard sits opposite Vera on the train to Indian Island. He is not sure why he has been assigned to the island, other than the fact that he is "at the disposal of

a client." Issac Morris, the agent who hired him, considers him to be "a good man in a tight place." Lombard admits that in his past actions, "legality had not always been a sine qua non.... There wasn't much he'd draw the line at." He had previously been mixed up in shady business abroad which gained him "a reputation for daring and for not being overscrupulous" about murder. He exhibits this latter quality when he admits to the others that he did cause the death of twenty-one East African men. In an attempt to justify his actions, he explains that while in the bush, he left the natives behind to die as a "matter of self-preservation." He insists, "natives don't mind dying.... They don't feel about it as Europeans do." Due to the callous nature of his crime, Wargrave allows him to suffer longer than the others before he is murdered.

General Gordon Macarthur

General Macarthur has received a letter from a man named Owen inviting him to Indian Island to "chat about old times." Macarthur's guilt about his past becomes evident in his paranoid notion that people have been avoiding him lately because of "that damned rumour" about an incident that occurred thirty years ago. He thinks that people suspect that he really did send Arthur Richmond to his death. As a result, he has slowly withdrawn from others and into himself. At the island he thinks about Richmond's affair with his wife and his subsequent decision to send him on a deadly reconnaissance. His guilt over his actions prompts his decision that he's "come to the end of things" and that he doesn't want to leave the island. At one point, the other guests find a dazed Macarthur looking out to sea exclaiming, "there is so little time.... I really must insist that no one disturbs me." He later explains to Vera, "none of us are going to leave the island" and expresses his relief that he won't have to "carry the burden any longer."

Inspector Maine

Inspector Maine reports to Sir Thomas Legge, Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard. He has investigated the murders at Indian Island and has discovered background information on some of the guests. However, he has not been able to solve the case.

Anthony Marston

Anthony Marston has been invited through letter by a friend to visit the Owens on Indian Island. Marston is handsome, young, and "a creature of sensation□and of action." His reckless actions, specifically his speeding, cause the death of two young people, John and Lucy Combes. His "complete callousness and his inability to feel any responsibility for the lives he had taken," prompt Wargrave to dispose of him first. Wargrave knows that Marston's amoral nature would prevent him from experiencing any guilt over his past and thus from feeling an increasing sense of unease as the murder plot unfolds. Wargrave murders Marston because his recklessness proves him to be "a danger to the community."

Isaac Morris

Isaac Morris, an "unsavory" man mixed up in drug deals, made all the arrangements at the island. He put the Indian Island house sale through a third party so the buyer would not be discovered and then carefully covered the buyer's tracks. Wargrave kills him with an overdose of drugs before he leaves for the island.

Fred Narracott

Fred Narracott, a local sailor, takes the others by boat to the island. He is "a man of the sea, [with] a weather-beaten face and dark eyes with a slightly evasive expression." Like the other residents of Sticklehaven, he feels uneasy about what is happening on the island, noting "the whole thing was queer□very queer."

Mrs. Ethel Rogers

Mrs. Rogers, wife of the butler Mr. Rogers, serves as cook and maid for the guests at Indian Island. The guests note that she is "a white bloodless ghost of a woman" and that her "flat-monotonous voice" and "queer light shifty eyes" make her look like a woman "who walked in mortal fear." Wargrave decides to murder her early on, since he feels her husband coerced her into neglecting the health of her previous employer, Jennifer Brady.

Mr. Thomas Rogers

Mr. Rogers was hired as a butler to serve the guests at Indian Island. Never having met his employer, he obeys all orders sent to him by letter, including the playing of the record that accuses all the guests, including himself and his wife, of murder. Even after he discovers his wife murdered, he remains "the good servant," carrying on "with an impassive countenance." We later discover that he and his wife had intentionally waited too long to call the doctor when their elderly employer, Jennifer Brady, fell ill. After her death, the couple gained a substantial inheritance.

Mr. Justice Lawrence Wargrave

Mr. Justice Wargrave, retired from the law, is a distinguished looking gentleman on his way to Indian Island after being invited there by letter from his friend, Constance Culmington. Upon closer inspection, however, the guests notice that his "pale shrewd little eyes" and "hunched up attitude" suggest a "decidedly reptilian" demeanor. He has been reputed to have "great powers with a jury," but some call him "a hanging judge." When he takes out his false teeth, his "shrunken lips" compress and turn his mouth "cruel" and "predatory." At the end of the novel, Wargrave is found innocent of the

charge that he wrongfully helped convict Edward Seton but guilty of murdering all the guests at Indian Island.

In the document discovered in a bottle and sent to Scotland Yard, he confesses to his crimes and reveals relevant character details: "From my earliest youth I realized that my nature was a mass of contradictions" including an "incurably romantic imagination," a "sadistic delight in seeing or causing death" and a "strong sense of justice." He explains that these contradictions prompted him to go into law, since "the legal profession satisfied nearly all [his] instincts." Wargrave further admits, "to see a wretched criminal squirming in the dock, suffering the tortures of the damned, as his doom came slowly and slowly nearer, was to me, an exquisite pleasure." And so, he lured ten guilty people to Indian Island and murdered them theatrically and slowly, one at a time.

Themes

Appearances and Reality

The focus on appearance versus reality appears throughout the novel in the form of the underlying theme of deception. All the characters deceive others and sometimes themselves about their true natures. All profess to be good, but in reality are filled with evil in the form of moral corruption caused by intolerance, jealousy, greed, and desire. The action begins under a cloud of deception when Judge Wargrave, under the guise of the mysterious Mr. Owen, lures the group to Indian Island. The deception continues after the voice on the recording accuses each of a crime and they all deny any responsibility. Wargrave's confession reveals the final deception when he exposes his faked murder and his own true nature.

Fear of Death

As soon as bodies start appearing on the island, the remaining guests are enveloped by the fear of death. Their instincts for survival cause them to suspect each other. As a result their primitive instincts emerge: Wargrave's mouth turns "cruel and predatory," Lombard's smile resembles that of a wolf, and Blore appears "coarser and clumsier" with "a look of mingled ferocity and stupidity about him."

Guilt and Innocence

The novel ties the question of the characters' guilt or innocence to the theme of appearance versus reality. At the beginning of their stay on the island, all the guests claim to be innocent. Some insist their crimes were committed by accident. Tony Marston explains that the accident that caused the deaths of John and Lucy Combes was "beastly bad luck." Louisa Clees' death, caused by Dr. Armstrong's drunken state in the operating room, was also accidental. The two, however, respond differently to these accidents. Marston will claim no responsibility. His amoral nature compounds his guilt. Armstrong, on the other hand, recognizes his responsibility for his patient's death, but cannot admit it publicly. Lombard's claims of innocence stem from the same kind of amoral nature coupled with his racism. He dismisses his "crime" arguing that his own survival should take precedence over that of the natives. Christie complicates the question of guilt and innocence when the focus turns to Wargrave. Is the judge guilty of the murder of ten people or is he fulfilling his duty as judge? His description of his motives in his confession point to his guilt.

Justice and Injustice

Justice is served when the guilty are punished. Injustice occurs when the innocent are punished. Wargrave justifies his crimes by claiming that the ten deserved to die

because they victimized innocent people. He prompts us then to consider his victims not truly victims. Acting as judge, jury, and executioner, his punishment, he insists, was just.

Sanity and Insanity

Four people on the island experience varying degrees of insanity, due for the most part to feelings of overwhelming guilt. Dr. Armstrong's guilt clouds his judgment when Wargrave asks him for help in staging his own murder. Afterwards, his nervous state propels him close to the point of collapse. Macarthur's guilt preys on him before he arrives on the island, taking the form of paranoia. He suspects people are whispering about his crime behind his back and so withdraws from society. While on the island, he appears to fall into a trance, muttering to the others that he wants to be left alone. Immediately before Wargrave kills him, he admits that he does not want to ever leave the island. He appears to welcome his impending death as he looks forward to not having to "carry the burden any longer." Throughout the novel, the judge appears to feel the burden of guilt less than anyone does. However, in his confession he reveals himself to be the very "homicidal maniac" he told the others to be on guard against.

Style

Structure

The novel is structured as a mystery, although Christie adds her own innovations. Stories of good versus evil have been told since the beginning of time, but the mystery story emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century with the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle. The mystery structure includes motives and alibis, detection, clues, and red herrings (diversions from the real culprit). Characters become suspects before the true one is unmasked. The hero discovers the villain only at the climax of the story, and then, in the denouement, explains how the crime was committed. Christie carries on several of the traditions of the mystery but adds some new twists. The characters in *Ten Little Indians* present motives for past crimes and alibis for the murders on the island. Judge War-grave, who at the end of the novel, identifies the murderer and puts all the pieces of the puzzle back together, engineers detection, clues, and a red herring. Christie's twist on the traditional mystery structure is that all of the characters are discovered to be villains; none are innocent. The final irony and delightful innovative turn is that the hidden villain in the novel, Judge Wargrave, also becomes the "hero," in the modern sense of the term.

Symbol

Christie uses the setting symbolically in the novel. The house becomes a symbol of the characters' fate. As the others search for "Mr. Owen," the narrator notes, "If this had been an old house, with creaking wood, and dark shadows, and heavily paneled walls, there might have been an eerie feeling. But this house was the essence of modernity. There were no dark corners□no possible sliding panels□it was flooded with electric light□everything was new and bright and shining. There was nothing hidden in this house, nothing concealed. It had no atmosphere about it. Somehow, that was the most frightening thing of all." As the narrator notes, nothing can be hidden in this house, especially the guilt of all the guests who inhabit it. The manner of death Wargrave chooses for himself is also symbolic, and he uses it as a clue to the real identity of the murderer on the island. He arranges to shoot himself in his forehead, the first time as a trick and the second time for real. In his confession, he notes that the mark in his head is symbolic of the "brand of Cain."

Foreshadowing

This technique occurs when an old man sitting across from Blore on the train warns, "there's a squall ahead ... Watch and pray.... The day of judgment is at hand." A squall will hit the island, literally and figuratively, and judgment will be pronounced and acted upon.

Historical Context

The world experienced a decade of aggression in the 1930s that would culminate in World War II. This second world war resulted from the rise of totalitarian regimes in Germany, Italy, and Japan. These militaristic regimes gained control as a result of the great depression experienced by most of the world in the early 1930s and from the conditions created by the peace settlements following World War I. The dictatorships established in each country encouraged expansion into neighboring countries. In Germany Hitler strengthened the army during the 1930s. In 1936 Benito Mussolini's Italian troops took Ethiopia. From 1936 to 1939 Spain was engaged in civil war involving Francisco Franco's fascist army, aided by Germany and Italy. In March 1938 Germany annexed Austria and in March 1939 occupied Czechoslovakia. Italy took Albania in April 1939. One week after Nazi Germany and the U.S.S.R. signed a Treaty of Nonaggression, on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. On September 3, 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany after a U-boat sank the British ship *Athenia* off the coast of Ireland. Another British ship, *Courageous,* was sunk on September 19. All the members of the British Commonwealth, except Ireland, soon joined Britain and France in their declaration of war.

Ten Little Indians was published in 1939, the year World War II began. While the novel is set in an indeterminate time period, Christie's focus on the darker side of human nature coincides with the displays of aggression evident in the 1930s. Her use of English characters and setting does not seem to contain much cultural significance. The novel does not portray genteel English characters who pride themselves on their sportsmanlike behavior.

Critical Overview

Ten Little Indians has been a popular and critical success since its publication in 1939. This best-selling novel appeared during what critics determine to be Christie's most productive period, from 1926 to the early 1950s. Many consider *Ten Little Indians* to be her best work.

Scholars note that Christie owes a debt to earlier crime writers such as Anna Katharine Green and Arthur Conan Doyle, yet most agree that she has had a tremendous influence on the crime novel genre. In *British Writers* Robin Winks observes her link to past works and her influence on future writers when he declares the novel to be "markedly tense, as close to a gothic thriller and modern suspense novel as the author would come." He insists that "Christie was original because of the way in which she developed plot, unraveled motive, and put utterly fresh twists on timeworn devices." He applauds her "quite remarkable ability to build motive, to misdirect the reader and to weave complex plots that turned and turned again."

Commenting on her style, Winks suggests that Christie was "at her best a writer of clear and engaging prose, a gentle (and at times sly) social critic, and a master of that element so essential to storytelling□plot." In his article on *Ten Little Indians* and *Murder on the Orient Express* for the *Spectator,* Anthony Lejeune writes that these works are "famous because each of them turns on a piece of misdirection and a solution which, in their day, were startlingly innovatory." Ralph Partridge's review in *New Statesman* asserts, "Apart from one little dubious proceeding there is no cheating; the reader is just bamboozled in a straightforward way from first to last. To show her utter superiority over our deductive faculty, from time to time Mrs. Christie even allows us to know what every character present is thinking and still we can't guess!" Julian Symons praises her construction of puzzles in the novel and in her other works in his *Mortal Consequences: A History□From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel:* "Agatha Christie's claim to supremacy among the classical detective story writers of her time rests on her originality in constructing puzzles. This was her supreme skill.... If her work survives it will be because she was the supreme mistress of a magical skill that is a permanent, although often secret, concern of humanity: the construction and the solution of puzzles."

Some, however, have found fault with Christie' s style. A few scholars criticize the genre itself, finding mysteries in general to pander to popular, uneducated tastes. Others discover limitations in what they consider to be the formulaic style of Christie's writing. They complain that her characters are stereotypical, and that the plots are too predictable and lack depth. Some note examples of racism, classicism, and sexism in her work. Marty S. Knepper, in "Agatha Christie□Feminist," argues that her novels, including *Ten Little Indians,* "present women in totally stereotypical ways: as empty-headed ingenues, for example, or as gossipy old ladies."

Despite the reservations of some critics, Agatha Christie remains today one of the world's most popular and highly acclaimed authors, a position noted by Max Lowenthal in his summary of her work in the *New York Times,* written after her death in 1976. He

writes, "Dame Agatha's forte was supremely adroit plotting and sharp, believable characterization.... Her style and rhetoric were not remarkable; her writing was almost invariably sound and workmanlike, without pretense of flourish. Her characters were likely to be of the middle-middle class or upper-middle class, and there were certain archetypes, such as the crass American or the stuffy retired army officer now in his anecdotage. However familiar all this might be, the reader would turn the pages mesmerized as unexpected twist piled on unexpected twist until, in the end, he was taken by surprise. There was simply no outguessing ... Agatha Christie."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Perkins, an Associate Professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland, has published articles on several twentieth-century authors. In this essay she examines how Christie's characterizations in Ten Little Indians *provide a harsh vision of human nature.*

In *British Writers* Robin Winks notes that Agatha Christie began writing during a time when detective fiction was a popular form of escapism. He argues that during the twenties, mysteries encouraged readers "to believe that even though their prewar, orderly world had been demolished, there was an ultimate order in human events if only one were astute enough to detect it." Yet during this time period, authors were also influenced by the writings of Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin. As a result, their characters often revealed deep-seated psychological conflicts that resulted from environmental and biological influences. Christie's early novels reflect her audience's desire to solve puzzles and regain a sense of order. In her later work, however, written before and after World War II, her characterizations often suggest the harsher postwar reality of the twentieth century. These characters are more complex and sinister, which make her endings more unsettling. *Ten Little Indians,* one of her most famous and highly acclaimed works, illustrates this shift in its focus to the darker side of human nature.

Winks explains that the typical mystery story in the 1920s, "looked in both directions: by focusing on a crime, almost always a murder, it spoke to the loosened morality of a period that followed years of legalized killing. Yet, by holding to a series of rules, or by acknowledging the existence of rules precisely by mocking them, mystery fiction also appealed to those who longed for the orderly and rational life that, they believed, had preceded World War I." This sense of order, he argues, would be restored by the detective, who would, by the close of the story, "demonstrate a rational connection between all that had happened." David Grossvogel, in his critical analysis of Christie's works in *Death Deferred: The Long Life, Splendid Afterlife, and Mysterious Workings of Agatha Christie,* finds that Christie's early work fits this model: "Agatha Christie's first readers read her in order to purchase at the cost of a minor and passing disturbance the comfort of knowing that the disturbance was contained, and that at the end of the story the world they imagined would be continued in its innocence and familiarity."

Initially all the characters in Christie's early novels were suspects until detectives like Hercule Poirot, in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd,* and Miss Jane Marple, in *The Murder in the Vicarage,* identified the murderer and proved the rest to be decent people. As a result, the world of the novel could revert back to its Edwardian gentility. In *Ten Little Indians,* however, all the suspects are found to be guilty of crimes; no one is innocent. The ending therefore becomes ambiguous, for although all the pieces of the puzzle now fit together, readers are left with an unsettling vision of evil. Thus no true sense of order can be restored.

In *Partners in Crime* Christie writes, "very few of us are what we seem." She clarifies that sentiment in *They Do It with Mirrors* when she declares "the worst is so often true." Christie illustrates these bleak observations in *Ten Little Indians,* as she reveals that each character has been responsible for the death of another. As Stewart H. Benedict notes in "Agatha Christie and Murder Most Unsportsmanlike," "the entire tone of this book gives the strong impression that Miss Christie is not sorry to see them go." The novel leaves readers with the disturbing sense that they have seen human nature at its basest, that even the English, who pride themselves on their honorable character, can be the perpetrators of heinous crimes.

Benedict notes that in other works Christie "sees murderers as being either good or bad individuals; the good ones dispose of evil victims, and vice versa." He explains that this bad murderer "unvaryingly preys on people with inadequate defenses: he may be a doctor [trusted by his patient] or a handsome and clever lover who first uses, then kills, a woman who has been unlucky enough to fall in love with him; or an old and respected friend and confidant; or a man who selects a child, an old person, a physical or psychological cripple as a victim. This element, the victim's inadequate defenses against the criminal, puts the murderer beyond the pale□he is unsportsmanlike and consequently despicable."

In *Ten Little Indians,* Judge Wargrave notes that the nine guests he has surreptitiously lured to Indian Island exhibit varying degrees of guilt. All ten of them, however, including the judge, fit the description of a "bad murderer": the Rogerses' intentional neglect resulted in the death of the employer who depended upon them; Anthony Marston accidentally ran over a young couple but felt no remorse and so refused to change his reckless habits; Philip Lombard revealed his cruel and racist nature when he left a group of natives to starve to death; Dr. Armstrong's weakness for alcohol caused him to botch an operation and kill his patient; Emily Brent's callousness prompted her servant to kill herself; ex-policeman Blore and General Macarthur betrayed the public's trust in them when they committed their crimes; and Vera Claythorne allowed her charge to swim too far out into the water, knowing he would not be able to make it back to shore. All of the nine assembled on the island were guilty of going "beyond the pale" by betraying their victim's faith and trust.

The motives behind the crimes reveal the baser qualities of human nature. The Rogerses greed prompted them to neglect Jennifer Brady and so gain her inheritance. Vera Claythorne also hoped to profit financially from the death of her charge, Cyril Hamilton, but her crime also involved uncontrollable desire. She encouraged Cyril to swim out too far so she and her lover Hugo Hamilton could marry and enjoy the inheritance that would then be transferred from Cyril to them. Uncontrollable desire also figures in Dr. Armstrong's crime, as his need for alcohol caused him to operate in a drunken state on Louisa Clees. Fear and the resulting need for self-preservation prompted Blore to provide false evidence against James Landor, an innocent man who later died in jail. These qualities coupled with a deep-seated prejudice surfaced in Philip Lombard's decision to leave a group of natives to starve in the bush. According to Lombard, "natives don't mind dying.... They don't feel about it as Europeans do." General Macarthur's jealousy prompted his decision to send Arthur Richmond on a

deadly reconnaissance after discovering the younger man's affair with his wife. "Hard and self-righteous" Emily Brent, "encased in her own armour of virtue," was guilty of callousness when she fired her pregnant servant Beatrice Taylor, insisting herself above reproach since she claims Beatrice was not "a nice girl." Anthony Marston also displays "complete callousness" and his "inability to feel any responsibility" for the lives of John and Lucy Combes reveals his amoral nature. The judge determines accurately that Marston was "a danger to the community."

When the voice on the recording makes the accusations against them, most compound their guilt by lying. When asked about her involvement in Cyril's death, Vera insists, "I couldn't get there in time.... it wasn't my fault." Macarthur also denies responsibility for his crime: "no truth whatsoever in what he said about-er-young Arthur Richmond. Richmond was one of my officers. I sent him on a reconnaissance. He was killed. Natural course of events in war time." Rogers insists he and his wife did "everything possible" for Miss Brady: "We couldn't get the doctor to her. I went for him, sir, on foot. But he got there too late.... Devoted to her, we were. Any one will tell you the same. There was never a word said against us. Not a word." Blore declares, "I was only doing my duty" when he gave evidence against James Landor. When pressed about the death of Louisa Clees, Dr. Armstrong denies "having a patient of that name." Emily refuses to discuss her crime, insisting, "I have nothing with which to reproach myself." Lombard and Marston admit some involvement in the charges against them, but will not take any moral responsibility. Marston calls the event "beastly bad luck" and "pure accident," while Lombard justifies his actions by citing his need for self-preservation.

Some do express feelings of guilt privately. Before coming to the island, General Macarthur gradually became so paranoid that people suspected his crime and were talking about him that he slowly withdrew from others and into himself. At the island he decides he's "come to the end of things" and doesn't want to leave, relieved that he won't have to "carry the burden any longer." Dr. Armstrong admits to himself that he killed his patient; his guilt probably contributes to his severe case of nerves on the island. Thoughts of Cyril's drowning keep coming to Vera who tries to block them out. Wargrave's plan to dispose of her involves his assumptions about her feelings of guilt. Vera was an "interesting psychological experiment. Would the consciousness of her own guilt, the state of nervous tension consequent on having just shot a man, be sufficient, together with the hypnotic suggestion of the surroundings, to cause her to take her own life?" Wargrave proves his hypothesis when Vera hangs herself.

The guilty feelings of some of the group are quickly displaced, however, by the overwhelming desire to save themselves. When they all determine that the murderer must be one of them, they turn on each other. During this process their animalistic natures emerge. As they observe each other, they find they have "reverted to more bestial types": Blore "looked coarser and clumsier." There was "a look of mingled ferocity and stupidity about him." Lombard resembled a wolf, Vera a "dazed bird." The "thoughts that ran through their brains were abnormal, feverish, diseased."

When all the pieces to the puzzle are presented in Wargrave's confession, some sense of order could have been restored if readers were left with a positive portrait of the

judge's character. Christie could have achieved this by suggesting that the judge's crimes were a necessary form of retribution. However, she does not. Even though Wargrave is cleared of the charge that he condemned an innocent man, his behavior on the island, coupled with the details that emerge in his confession prove him to be almost as guilty as the others. War-grave admits that he took "sadistic delight in seeing or causing death." He notes that his "lust to kill" prompted his turn to law, since "the legal profession satisfied nearly all [his] instincts": "To see a wretched criminal squirming in the dock, suffering the tortures of the damned, as his doom came slowly and slowly nearer, was to me, an exquisite pleasure." On the island, Wargrave also reverts to an animalistic state, appearing like "a wary old tortoise." His mouth is described as "cruel" and "predatory." When he first assesses the situation on the island, he tells the others that the person responsible for the murders there must be a "dangerous homicidal lunatic"□ironically an apt description of himself.

When Wargrave explains the rationale behind his crimes, he notes that he determined to commit murder on "a grand scale." To that effect, he decided to plan the murders according to the nursery rhyme about the ten little Indian boys he had recited as a child. He admits, "it had fascinated me as a child of two□the inexorable diminishment□ the sense of inevitability." It is this sense of inexorable diminishment and inevitability that Christie leaves her readers. In *Ten Little Indians,* Christie exposes the diminished state of human nature and the inevitability of evil, thus presenting a disturbing vision of humanity.

Source: Wendy Perkins, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Knepper presents an overview of feminism in Christie's writing, including Ten Little Indians.

To a greater or lesser degree, detective fiction writers Dorothy L. Sayers, Josephine Tey, P. D. James, Amanda Cross, and Anna Katherine Green can be considered feminist writers. But what about the "Mistress of Mystery," Agatha Christie, whose books, written between the years 1920 and 1973, have sold over five hundred million copies and have been translated into dozens of languages? Is Christie a feminist or anti-feminist writer, or do her works fall somewhere in between, in some middle ground?

Obviously, evaluating an author as feminist or anti-feminist involves making subjective judgments that are influenced by a particular reader's conception of feminism and interpretation of a work. The character of Mrs. Boynton in Christie's *Appointment with Death,* for example, provides a real dilemma for the critic. On one hand, Mrs. Boynton is the epitome of the dominating, castrating mother stereotype. Christie makes us sympathize with her victimized family and view Mrs. Boynton as a personification of evil power, as a particularly malignant female Machiavelli (much like Big Nurse in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest).* Yet at the end of this novel, Christie, unlike Kesey in his novel, intimates that perhaps Mrs. Boynton is a tragic figure, herself a victim of a patriarchal society that provides few outlets for strong-minded, power-hungry women other than domestic tyranny. Is this characterization feminist or anti-feminist? Certainly there is support for either judgment. The final decision, a subjective one, will depend on whether the reader/critic chooses to see Mrs. Boynton as evil by nature or a pathetic victim of society.

Recognizing, then, that any assessment of a writer's sexual politics will be subjective, it is nevertheless possible to legitimately argue that a writer is more or less feminist or more or less anti-feminist, especially if the crucial terms are clearly defined and if the author's works are analyzed closely. In the case of Agatha Christie, an examination of her sixty-six detective novels reveals that although there are anti-feminist elements in her writings, Christie obviously respects women and has feminist sympathies.

Before considering Christie's novels, it is first necessary to answer two questions: What are the characteristics of a feminist writer? What are the characteristics of an anti-feminist writer? For the purposes of this discussion, a feminist writer will be defined as a writer, female or male, who shows, as a norm and not as freaks, women capable of intelligence, moral responsibility, competence, and independent action; who presents women as central characters, as the heroes, not just as "the other sex" (in other words, as the wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, lovers, and servants of men); who reveals the economic, social, political and psychological problems women face as part of a patriarchal society; who explores female consciousness and female perceptions of the world; who creates women who have psychological complexity and transcend the sexist stereotypes that are as old as Eve and as limited as the lives of most fictional spinster schoolmarms. In contrast, the anti-feminist writer is a man or woman who depicts

women as naturally inferior to men in areas such as intelligence, morality, assertiveness, and self-control; who dismisses strong women as ridiculous or evil anomalies of nature; who presents only males as heroes and only a male view of the world; who characterizes women exclusively in terms of their relationships to men and in narrowly stereotyped ways; who is concerned not so much with reality (women as victims of a sexist society) but with fantasy (men as "victims" of powerful, predatory women).

In what respect are Christie's detective novels anti-feminist? Critics Margot Peters and Agate Ne-saule Krouse□who, in an article entitled "Women and Crime: Sexism in Allingham, Sayers, and Christie," detect sexism in Christie's writings, while conceding that she is less anti-feminist than Allingham and Sayers□argue that Christie's female characters reflect her prejudice against women:

Her [Christie's] women are garrulous, talking inconsequentially and at length about irrelevancies. If young, they are often stupid, blonde, red-fingernailed gold diggers without a thought in their heads except men and money. Her servant girls are even more stupid, with slack mouths, "boiled gooseberry eyes," and a vocabulary limited to "yes'm" and "no'm" unless, of course, they're being garrulous. Dark-haired women are apt to be ruthless or clever, redheads naive and bouncy. Competent women, like Poirot's secretary Miss Lemon, are single, skinny, and sexless. A depressing cast of thousands.

Although, Peters and Krouse admit, Christie does portray women making it on their own in society through their brains, skills, and energies, too many of these women, they claim, are shown to be deadly and destructive. Peters and Krouse point out, furthermore, that in contrast to Hercule Poirot, who uses reason, knowledge, and method to conduct his investigations, Miss Marple relies on intuition and nosiness, and Ariadne Oliver usually fails to uncover the truth because of her untidy mind.

While the arguments of Peters and Krouse are inadequately supported in the article and much too overstated (Christie does *not* make all her independent, competent women characters either deadly and destructive or skinny and sexless), there is truth to their claims that Christie's books display sexism. Certainly some of her most popular detective novels *(The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, And Then There Were None, The A.B.C. Murders, Murder on the Orient Express)* present women in totally stereotypical ways: as empty-headed ingenues, for example, or as gossipy old ladies. Other less famous novels are just as anti-feminist. In *Evil Under the Sun,* for example, dress designer Rosamund Darnley gladly gives up her successful business enterprise when the man she loves proposes and insists she live in the country and devote herself full-time to marriage and stepmotherhood. Lynn Marchmont, in *There Is a Tide,* is only really attracted to her dull fiancé Rowley Cloade, after he tries to kill her. The main character in *Sad Cypress,* Elinor Carlisle, is a truly romantic heroine, sentimental and helpless: She is obsessed with love for her cousin Roddy, and when she is accused of murdering Roddy's new girlfriend, Elinor, a classic damsel in distress, she must be saved by Dr. Lord and Hercule Poirot. The women in *Endless Night*

are an unattractive lot, all representing negative stereotypes of women: Ellie, an overprotected rich girl, is perfect prey for the two unscrupulous murders she is too stupid to recognize as threats; Gerta is a criminal accomplice whose hypocrisy is only matched by her disloyalty and cold heart; Aunt Cora is only interested in money and what money can buy; Mrs. Rogers knows her son is a psychopath but is too weak and ineffectual to stop him from murdering his wife. The women in *Funerals Are Fatal* whom Christie seems to admire devote themselves, like good martyrs, to the men in their lives, either husbands or sons. A final example of Christie's anti-feminism is the arch-villain Charlotte Zerkowski in *Passenger to Frankfort.* This fat, fascist, fantastically rich and powerful woman is presented as an unnatural, ludicrous monster, an example of what can happen, according to some misogynist minds, when women wield power.

Christie, it is clear, often uses sexist stereotypes of women, sometimes shows women as inferior to and dependent on men, occasionally idealizes self-abnegating women and monsterizes strong women, and frequently implies that woman's true vocation is marriage and motherhood. Yet Christie should not be so easily dismissed as an anti-feminist writer. Perhaps because readers and critics usually concentrate on Christie's major works, they fail, like Peters and Krouse, to consider carefully some of Christie's lesser-known works, such as *The Secret Adversary, Murder After Hours, A Murder Is Announced, The Moving Finger,* and *Cat Among the Pigeons,* all of which illustrate that Christie is capable of presenting a wide range of female characters that go beyond anti-feminist stereotypes, creating some very admirable female heroes, and exploring many problems women face as a result of the sexism that pervades our society.

Only a writer with a healthy respect for women's abilities and a knowledge of real women could create the diversity of female characters Christie does. Her women characters display competence in many fields, are not all defined solely in relation to men, and often are direct contradictions to certain sexist "truisms" about the female sex.

Christie, for instance, shows women who are happy and competent (sometimes super-competent) in all these fields of endeavor, many of them non-traditional fields for women: archeology (Angela Warren, *Murder in Retrospect);* medicine (Sarah King, *Appointment with Death);* science (Madame Oliver, *The Big Four);* high finance (Letitia Blacklock, *A Murder Is Announced,* and Anna Schelle, *They Came to Baghdad);* sculpture (Henrietta Savernake, *Murder After Hours);* nursing (Amy Leatheran, *Murder in Mesopotamia);* politics (Lady Westholme, M.P., *Appointment with Death);* business management (Katherine Martin-dale, *The Clocks);* espionage (Mrs. Upjohn, *Cat Among the Pigeons);* acrobatics (Dulcie Duveen, *Murder on the Links);* school administration (Honoria Bulstrode, *Cat Among the Pigeons);* acting (Ginevra Boynton, *Appointment with Death);* and writing (Adriadne Oliver). Of these fourteen examples of competent women in Christie's novels (and there are many more), only three are criminals and none fits the Miss Lemon skinny and sexless category.

Christie also presents, in a positive way, a category of women who are generally ignored or ridiculed in literature because their lives are independent of men's lives: the single women. Besides unmarried older women such as Jane Marple, this category also includes lesbians (for example, Hinch and Murgatroyd in *A Murder Is Announced* and

Clotilde Bradbury-Scott in *Nemesis),* feminists (Cecilia Williams in *Murder in Retrospect,* for instance), children (Geraldine in *The Clocks,* Josephine in *Crooked House,* Joyce and Miranda in *Hallowe 'en,* Julia and Jeniffer in *Cat Among the Pigeons),* and handicapped women (such as Milli-cent Pebmarsh in *The Clocks).*

Christie's women, furthermore, often defy sexist "traditional wisdom" about the female sex. For instance, young women married to older men are supposed to be mercenary and adulterous, but Christie's Griselda Clement (in *The Murder at the Vicarage)* is totally devoted to her scholarly older husband, a poor vicar. Women, it is also commonly believed, prefer to use their brains to ensnare a mate or run a household rather than to contemplate philosophy and politics. Yet beautiful young Renisenb (in *Death Comes As the End)* is interested in learning about life and death and the politics of ancient Egypt. Another popular idea is that there is something unnatural and unhealthy in a close relationship between a mother and her grown son. From Freud in his writings on the Oedipus Complex to Roth in *Portnoy 's Complaint,* modern writers have harshly criticized the overprotective mother. In *Death on the Nile,* however, the characters of Mrs. Allerton and Tim Allerton contradict this idea: This mother and son respect and enjoy each other; they are not devouring, smothering mother and pathetically dependent son, though they have a very close relationship.

Besides writing about all types of female characters, many unstereotypical, Christie also creates some appealing female heroes with whom women readers can identify. This is significant because one of the great weaknesses of literature over the centuries is the paucity of heroic women characters: women who display qualities such as intelligence, imagination, bravery, independence, knowledge, vision, fortitude, determination; women who triumph; women who are not ridiculed, condemned as evil, or killed off by their authors. Examples of Christie's spunky female heroes are Victoria Jones (in *They Came to Baghdad),* Hilary Cravens (in *So Many Steps to Death),* "Bundle" Brent (in *The Seven Dials Mystery),* Lady Frances Derwent (in *The Boomerang Clue),* and Emily Trefusis *(inMur-der at Hazelmoor).* These women not only have heroic qualities, but they also achieve their goals, often when men have failed to do so....

As well as in the diversity of her women characters and in her delightful female heroes, Christie's feminist sympathies are revealed in the way she points out problems women face living in a patriarchy, problems that have not changed much over the centuries. One such problem is the economic oppression of women, as much a reality today as ever. In *A Murder Is Announced,* Dora Bunner, a single woman with no family to support her financially, describes the ignominy of her poverty:

"I've heard people say so often, 'I'd rather have flowers on the table, than a meal without them.' But how many meals have those people ever missed? They don't know what it is□nobody does who hasn't been through it□to be really hungry. Bread, you know, and ajar of meat paste, and a scrape of margarine. Day after day and how one longs for a good plate of meat and two vegetables. And the shabbiness. Darning one's clothes and hoping it won't show. And applying for jobs and always being told you're too old. And then perhaps getting a job and after all one isn't strong enough. One faints. And you're back again. It's the rent□always the rent□that's got to be paid□ otherwise you're out in

the street. And in these days it leaves so little over. One's old-age pension doesn't go far□indeed it doesn't." ...

Another problem women face in our society is the pressure to make themselves beautiful sex objects to allure men. Because beauty is often the measure of a woman's value (consider, for example, beauty pageants and magazine advertising), plain women often suffer tremendous feelings of self-hatred, jealousy, and rejection. Christie presents sympathetically in her novels the unbeautiful women, the changelings, women such as Mildred Strete in *Murder with Mirrors* and Josephine Leonides in *Crooked House.* She shows how plainness or physical anomalousness can lead women to feel hatred of the men who reject them and jealousy of more beautiful women (Henet in *Death Comes As the End),* how it can lead a woman longing for love to be taken in by a scoundrel with a smooth line (Gladys Martin inA *Pocket Full of Rye,* Kirsten Lindstrom in *Ordeal by Innocence),* or how it can make a woman feel life owes her some recompense for her physical shortcomings (Charlotte Blacklock inA *Murder Is Announced).* But Christie recognizes that the problem is not all one-sided. She also shows women who have dedicated themselves to achieving their own physical perfection caught in the beauty trap: Linda Marshall, a gorgeous woman in *Evil Under the Sun,* can attract any man's attention, but she has never been able to hold a man's interest because her positive qualities are only skin deep.

Christie's depiction of the various problems women face in their lives reveals her astuteness as a psychologist and an observer of human nature and her awareness of how society discriminates against women. While Christie is, by no means, a radical feminist (her novels are not a sustained critique of the institutions and ideas that bolster male dominance), she does display feminist attitudes in those of her novels which show problems women have living in a patriarchal society. In presenting various difficulties facing women, Christie sometimes shows women, such as Aimee Griffith and Emily Barton in *The Moving Finger,* stoically enduring injustices and making full lives for themselves, despite limiting circumstances. Other times Christie creates characters, like Charlotte Black-lock in *A Murder Is Announced,* Gerda Christow in *A Murder Is Announced,* Gerda Christow in *Murder After Hours,* and Marina Gregg in *The Mirror Crack 'd,* whose suffering, whose failure to cope with the problems and conflicts in their lives, makes them tragic figures, comparable, to some extent, to George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke and Maggie Tulliver or Thomas Hardy's Sue Brideshead.

When all her sixty-six detective novels and hundreds of women characters are considered, should Christie, finally, be characterized as a feminist or anti-feminist writer? As Peters and Krouse point out in their essay, Christie's writings do display sexism, mainly in the form of anti-feminist stereotyping. Disorganized, intuitive, imaginative Ariadne Oliver does not compare as a detective to orderly, competent, knowledgeable Hercule Poirot. Christie's more famous novels, especially the ones written in the 1930s, perpetrate a number of anti-feminist ideas about women. Yet it is distorting the case for Peters and Krouse to dismiss Christie's women characters as "a depressing cast of thousands." In many of her lesser-known novels (written mainly in the 1920s, 1940s, late 1950s, and early 1960s) Christie creates very positive women characters who are competent in many fields (including the detection of crime), who are

psychologically complex, who are heroic in stature, who are not inferior to nor dependent on men, women such as Tuppence Cowley, Lucy Eylesbarrow, and HonoriaBulstrode. In these novels Christie also explores, with compassion and sympathy and from a woman's point of view, various problems women in sexist society must cope with, problems ranging from poverty and job discrimination to social pressure to be attractive. The only fair conclusion seems to be that Christie, while not an avowed feminist, let her admiration for strong women, her sympathy for victimized women, and her recognition of society's discrimination against women emerge in the novels written during the decades of the twentieth century more receptive to feminist ideas (such as the 1920s and World War II years), while Christie, always concerned with selling her novels to mass audiences, relied more on traditional (sexist) stereotypes and ideas about women in the more conservative and anti-feminist decades (such as the 1930s).

Source: Marty S. Knepper, "Agatha Christie□Feminist," in *Armchair Detective,* Vol. 16, No. 4, Winter, 1983, pp. 398-406.

Adaptations

Christie adapted *Ten Little Indians* for the stage. It first played with the novel's original title, *Ten Little Niggers,* in London, opening October 17, 1943; it was produced under the title *Ten Little Indians* on Broadway and opened at the Broad-hurst Theatre on June 27, 1944.

The novel was made into three film versions, all titled *Ten Little Indians.* The first (1966) was directed by George Pollock and starred Hugh O'Brian and Shirley Eaton. The second (1974) was directed by Peter Collinson and starred Oliver Reed and Richard Attenborough. The third (1989) was directed by Alan Birkinshaw, starring Donald Pleasence and Brenda Vaccaro.

Topics for Further Study

Conduct a mock trial for Justice Wargrave to determine whether or not he should be convicted of first-degree murder. If he is convicted, determine his sentence.

Research English culture and determine whether or not the characters would behave any differently if they were American instead of British.

Read another mystery story and compare the two works, focusing on how the mystery in each is constructed.

Investigate psychologists' conclusions on the nature of the criminal mind and compare those findings to the characterization of Justice Wargrave.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: The economy collapses and causes a decade of poverty and hunger for millions of people.

Today: The economy is booming, but many fear the year 2000 could cause another period of economic crisis.

1930s: World War II begins in 1939. The United States plans to remain neutral in the war, until its ships are attacked at Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Today: The United States helps control the 1999 crisis in Kosovo through air strikes and is able to keep from deploying ground troops.

1930s: Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany in 1933. His dictatorship promises order for his country, but instead, results in fear, suffering, war, and death for many of its citizens, especially the Jewish population.

Today: Many survivors of Hitler's rule and their families who have reestablished their lives many in the United States are still trying to heal the pain stemming from Hitler's murderous tactics.

What Do I Read Next?

InMurder on the Orient Express (1934) Agatha Christie writes a variation on *Ten Little Indians,* gathering together a diverse set of characters and focusing on the murder of one of them. This time, though, Hercule Poirot, a Belgian detective, solves the crime.

Dorothy L. Sayers's *Strong Poison* (1930) centers on Lord Peter Wimsey's determination to find out who poisoned novelist Harriet Vane's fiancé.

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, a collection of short stories published in 1892, introduces Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's famous detective and his sidekick, Dr. Watson, in four classic mysteries.

In P. D. James's *Innocent Blood* (1980) Philippa Palfrey meets her biological mother and discovers the shocking mystery that surrounds her.

Further Study

Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime, edited by H. R. F.

Keating, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977.

This collection of essays provides biographical details as well as analyses of individual works, including *Ten Little Indians.*

Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie,* Dodd, Mead and Company, 1980.

Barnard examines Christie's "strategies of deception" in her works, including *Ten Little Indians.*

Nancy Y. Hoffman, "Mistresses of Malfeasance," in *Dimensions of Detective Fiction,* edited by Larry N. Landrum, Pat Browne, and Ray B. Browne, Popular Press, 1976, pp. 97-101.

This essay compares Christie's style to other women mystery writers.

G. C. Ramsey, *Agatha Christie: Mistress of Mystery,* 1967. An early analysis of Christie's work.

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Robin W. Winks, *British Writers, Supplement 2,* Scribner's, 1992, pp. 123-37.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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