The Mousetrap Study Guide

The Mousetrap by Agatha Christie

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Introduction

The Mousetrap was initially performed as a radio play in 1952 and was broadcast by the BBC with the title Three Blind Mice. The radio play had been commissioned in 1947 by Queen Mary, who was a Christie fan. The forty-five minute play was based on a short story on which Christie had been working; however, audience reaction was so positive that Christie went back to work on the script, elaborating on it, and with its first performance on October 6, 1952, The Mousetrap became a stage play. After a seven-week tour, the play opened in London at The Ambassadors Theatre on November 25, 1952. The play later transferred to St. Martin's Theatre in London on March 23, 1974 and has been running there ever since. The Mousetrap has broken several records for its continuous theatrical run since its opening, and it is estimated that more than four million people had seen the play by the time its twenty-five year anniversary was celebrated in 1977. After another twenty years of performances it is safe to speculate that an additional three to four million people have probably sat in the dark and tried to puzzle out the identity of the murderer. Performances of The Mousetrap continue to benefit from tourists who seek out the play both for its artistic merits and for the joy of being part of a theatrical tradition. Christie signed over the royalties from the play to her grandson at its opening in 1952. It is thought that he has become a multimillionaire from the royalties of this one property alone.

Author Biography

Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie also wrote as Agatha Christie Mallowan and under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott. Christie was born September 15,1890, in the seaside resort town of Torquay, Devon. She was educated at home by her mother until age sixteen and later studied piano and voice in Paris. Christie was an avid reader who knew by the time she was a teenager that she wanted to be a writer, but it took a dare from her sister to force Christie into writing her first novel. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was published in 1920 and sold only a few thousand copies, but the novel's publication and the seventy dollars that Christie earned was enough to encourage her writing. For the next half dozen years Christie wrote steadily, turning out novels and building a readership among enthusiastic mystery buffs. But it was the publication of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in 1926 that caught the attention of the reading public. Although Christie's plots had always been unfailingly clever and well-constructed, this newest novel created a murderer who was so far above suspicion and required such analytical skill to solve that Christie's popularity as a mystery writer and novelist was immediately assured.

Christie's novels have introduced such timeless and popular detectives as the Belgian Hercule Poirot; the genteel, elderly Miss Jane Marple, and the adventurous and lucky couple Tommy and Tuppence Beresford. Among the best known Hercule Poirot novels are *Murder on the Orient Express(l934~), The A.B.C. Murders (1936), and Death on the Nile (1937)*. The most popular Jane Marple mysteries include *What Mrs. McGillicuddy Saw! (1957), A Murder is Announced (1959),* and *The Mirror Crack'd (1962)*. The Beresfords, who solve crimes more through luck than deductive thought, are featured in such works as *The Secret Adversary* (1922), *Partners in Crime (1929)*, and *By the Pricking of My Thumbs (1968)*. Christie's novels are distinctive in that they present complex puzzles designed to misdirect the reader's attention from the most important clues. The solution is often the least expected or anticipated one, but, upon reflection, always makes perfect sense.

Christie was a prolific writer who turned out more than a hundred novels and short stories. She was also a playwright who published more than a dozen plays. Among the best known are *Ten Little Niggers* (produced in the United States as *Ten Little Indians*) and *Witness for the Prosecution*. Under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott, Christie published several romance novels, and in a departure from fiction, she published a book of poetry (*Poems*, 1973) and two autobiographical works, *Come, Tell Me How You Live* (1946) and *An Autobiography* (1977).

Christie was married twice. Her first marriage to Archibald Christie in 1914 ended in divorce in 1928. Her mother's death and problems in her marriage led to the most mysterious element in Christie's life when, in December 1926, Christie disappeared. After a nation-wide and very public search, Christie was located ten days later in a hotel at Harrogate. She was registered under the name of her husband's alleged mistress. Both Christie and her husband refused comment, but they were divorced soon after. Christie married Max Edgar Lucien Mallowan in 1930. She had one child, a girl, from

her first marriage. Christie was a recipient of several awards, including the New York Drama Critics Award in 1955 for *Witness for the Prosecution*. She was named a Commander of the British Empire in 1956 and Dame Commander, Order of the British Empire in 1971. Christie died in England on December 24,1977.

Plot Summary

Act One, scene i

The play opens with a radio account of a woman murdered in London. Mollie and Giles have just opened a small guest house and inn with property that Mollie has inherited from her aunt. The action begins on their first day of business and with their first guests. Christopher Wren is the first guest to arrive. He is enthusiastic about the house and praises both the style and decor. Mrs. Boyle is the second guest to arrive, and she arrives complaining that a taxi did not meet her at the train (although she never provided an arrival time). The third guest to arrive, Major Metcalf, is carrying her luggage when he enters the hall a few moments later. Mrs. Boyle's complaints about everything, including the lack of servants and experienced hosts, result in Giles offering to cancel her stay, but she declines and insists she will stay.

Miss Casewell arrives next with news that the snow is worse, and they are all likely to be snowed in for some days. She brings a newspaper account of the murder earlier that afternoon and joins with Wren and Giles in speculating about the murderer. There is a knock at the door and Mr. Paravicini arrives claiming to be stranded in the storm and seeking a room. Mr. Paravicini announces that the roads are so snowed in that that there will be no further arrivals or departures. His strange pronouncement that the inn is just "perfect" makes Mo! lie and Giles uneasy.

Act One, scene ii

This scene lakes place the next afternoon. Mrs. Boyle is still complaining, but Major Metcalf is happy with the excellent breakfast and lunch and tells her so. Mrs. Boyle is writing a letter and Major Metcalf is reading when Wren enters and quickly exits again to seek quiet in the library. Soon after, Miss Casewell enters and turns the radio up loudly enough to force Mrs. Boyle out of the room. Wren again enters claiming to have fled Mrs. Boyle in the library. Wren and Miss Casewell talk, and she lets slip that she had a poor, deprived childhood too awful to think about.

The phone rings, and the local police superintendent claims he is sending a policeman over and that Giles should follow his orders. At the mention of the policeman, Miss Casewell flees the room clearly upset. Once again, Mrs. Boyle enters to complain about the heat, leading Giles to rush off and put more coal in the furnace. Mrs. Boyle tells Mollie that Wren's story and name sound "fishy" and she thinks Mollie should check his references. Paravicini enters and warns Mollie that she should get references before she lets guests stay. He tells her that she can never tell who is a murderer, robber, madman, etc. At the same time he continues to leer suggestively at Mollie. Later, Mollie lets it slip about the police calling. At the news, Mrs. Boyle is disturbed; Metcalf is incredulous. Paravacini, who has been attending the fire, is startled enough to drop the poker.

Just then, Sgt. Trotter arrives on skis. Major Metcalf goes to use the phone and discovers that the line is dead. After his entrance, Trotter assembles everyone to tell them thai he has been sent to provide police protection and alleges that someone present may be connected to the murder of a woman in London. The murdered woman was a local woman, who with her husband, was imprisoned for a number of years in connection to a child-neglect case. The woman and her husband were found guilty of actions that resulted in the death of one of the three children who had been mistreated while in their foster care. Clues left at the scene of the murder indicated that there may be two more possible victims. Trotter claims that the murderer may be one of the other two children who survived, a young man and woman both in their twenties. Clues left at the scene have led Trotter to the guest house. Trotter asks everyone present if any of them have any connection to the child's death so many years ago, but all present deny it. At that. Trotter goes off to search the house, and the guests begin to speculate about the murder and the possible identity of the murderer. Metcalf says that he knows that Mrs. Boyle was the magistrate who sent the children to live with those foster parents.

Sgt. Trotter returns from inspecting the house and states that he is going to phone his supervisor with a full report. When told that the phone lines are dead, Trotter remarks that they may have been cut. He sends Giles upstairs to check the other extension but not until he has mentioned that the killer may be among the guests. With everyone out of the room, Trotter follows the telephone wire and crawls out the window searching for a cut end. Mrs. Boyle returns to the room and rushes over to close the open window. Just then, someone else enters the room. The lights are turned off and a scuffle and gurgles are heard, Mollie enters, turns on the light, and Mrs. Boyle's body is seen on the floor.

Act Two

Trotter is interrogating all present. Everyone claims to have been alone; no one saw anyone else as they responded to Mollie's cries for help. All their alibis sound slightly suspicious. Both Mollie and Giles are suspicious of one another because both hid the fact that they were in London the previous day. Trotter talks to Mollie alone and asks her about how well she knows her husband and about her knowledge of the abused children. Trotter tries to make Mollie think that Giles could be the surviving brother bent on revenge. But Molfie points out the murderer could even be the children's natural father since no one has any idea of where he is and that Trotter could be looking for a middle-aged man and not a young man. After Trotter leaves the room, Wren enters quite distraught and convinced that Trotter will try to pin it all on him. He discloses that Wren is not his real name and that he is not an architect. Mollie tells Wren that she has an unhappy, even horrible, memory in her past, too, but does not disclose what it is. Giles enters and finds Wren comforting Mollie. He misunderstands and accuses Mollie of having had a longstanding affair with Wren. Mr. Paravicini enters as the Ralston's are quarreling and announces that Trotter cannot find his skis. Everyone enters the room and all deny knowing anything about Trotter's skis. Trotter resumes interrogating everyone about their knowledge of the murder or the child's death years earlier.

Trotter speaks to everyone individually, and then tells them that he wants each one to reconstruct their actions during Mrs. Boyle's murder, with one exception. Trotter wants each person to do what another claimed to be doing. Mollie is to play "Three Blind Mice" on the piano as Mr. Paravicini did during the murder. After a few moments Trotter calls Mollie back into the room. At first, Trotter accuses Mollie of withholding personal knowledge of the child's murder. Trotter pulls a gun out of his pocket and reveals that he is Georgie, the dead child's older brother. It was he who murdered the woman in London and Mrs. Boyle. Trotter drops the revolver and reaches out to strangle Moilie. He is interrupted by MissCasewell, who tells him that she recognizes him as her brother Georgie. She leads him away telling him that she's going to take him somewhere where he will get the kind of help he needs. Metcalf enters the room with the other guests and tells them that Georgie has been sedated. He explains that he knew that Georgie was not a policeman because he, Metcalf, was the policeman. Metcalf also divulges that Paravicini is a crook. And Mollie and Giles reveal that each was in London to buy an anniversary gift for the other. The play concludes with Mollie crying out that her pie is burnt.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The scene opens with darkness and the sounds of someone whistling the tune of "Three Blind Mice." Shouts in the darkness indicate something is amiss, and then we hear police whistles. After that, the lights come up and we hear a radio announcer reporting on a recent murder. The scene is the great hall at Monkswell Manor, an older home with a large window in center stage, a fireplace on one side and several doors leading to other parts of the house.

Mollie Ralston is the first character to appear on stage. She turns off the radio, removes her coat, and turns on the heat and lights. Next enters her husband, Giles Ralston. They are newlyweds in their twenties.

Through their initial dialogue together, the audience/reader learns that they live near a country village, that the weather outside is snowing and freezing making driving dangerous. We also learn that they are expecting somebody, and then learn they are attempting to start a guest house.

As they go about getting the house ready for their first guests, Mollie turns the radio on again. While the announcer mentions that the murderer was wearing a dark overcoat, a light scarf, and a soft felt hat, Mollie picks up Giles' coat, scarf, and hat.

The doorbell rings and guests start arriving. First is Christopher Wren. He is young and odd. He is described as untidy and neurotic. We learn he is an architect. Giles immediately dislikes Christopher.

The next guest to arrive is Mrs. Boyle, described as "a large imposing woman in a very bad temper." She immediately begins complaining and rarely stops. She is followed close behind by Major Metcalf, a middle-aged military man.

Next is Miss Casewell, a young woman with a long dark coat, a light scarf, and no hat. Christopher is the only guest in the great hall when she enters. She brings a newspaper with her that has reports about the murder we heard about on the radio. Miss Casewell is taken to her room, leaving Christopher in the great hall by himself. He sings "Little Jack Horner." Moments before, he was reciting "The North Wind Doth Blow." He seems fixated on nursery rhymes, and has an air of someone who is "unhinged mentally." When Mollie and Giles return to the room, Christopher hides behind the curtain. Then he comes out to offer to help make dinner. As he and Mollie go off to the kitchen, Giles makes rude comments about Christopher behind his back.

The doorbell rings again, and an unexpected guest, Mr. Paravicini, arrives. He is strange, but by now, we are used to the guests being strange.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The purpose of this scene is to introduce us to the characters, set the scene, and literally "trap" all the guests at the house through the means of a severe snowstorm. Agatha Christie wastes no time in introducing murder; it is right there in the opening moments before any characters even appear onstage, in fact before the stage lights even come up.

The setting contributes to the air of mystery and tension. The mere detail that Monkswell Manor is a guest house lends to the doubt that is central and necessary in a murder mystery: because none of the characters know any of the others, they and the reader have opportunity to question, ponder, wonder, and make judgments. Why is this one traveling alone? What is that one trying to run away from? Why did that one show up without a reservation?

The setting plays right into the characters. As each guest arrives, the reader has a chance to meet them, learning about the quirks and oddities that make them both unique and suspicious. By the end of the scene, each one has revealed something that makes the reader question: is one of them the murderer? We are already guessing, even though little of the plot has yet been revealed, but we want to figure it out first, before the author tells us.

With all the characters developed, the scene of a group of people stranded in an out-of-the-way guest house in a blizzard, and the tension of a murder hanging over it all, it is time for Scene 2.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

It is now the next day, and the guests are settling in, having decided what they think of each other. Things get really interesting when Monkswell Manor receives a phone call from the Berkshire Police Department. They are sending over a sergeant, although the phone call ends before Mollie can find out why.

While they're waiting for the sergeant to arrive, Mollie and Mrs. Boyle have a conversation in which we find out that Mrs. Boyle was once a magistrate, or courtroom judge. Paravicini warns Mollie that she should not be too trusting—that people seem to be fine but turn out to be robbers, and even murderers. Mollie announces that the police are coming, which elicits strong reactions from both Major Metcalf and Mr. Paravicini.

Sergeant Trotter then appears on a pair of skis, which was the only way he could get to Monkswell Manor in the deep snow. Major Metcalf excuses himself to use the phone, only to find the phone is dead.

Sergeant Trotter gets to the point, explaining that the murdered woman (from the beginning of scene 1, on the radio report) had been a foster mother to three children, one of whom died of neglect while under her roof. At the scene of her murder, the police found a notebook with two addresses, one of them being Monkswell Manor. They believe the murderer is headed to the manor next.

Other clues found at the murder scene were the words "Three Blind Mice" and a note on the dead woman's body saying "This is the First."

Giles notes the connection with Three Blind Mice--there were three children and one died. Trotter explains that the other two, a girl and a boy, have not been located, but it is believed that one of them is the murderer taking revenge on the horrid foster mother who killed their brother. He begins asking if anyone here had any connection with the case and might be in danger. Giles says no, Mollie says no, but hesitatingly. No one else admits to any connection, but Trotter keeps pressing, reminding them that they are in danger. Mrs. Boyle vehemently denies any connection, which gets a glare from Major Metcalf, leaving the reader to wonder what he knows.

As Trotter goes out with Giles to check the rest of the house, Christopher plays on everyone's fears, whistling Three Blind Mice and joking around that he's going to strangle Mrs. Boyle. He acts quite unstable mentally, and then goes out.

In the ensuing conversation, Major Metcalf reveals what he knows: that Mrs. Boyle was actually the judge who sent the three children to the foster home where one of them died. How he knows this, we will find out later. Mollie remarks that she knew it was Mrs. Boyle, but we don't really know what she's talking about. Paravicini acts weirder every moment, casting suspicion on himself as a crazy type who might kill.

Mollie and Miss Casewell are left alone in the great hall, and have a cryptic conversation about their childhoods, whether they were happy, how one has to get over things. This leaves the reader wondering if maybe one of them is the murderer, the sister of the dead boy seeking revenge.

Trotter and the Ralstons talk for a while about the case, the dead phone line having been possibly cut, and what they know about the guests. Giles finds a glove that Mollie dropped earlier in scene 1. Inside the glove, he finds a bus ticket to London, casting more suspicion on Mollie.

Trotter doesn't notice this, and suggests that Giles go upstairs to see if the phone there is also dead. Trotter traces the phone line from the phone onstage to outside, and goes to check it out.

Mrs. Boyle enters, turns on the radio. A door opens and we hear "Three Blind Mice" being whistled. Mrs. Boyle says, "Oh, it's you," indicating that she knows the person opening the door. A hand clicks off the light, and we hear sounds of struggle, then Mrs. Boyle's body falling. Mollie comes in, switches on the light, and finds Mrs. Boyle dead. The curtain falls on Act I as Mollie screams.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Doubt and suspicion are the driving forces in the plot here. For example, what does Miss Casewell mean when she tells Christopher what she can't forget: "Ice on a bedroom jug, chilblains, raw and bleeding—one thin ragged blanket—a child shivering with cold and fear." Sounds like it could be a bad foster home. How would Mollie know Mrs. Boyle was a judge? What else does she know? Why does Metcalf react so strongly when he hears the police are coming if he isn't guilty of something? Paravicini also reacts strongly.

When the telephone is found to be dead, the household and the reader alike wonder how that happened. There is tension created by the as yet unspoken thought that the line could have been cut. Who would have done that and who had the opportunity? And why?

Trotter begins to tell the assembly about the murder of Mrs. Lyon, or rather Mrs. Stanning. Miss Casewell remarks that there were three children. This is a significant clue because it tells us that she already knows that detail of the case before Trotter has a chance to explain it. So she must be involved somehow.

Why does no one admit to any connection to the case of the three children? Someone must know something. Perhaps if they have a connection, they are worried they would be under suspicion of murdering Mrs. Stanning.

How does Metcalf know that Mrs. Boyle was the judge who sent the three children to the horrible foster home? Mollie also knows about this. Why don't they say something? Their silence makes us assume guilt.

Miss Casewell's comment about her unhappy childhood makes us wonder if she could be one of those three children. If so, is she the murderer? Or is Mollie lying and she's really the murderer?

When we reach the end of Act 1, Mrs. Boyle's "Oh, it's you" indicates that she recognizes the person who then murders her. So the murderer is indeed one of the people in the house already.

This leaves us ready for Act 2. We have the potential suspects all rounded up and trapped in Monkswell Manor. We know the murderer has to be one of them. We know there is possibly another victim in the house as well. Now we are ready for it all to be solved in Act 2.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

The act opens with Trotter questioning everyone as to their whereabouts when Mrs. Boyle was murdered. As each one responds in turn, Trotter has some sort of comment to shed doubt and suspicion on their alibi.

As the questioning continues, Giles throws suspicion on Wren, saying he is the right age, height, and so forth to fit the description they have of the murderer. Wren gets very agitated by this accusation, and Mollie sticks up for him. Trotter asks her what other ideas she has, and she names Metcalf and Paravicini because of their strong reactions upon hearing the police were coming to the manor.

Then Trotter throws it back on her, saying it could be the sister, not the brother, who is murdering people. Next, he says it could even be her husband, Giles. He reminds her that they don't know each other that well, have only been married a short time, and got married only three weeks after meeting. Then Trotter produces a London newspaper from the day of the first murder, and it was in Giles' pocket.

As Mollie is trying to digest this information, Trotter leaves and Wren enters. As Mollie and Wren talk, the reader notices how much sympathy there is between the two of them. She shows Wren the newspaper from Giles' pocket. Giles walks in to find the two sitting very close together, and he gets very protective of Mollie. He thinks Wren is the murderer and he's worried Mollie might be the next victim. Then Giles starts acting jealous, as if he thinks Mollie and Wren somehow knew each other before and have planned this meeting. Finally, Giles accuses Mollie of going to London. He found her glove with a London bus ticket inside. Then she brings up the newspaper. They become increasingly suspicious of each other, thinking the other has been to London having an affair or something.

Paravicini enters to announce that Trotter's skis are missing from the closet where they were stored. Mollie remembers that Christopher had joked about taking them and skiing away, since everyone was already suspicious of him. Trotter was going to go out on his skis to bring in reinforcements, which he can't do because his skis are gone. Once again, he questions everyone present, and everyone seems possibly guilty. Trotter emphasizes yet again that they are all in danger, and that one of them is the killer.

Trotter starts interrogating the guests again. First Paravicini, who provides no information and seems to enjoy making everyone uncomfortable by implying more mystery around himself than really exists. Next Miss Casewell. Trotter twirls his hair as he questions her, which seems to distract her very significantly. Trotter becomes odder as they talk; they both do. Finally, Miss Casewell breaks into tears and says she wishes she'd never come. What the reader doesn't know is that this conversation reveals

something to both Casewell and Trotter that greatly affects both of them, as we shall see later on.

Trotter assembles everyone again and announces that he wants to have all the guests recreate their whereabouts at the time of Mrs. Boyle's murder. The twist is that each guest, as well as Giles and Mollie, will recreate the actions of another person. After everyone leaves the great hall, except Trotter, he turns out all the lights, closes off all the curtains, and calls Mollie into the room. He confronts Mollie and reveals that she was a school teacher, and in fact was the teacher of the boy who died of neglect. He also reveals that he knows the boy tried to send her a letter begging for help.

Mollie admits it, but says she never received the letter because she came down with pneumonia and wasn't at school. It wasn't until weeks later that she read the letter, after the boy was already dead.

Trotter pulls out a revolver, and lets Mollie know who he really is. Not a policeman at all. He's the older brother of the dead boy. His real name is Georgie. As he approaches Mollie intending to strangle her, Miss Casewell and Major Metcalf enter the room.

It turns out Miss Casewell is his sister, the sister of the dead boy. She leads him away like a little child, averting another murder. Giles rushes in and holds Mollie. Major Metcalf reveals that he suspected Trotter all along. Why, asks Mollie. Then Metcalf says he is a policeman and was sent out to the manor to protect them. Miss Casewell didn't recognize Trotter as her brother until he was twirling his hair during their last conversation. It turns out that both Mollie and Giles had gone to London secretly to get each other wedding anniversary gifts. Paravicini deals in stolen goods. Everyone has an explanation at last. The mystery is solved.

Act 2 Analysis

As in Act 1, Act 2 continues to build suspicion of everyone. Christie reveals information little by little, allowing the reader to try to solve the mystery before she does. Trotter continues interrogating the guests, and when he gets to Miss Casewell, something clicks. She recognizes him by the subconscious gesture he has of twirling his hair—a detail we don't know about, but she does.

Immediately after their conversation, Trotter says he thinks he has the answer. What answer does he have? He knows the person he is looking for is Mollie. Why? Because he knows he's looking for a young woman who would have been his brother's teacher. When he first arrives, it could be one of the two young women. But once he realizes Miss Casewell is his sister, he knows he's going after Mollie.

That's why he sets up this elaborate and ridiculous reconstruction of events: he merely wants to get Mollie alone so he can murder her. He knows if he tells the others to stay where they are until he calls them that they will.

Things go as he planned, except he doesn't realize that Miss Casewell recognized him, too, and that she is telling the real policeman, Major Metcalf. Christie has used the placement of her characters in the manor to heighten suspicion and also to make her plot work out. No one else besides Miss Casewell could possibly know that Trotter is the long lost brother, the murderer.

There's just one hitch, though. Major Metcalf has known all along that Trotter was not a real policeman. Why didn't he call Trotter out on it right away? He tried to call for reinforcements, but the phone line had already been cut. Still, if he had gotten the cooperation of the other guests, they could certainly all have detained Trotter before Mrs. Boyle was murdered. Christie ignores this flaw, hoping that the reader will just accept that Metcalf had his reasons—she needs that to happen so her plot can pan out.

Once the critical elements have been revealed, the play ends. The murderer is caught and everyone's quirks and strange behavior have been explained, including the secretive trips to London by Mollie and Giles.

Characters

Mrs. Boyle

Mrs. Boyle is a large imposing woman in a bad temper; she complains about everything, She is disapproving of every effort that Mollie and Giles produce to make her comfortable. She surveys everything with displeasure and looks at her surroundings disapprovingly, Mrs. Boyle was a rnagistrate at some point. The audience learns just before she is murdered that Mrs. Boyle was the magistrate who sent three children to live with foster parents. The children were all abused and the youngest killed, but she disavows any responsibility for the tragedy.

Miss Casewell

Miss Casewell is described as a young woman who is masculine in appearance and with a masculine voice. She claims not to have lived in England for some years, since she was twelve to thirteen years of age, but she is mysterious about where she does live. Mollie thinks Miss Casewell peculiar, and Giles doubts she is a woman. Wren and Miss Casewell talk, and she lets slip that she had a poor, deprived childhood too awful to think about. The audience learns in the final scene that Miss Casewell was one of the children who was abused so many years earlier. It was her younger brother who was killed. She also discloses at the play's conclusion that she returned to England to find her older brother, Georgie.

Georgie

See Detective Sergeant Trotter

Major Metcalf

Major Metcalf is middle-aged, square-shouldered, military in manner and bearing. He is friendly and very polite, and serves as a good counter to Mrs. Boyle during the play's first act. The audience learns in the final scene that Metcalf is a policeman who is at the guest house undercover to help find a murderer and to provide protection to the possible victims.

Mr. Paravicini

Mr. Paravicini is foreign, dark, and elderly with a small flamboyant mustache. For those in the audience who are familiar with Agatha Christie's other works, Paravicini seems to be a slightly taller edition of Hercule Poirot, which may serve to confuse some members of the audience. Paravicini claims to be lost after his car overturned in a snow drift. He

is much taken with himself first leering at Mollie and then providing a dramatic reading of his untimely arrival in a storm with no luggage. The audience learns at the play's conclusion that he is a con man or crook.

Giles Ralston

Giles is described as arrogant, attractive, and in his twenties. He has been married for one year to Mollie. Their courtship lasted only three weeks. Giles is jealous of the attention that Wren showers on Mollie. The audience knows little about Giles and it is revealed that Mollie also knows little about Giles.

Mollie Ralston

Mollie is a tall, pretty young woman in her 20s. She has been married for one year to Giles. Mollie knew him for only three weeks before they married. Mollie inherited the house from her aunt and then decided to turn the property into a guest house. Both husband and wife are inexperienced at running an inn and have no idea what they are doing. The audience learns in the last scene that Mollie was a teacher years earlier and that she was the teacher of a young boy who was murdered by his foster parents. The child had written to Mollie for help, but she was ill and never received the letter. She is haunted by this child's death.

Detective Sergeant Trotter

Detective Sergeant Trotter is a cheerful, common-place young man who arrives at the guest house on skis. He has a slight cockney accent. Trotter spends most of his time on stage explaining to the other characters (and to the audience) the motive for the murder of the woman in London. He is supposedly there to protect the guests in the household and to find the murderer. However, in the final act, Trotter pulls a gun out of his pocket, threatens to shoot Mollie, and reveals that he is Georgie, the older brother of a child who was murdered by his foster parents. Georgie and his sister were neglected and abused by the same people. It was Georgie/Trotter who murdered the woman in London and Mrs. Boyle. He is not realty a policeman, but only assumed that disguise to gain entry to the guest house. Miss Casewell recognizes him because of his habit of twisting a lock of his hair when nervous. At the end of the play, she sedates him and takes him away to be confined where he can be treated for his emotional illness.

Christopher Wren

Christopher Wren is the first guest to arrive. He is described as a wild-looking neurotic young man; his hair is untidy and long. Wren is also quick to confide and child-like. He also has a knowledge of and appreciation for fine furniture. Wren is friendly and likes to cook. But he is also nosy and prone to gossip, reflecting his interest in people. Wren claims to be an architect and to have been named after the seventeenth-century

architect, Christopher Wren by his parents in an effort to promote an interest in architecture. He sings nursery rhymes at odd moments during the play. Wren arrives with a suitcase so light that Giles thinks it is empty. After Mrs. Boyle is murdered, Wren is quite distraught and convinced that Trotter will try to pin both murders on him. Later, he discloses that Wren is not his real name and that he is not an architect. But he doesn't volunteer any information about who he really is. His character is mysterious and the audience learns little of substance about him.

Themes

Appearances and Reality

At the heart of any mystery lies the question of what is real and what is not. This is particularly true of *The Mousetrap*, which relies on disguise to confuse the audience. The detective in the mystery genre is suppose to be the outsider, the member of the cast with whom the audience can most closely identify. But in this play, the appearance of the detective does not fulfill the audience's expectations, since the reality is that the detective is the murderer, Christie is playing with a genre which the audience thinks is predictable in its basic form, forcing them to employ analytical skills beyond the accustomed.

Death

Death provides both the opening of this play and the transition between acts. And yet, in one sense, death is almost the least important aspect of the play; solving the murder is the crucial element. Christie's first victim is unknown to the audience and the second is a complaining obnoxious woman whom the audience gladly sacrifices in the struggle to unearth a murderer. Thus, death becomes almost abstract, a necessary action to advance the plot but not an action which causes the audience any grief. The result is that death, rather than assuming a central position of importance in the play, becomes only a necessary contrivance which the author employs to entertain. However, in a second way, death has a separate importance. The motivation for the deaths that occurs during the play is the death of a small boy years earlier. It is this death that leads to the others, and since both victims are in some way responsible for the death of the child, once again the audience is able to absolve itself of any caring for the two female victims. And so, Christie provides a complexity to the theme of death that requires her audience to look beyond the obvious.

Justice and Injustice

This play can also be described as a search for justice. The two murder victims are responsible for the death of a young child and the abuse of his siblings. The murderer has decided that justice has not been provided through social and legal means and so decides to dispense justice himself. The difficult question for Christie is how to make the murderer sympathetic without sacrificing law. She does this by making the initial murder an innocent child who suffered greatly. The first victim is the foster mother who was responsible for the child's death. The second victim is the magistrate who placed the boy in foster care, Christie adds to the second victim's appeal as a sacrifice for justice by giving her an unattractive personality. And to stack the deck further against the two female victims, she makes the murderer friendly and attractive, but emotionally and mentally disturbed. Accordingly, the audience is sympathetic to him and uncaring about

the victims. In the end, justice has the appearance of having been served: the deranged young man is taken away to be treated and a sympathetic potential victim has been saved.

Order and Disorder

To establish a venue for murder, Christie creates a scenario that dismisses order from the stage and instead establishes disorder. She does this first with the snow storm that strands all the guests. The second step is to remove any chance of communication with the outside authorities. To do this the phone lines are cut, and the house is isolated. Next the detective's skis have disappeared and the audience realizes that the detective is stranded and unable to seek help. And finally, the guests and their hosts begin to fall apart and their veneer of civility is cracked enough for the audience to begin suspecting any or all of mem to be a murderer.

Punishment

Modern audiences are conditioned to expect punishment as a response to crime. But for Christie, punishment depends more on circumstance than the crime committed. Although Georgie/Trotter has dispensed his own idea of punishment to his two murder victims, the audience is given ample reason to dislike the victims and like their murderer. The plot makes clear that Georgie is also a victim, and so his removal to a treatment center at the play's conclusion is a resolution the audience endorses. Generally, most audience members will feel that Georgie has suffered a great deal and that he is deserving of sympathy rather than condemnation. A second glance at the play reveals that he has almost claimed a third and more innocent victim, but since Mollie has not been injured (she leaves the stage unhurt and more concerned with her burned pie than her near death), the audience is permitted and encouraged to direct all its sympathy to the young man who was more victim than victimizer.

Revenge

Like punishment, revenge is the motivating force behind Georgie's deception. He is seeking revenge for his brother's death and revenge for the injuries he suffered. The two murder victims are unsympathetic characters, while the murderer is portrayed as both likable and emotionally unstable. All of these elements lead the audience to recognize and sympathize with the young man when he is unmasked at the play's conclusion. Forgotten is the fear and conflict that permeated the last act. But, since the last act takes place only ten minutes after the second victim's murder, presumably, their collective fear was not great. In fact, Christie leaves the audience with an understanding that all the guests are once again engaged in common-place activities.

Sanity and Insanity

Insanity is offered as both a mitigating reason for Georgie's actions and a justification for the murder of two people. Throughout the play the murderer is referred to several times as a homicidal maniac, but the connotation of maniac is someone who is unbalanced. In fact, the definition of maniac is a madman, a lunatic, someone who is violently insane. After Trotter is unmasked as Georgie, the audience, who has come to like the young man, is quick to accept that he is insane. Indeed the conclusion reveals that he is not going off to prison, but instead, he has been sedated and will be confined somewhere for treatment. His insanity is justified by the circumstances of his childhood. And it is a solution with which the audience is comfortable.

Style

Act

A major division in a drama. In Greek plays the sections of the drama were signified by the appearance of the chorus and were usually divided into five acts. This is the formula for most serious drama from the Greeks to Elizabethan playwrights like William Shakespeare. The five acts denote the structure of dramatic action. They are exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. The five-act structure was followed until the nineteenth century, when Ibsen combined some of the acts. *The Mousetrap* is a two-act play. The exposition, complication, and climax are combined in the first act with the story of the child's murder and the murder in London and in the final minutes of act one when Mrs. Boyle is murdered. The falling action and catastrophe are combined in the second act with the realization that a murderer is in the house and that Trotter is Georgie.

Catharsis

Catharsis is the release of emotions, usually fear and pity. The term was first used by Aristotle in his Poetics to refer to the desired effect of tragedy on the audience. Many critics cite *The Mousetrap* as cathartic because Christie subverts the mystery genre by making the detective the murderer. The unexpected ending provides an exciting release for the audience, who think they have the murders solved only to discover how wrong they have been,

Character

A character is a person in a dramatic work. The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual's morality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multi-faceted ones. Characters may also be defined by personality traits, such as the rogue or the damsel in distress. "Characterization" is the process of creating a lifelike person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who she will be and how she will behave in a given situation. For instance, Trotter is likable and represents authority. But in the play's conclusion the audience learns that Trotter does not represent authority he represents insanity.

Genre

Genre is a term for the categorization of literature. Genre is a French word that means "kind" or "type." Genre can refer to both the content of literary work such as tragedy, comedy, or pastoral and to the forms of literature, such as drama, novel, or short story.

This term can also refer to types of literature such as mystery, science fiction, or romance. *The Mousetrap* is a drama, but it is also a mystery.

Plot

The pattern of events in a narrative. Generally plots should have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, but they may also sometimes be a series of episodes connected together. Basically, the plot provides the author with the means to explore primary themes. Students are often confused between the two terms; but themes explore ideas, and plots simply relate what happens in a very obvious manner. Thus fhe plot of *The Mousetrap* is a snow storm that isolates a group of people, one of whom is a murderer. But the themes are those of insanity and revenge.

Scene

Scenes are subdivisions of an act. A scene may change when all of the main characters either enter or exit the stage. But a change of scene may also indicate a change of time. In *The Mousetrap*, the second scene of Act I occurs the next afternoon and thus indicates the passage of time in the play.

Setting

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The location for *The Mousetrap* is Monkswell Manor, a small guest house thirty miles from London. The action begins in the late afternoon and concludes the following afternoon; both acts take place in the Great Hall of the Manor.

Suspense

Quite simply, suspense is the anticipation of an action occurring. It is a major device in mystery since suspense is what keeps the audience interested in the resolution of the action. In a play such as *The Mousetrap*, suspense is more than curiosity, since members of the audience may already be familiar with the play's resolution. Suspense heightens the audience's reaction to characters, either sympathetic or not. It also provides the audience with an opportunity to prove their analytical skills superior to the author's. Dissecting the clues is an important ritual for theatre-goers for whom solving the mystery is the whole purpose of seeing the play.

Historical Context

Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* opens in theatres during a period marked by post-World War II rebuilding, a new monarchy, food shortages, and the threat of communism. The giddiness that greeted the end of the war has been replaced by the realities of rebuilding the country. Whole sections of the nation have been destroyed in the bombings of the war, and London, in particular, is undergoing a rebirth. In England, the king who has guided Great Britain through the war years dies on February 6, 1952. His daughter, Elizabeth, ascends the throne replacing George VI to become only the second Ehzabeth to wear the crown. Food is in such short supply in England that 53,000 horses were consumed for food in the previous year to feed a population that now exceeds fifty million people. And in London, a four-day smog kills more than four thousand people. Meanwhile, the threat of communism hangs over everyone. The war that humbled Germany has loosed the threat of communism on the world, and this is particularly noticeable in the United States where congressional inquiries into the "Red Threat" continue for a third year.

In contrast to the difficult realities outside the theatre's door, inside the Ambassadors Theatre the atmosphere is decidedly different. On stage, the only concern about food is that caused by the snow storm, and Giles is confident that if the store of tins in the cupboards should prove inadequate, the hens in the outbuilding will meet any need. No one will go hungry, and indeed, the conversation frequently focuses on food, the preparation of meals, and the guests satisfaction with what is offered at the table. Monkswell Manor is entirely satisfactory according to at least one guest. The house is untouched by the bombing that destroyed London only thirty miles away. The furniture is comfortable and stylish and although the house is difficult and expensive to heat (a universal complaint about British homes), Giles keeps piling on the coal.

Of course a short distance away in London all that burning coal added to the growing problem with automobile emissions is causing smog that endangers the health of its urban population. Nevertheless, at Monkswell Manor smog is not a problem. A snow storm that has reached blizzard proportions may prove to be more of a danger to those inside the house than the smog that exists in London.

In fact, the stage setting of *The Mousetrap* effectively removes the audience from the real world outside. Christie creates an escape from the problems that plague England. At a time when other writers are lamenting the lost innocence of a world and creating a literary tradition that reflects the ruins of London, Christie is still offering an escapist literary journey for her fans. In a discussion that examines a new post-war literary tradition, Andrew Sanders maintains that Christie's play "tells us something about the resilience of certain theatrical conventions and styles." These conventions, Sanders argues, "have been selected so as not to offend the sensibilities of audiences happy with a pattern of light-hearted banter." Theatre patrons who want to escape the troubles that plague the country will keep Christie's play on the London stage long after John Osborne' s *Look Back in Anger* has completed its run.

Critical Overview

When Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* opened in London's West End on November 25, 1952, few theatre-goers anticipated that the play would become a fixture for the next half-century. The *Times of London* review of the play's opening at the Ambassadors Theatre noted that "the piece admirably fulfills the special requirements of the theatre." That is, there is a good assortment of suspects and potential victims assembled on stage and each is easily identifiable. The reviewer for the Times noted that these people "provide the colour, the mystification, the suspects, and the screams" and that "all fit the play as snugly as pieces in a jigsaw puzzle." The audience would find that *The Mousetrap* fits nicely into the Christie tradition: "No sooner have we, following the precepts of our old friend Poirot, peered back into the past for this is what is known, rather grandly, as a revenge tragedy and found in the present a suitable couple for the child victims of long ago, than the ingenious pattern shifts, and we are back where we started."

This inability to out-think Christie and solve the crime is part of what keeps audiences flocking to see this play. The run at Ambassadors Theatre lasted twenty-two years; in 1974, *The Mousetrap* moved to St. Martin's Theatre to continue its successful theatrical course.

The Mousetrap finally opened off-Broadway on November 5, I960, at the Maidman Theatre. At its *New York* opening, New York Timer's reviewer Lewis Funke observed that "a good in-the-flesh whodunit has been overdue." While observing that the play was not a "blood-curdling experience," Funke noted that "it is the Christie skill and polish in throwing you off the scent that keeps the entertainment going." *"The Mousetrap,"* Funke stated, "will not exactly shakes you up, but neither will it let you down." While neither the *Times of London* review or the *New York Times* provided the kind of "don't miss it" or "Four Stars" review that many theatre patrons come to expect of a play that is as wildly successful as *The Mousetrap* has proved to be, both papers did pronounce the suspense and clever plotting worth a visit. Apparently the public agrees. The play is simply a well-constructed mystery that holds the audience's attention from the first moment and offers enough theatrical "red herrings" to keep the audience guessing until the play's conclusion.

Throughout the play's run in London, note of its longevity has appeared almost yearly in the T*imes of London*. As the play neared its fortieth year of continuous performance, Robin Young, writing in *Times*, considered the play's continued success, observing that "the solution [to the murder] ... is unorthodox enough to be unguessable, and unguessable enough to be unforgettable. The play has seeped into our collective consciousness as a national challenge." That the public has responded to this "national challenge" is evident in the six-month wait to get tickets. As Young stated, one reason that the play has remained interesting and fresh so many years after its opening is attributed to the yearly change in cast and director. A performance of *The Mousetrap*, Young remarked, has become an "essential part of the London itinerary, right up with the Houses of Parliament and the Tower of London." In the United States, however, the

play has never achieved similar status. Nevertheless, the play still remains complex and intriguing forty-five years after its initial performance. In fact, when an attempt was made a few years ago to publish a novel loosely based on the play, called *Three Blind Mice*, public clamor halted the book's publication, A book, it was argued, would reveal the identity of the murderer. And so the mystery remains to delight and entertain London audiences.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Metzger is a Ph.D. with an extensive background teaching drama. In this essay she assesses critical response to Christie'splay and praises the writer's dramatic skills.

J. C. Trewin remarked in *Agatha Christie; First Lady of Crime* that it often astonishes critics and theatre reviewers that after so many years on the London stage *The Mousetrap* "can still be acted before audiences with no idea of its development or climax." Not only critics but audiences have kept the secret of the whodonit and they have done so, Trewin argued, in tribute to Christie's work. Part of the appeal is in the reliability of the puzzle. Christie fans know they can rely on a solution that is plausible and yet one that completely escapes them until the play's conclusion. The least likely suspect is too often the murderer, or is he? It is the solving of that equation that keeps audiences guessing and coming back for more. And it is that complexity and familiarity that account for the play's longevity.

Trewin maintained that characterization was less important to Christie than action, that many of her characters were stereotypes who might have as readily been identified by numbers as by name. These stock characters might have easily been "transferred as needed, from plot to plot, hall to manor, court to vicarage ,.. they rarely had a life of their own." Perhaps to some degree that is true. Devoted readers of Christie will recognize Mrs. Boyles, Miss Casewell, Mollie, Giles, and Major Metcalf as familiar characters. But after more than a hundred novels, short stories, and plays, that familiarity is what readers and audiences are seeking. It is the accustomed that creates comfort and why Christie's work endures. But, I would agree that it is the plot, the action, the murder, and its solution that keeps the fan returning for more. It is the pleasure derived from solving the puzzle that keeps the audience in their seats.

Christie relied on narration and plot and eschewed the technology that is identified with so many other mystery writers. *The Mousetrap* employs no sliding panels or hidden staircases to enliven the action. There are no devices to create illusion; there are only the words and actions of ordinary people to offer clues. If, indeed, a murderer can be defined as ordinary. The lack of gadgets to distract the audience and Christie's reliance on a world of upper class gentry are two components that account for her longevity, according to Russell Fitzgibbon. In a chapter of his *The Agatha Christie Companion* that examines Christie's appeal, Fitzgibbon synthesized several critical responses to Christie. In one section, he examined criticism of Ian Fleming's use of technology. Christie's supporters argue that Fleming's use of technology is so quickly outmoded that his work is easily and quickly dated, and conclude that Christie, who ignored any technology more advanced than the radio, is timeless in her appeal. But Fleming's supporters counter with the assertion that Christie's work appears dated because she relies upon an antiquated setting and life-style that no longer exists in England, and consequently, the popularity of her work will inevitably decline.

In response to both these views, Fitzgibbon asserted that Fleming's technology is mechanical and impersonal, while Christie uses "the personalities, the emotions, and

the general intangibles she found in the social world she knew so well." The lengthy theatrical run and enduring popularity of *The Mousetrap* would seem to support Fitzgibbon's argument. The comforts of the Victorian upper class may no longer exist in England, and this is especially true in the wake of World War n, but the public's need to escape to that earlier realm is apparently even greater today than it was in the 1920s when Christie first began to re-create that world.

It is the characters who deceive the audience and who provide the clues that enable the fans to solve the puzzle. As Trewin noted, the characters are often stock and interchangeable; but David Grossvogal maintained in *Art in Crime Writing: Essays on Detective Fiction* that it is their very reliability, their ordinariness that attracts Christie fans. Her public "knew these people without having encountered them and they were therefore exactly suited to [our] expectations." The actual murder, stated Grossvogal, "was trivial enough" and "antiseptic." A Christie murder lacks the corruption and messiness of a Mike Hammer or Sam Spade crime scene, but Grossvogal acknowledged that "there were always half a dozen compelling reasons to kill the victim and as many evident suspects." This is certainly true of *The Mousetrap.*

Mrs. Boyle establishes at her entrance that she is going to make her stay at Monkswell notable. Her constant complaining in the face of Mollie's earnest desire to help quickly makes her a victim the audience wants to murder. Christie makes sure that everyone on stage has the appearance of a suspect; all are hiding something and everyone acts suspicious, except detective Trotter. But an aware Christie audience will expect these characters, anticipate their entrance, and concentrate on the action to provide the clues.

Much of the criticism that has focused on Agatha Christie in recent years has delved into the issue of whether Christie can be defined as a feminist or if the depiction of women characters in her work reveals that she was an anti-feminist. Marty Knepper attempted to respond to this controversy by examining the body of Christie's work in the *Armchair Detective*. Knepper did admit that there is sexism in some of Christie's work but asserted that "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." Knepper continued by presenting examples from Christie's work that span several decades and character types. While acknowledging that Christie has created women who are flawed and who are even murderers, Knepper maintained that the greater majority of women are strong, intelligent, clever, successful characters. Knepper concluded 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 n 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)." In applying Knepper's theory to *The Mousetrap* it becomes clear that in this play Christie's feminism is not easily defined. Mrs. Boyle is a magistrate. That she apparently was not always good at

it could be argued as anti-feminist, but then, men were not always good magistrates either. But her constant complaining is a greater problem, since complaining has historically been attributed to women as a negative trait. And, since it makes her an unsympathetic character, her murder is almost welcomed by the audience. Mollie co-owns the guest house with her husband and on the surface seems a competent business woman. But she is easily led by Trotter to question her husband's honesty, becomes a near victim, and is in need of rescuing at the play's conclusion. Miss Casewell is described as mannish in appearance, and Giles even questions if she is a woman at one point. Is this a positive depiction of a single woman? It depends on the critics vantage point. Critics can choose to point out that Miss CasewelPs appearance implies that she is strong and in command. While other critics might ask why Christie could not create a single woman who is both strong and feminine. But as M, Vipond noted of Christie's feminism in *International Fiction Review*, "to generalize about sexual roles is to lose that touch of reality," the depiction of "familiar patterns and types" that draws the audience to Christie's work. There is much to be said for simply enjoying the characters as they are presented than in dissecting them to reveal Christie's feminist agenda.

When a play is as successful as *The Mousetrap* it is perhaps inevitable that its success will spawn parodies. Marvin Carlson looked at the influence of Christie's play in an article that appeared in *Modem Drama*, Carlson began by noting that with the advent of newer forms of mystery, Christie's play is "taking on an increasingly anachronistic tone." He maintained that the mystery play has not lost its popularity, but rather, that the mystery play has evolved into something very different, a comic thriller. One of the first of the comic parodies of detective fiction was Torn Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), which, Carlson maintained, used Christie's play as a model because it was both familiar and popular. Stoppard makes use of Christie's "trick" of making the detective the murderer. The public expects a certain resolution to a mystery, but in *The Mousetrap*, the expected is subverted when the detective, whom the audience thinks they can count on to be eliminated as a suspect, is revealed as the murderer. Stoppard parodies Christie by elaborating upon this "trick." Although Christie has disguised the murderer as a detective, she has also disguised the detective as a suspect. In the end the murder is solved by the real detective and the mystery play remains rooted in its traditional garb. But in Stoppard's play, the disguised detective is not really a detective but is another murderer disguised as a detective. The complexity and ridiculousness of it all creates the comedy for the audience. Carlson observed that Stoppard's play eventually led to other comedy thrillers such as *Sleuth* (1970) and *Deathtrap* (1978), both of which went on to be successful films. However, it is worth noting that while Carlson found *The Mousetrap* "anachronistic," its theatre run continues long after the comic thriller has left the stage.

Finally, the question remains why *The Mousetrap* has endured so long as a fixture in London's West End theatre district. Trewin attempted to answer a question for which there is no clear response, and he acknowledged that he has "no dramatic reply----- People keep on going, "He compares it to a sort of Stonehenge complete with legends, but Trewin also recognized that the play is a "really efficient thriller" that represents an "untouched fragment of 1952." If Trewin's premise is to be accepted, then fans of

Christie have elevated *The Mousetrap* from an entertaining puzzle to a tourist attraction that represents a world that disappeared more than 45 years ago.

Source: Sheri Metzger, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In this excerpt, Wren-Lewis discusses Christie 's record-breaking play and offers some theories on the secret of its success.

Wren-Lewis is a critic for various publications and a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia.

The longest-running play in human history is now well into its forty-first year on the London stage. Agatha Christie's detective-thriller *The Mousetrap*, which celebrated the fortieth anniversary of its opening on November 25th last year, has now become almost a British National Monument. When I went to its opening night, to see the young Richard Attenborough playing the detective, we were still only just emerging from the shadows of World War Two. The possibility that forty years on I'd be in Australia wasn't in my mind then, but even more remote was any thought that the play could still be going near the end of the century. And I don't think the idea crossed anyone else's mind either; Agatha Christie herself, interviewed on the then-phenomenal occasion of the play's tenth anniversary, said she had expected a run of no more than three months and was greatly buoyed by the assurance of impressario Peter (now Sir Peter) Saunders that it was good for at least a year!...

The extraordinary success of *The Mousetrap* would imply that it contains some particularly acute, nerve-touching insight about the origin of evil in the human psyche, and I believe this to be indeed the case. For the play gives a very special twist to the "least likely suspect" theme, a twist anticipated occasionally in earlier stories (for example, in more than one by G. K. Chesterton), but never (to my knowledge) before put into drama-form, the mode which appeals most directly to the mythopoetic imagination. After all these years of exposure on the London stage, I don't think I shall be giving away any secret by mentioning what that twist is (and anyway, the characteristic of a really significant mythic theme, as I believe this to be, is that it retains its appeal even when the "plot" is common knowledge.) At the end of *The Mousetrap*, the detective himself, the young policeman who appears as the protector of the innocent and as the guardian of law and order, turns out to be the murderer. And here I find a clear echo of a theme expressed in different ways in many of the world's ancient stories about the Fall, but most clearly in the one which, more than any other, has exercised emotional appeal across many different cultures, the biblical story in which the Loss of Eden comes about because of a "snaky" temptation to assume a divine role of moral guardianship, "knowing good and evil."

I would translate this idea as a diagnosis that the responsibility for humanity's unnatural destructive-ness lies with the very element in the psyche that purports to aim at harmony, the moral impulse not that it is too weak, as conventional social wisdom assumes, but that it usurps power and toes to control all other impulses by judging and repressing. It was an insight central to William Blake's attempts to uncover the true essence of Christianity in his mythic epics: "The punisher alone is the criminal of Providence." And this too is surely something we are in a better position to understand

today than any earlier generation, thanks to the detailed investigations of psychologists and sociologists. There is now ample evidence that behind all really violent and destructive human behaviour, whether it be the ridiculously excessive ambitions of the military conqueror or the empire-building of the capitalist, or the sadism of tyrants great or small, or the insatiable violence of the rapist, or the blind destructiveness of the hoodlum or child-batterer, there lies a screaming protest on the part of some much more limited desire that has been repressed by an overweening morality, in society, in the family, or in the individual psyche itself. And on the other, outer side of the coin, egoistic and aggressive urges become really dangerous and outrageous precisely when they are moralised and amplified by righteous indignation. The Inquisition really did think that they were saving souls, and while mere greed or ambition would never lead any sane person to .plunge the world into nuclear winter, a holy war might easily do so, on the judgement that it is better to be dead than red or, in more topical terms, better to have a nuclear holocaust than to submit to the Great Satan of American Capitalism.

"Better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven" were words which Milton put into the mouth of Satan himself. His poem followed much Christian tradition in linking the Biblical story of Paradise Lost with another ancient tale, giving it, in the process, a definite "whodunnit" flavour of its own, by suggesting that the serpent was just a disguise for the cosmic Mr. Big Lucifer, the Archangel of Light, who subverts humanity in the course of trying to usurp the role of God. The moral impulse, or "conscience," could indeed be described as the angel (the messenger) of light in the human psyche, and this story unmasks its constant tendency to get above itself and rule the roost instead of simply serving life. Thus a vicious circle is created, because repression and moralisation exaggerate the very impulses they claim to control, and thereby give "conscience" the excuse for attempting still more repressive measures and expressing still more moral outrage against others. This was why Blake went beyond Milton's interpretation of the story and represented Satan as having to all intents and purposes already taken over the place of God m most religions by making them agents of repressive moralising, rather than of salvation. That, he argued, was why Jesus of Nazareth "died as a reprobate ... punished as a transgressor" because he had seen what was going on in the world and tried to reverse the process by urging "mutual forgiveness of each vice," only to have his name and image taken over in turn in the service of repression and indignation.

The Mousetrap doesn't attempt to pursue the story into those depths: its villain simply gets killed at the end, much as in most other "whodunnits." But Chesterton did try to take that extra step: Father Brown never sought punishment or death for his villains, but unmasked them only as a first step in trying to redeem them. And for Blake that was the ultimate goal both in society and in the psyche itself, to "have pity on the Punisher" and restore the moral sense to its proper role as servant of life, by subordinating its judgements to forgiveness. He had the mystic vision that while no individual can hope to make more than a small impact on the destructive patterns of society by pursuing this goal, determined exposure of satanic judgementalism within the psyche will open up direct experience of eternity even in the midst of the world's still-unresolved conflicts. He identified this as "the Everlasting Gospel of Jesus"; yet he also insisted that "AH Religions are One" prior to satanic perversion and in our own day his insight, expressed

in different terms, has been the core "gospel" of Krishnamurti, who stood apart from all formal religion: he urged the regular practice of "non-judgemental choiceless awareness" as the way of opening to the eternal. Maybe he wasn't a detective-story buff for nothing.

The ending of any detective-story after the unmasking of the villain is inevitably something of an anticlimax (a post-climax, perhaps?), and in my view one of Blake's most profound insights was that the unmasking of the Great Originator of Sin in human life brings something of the same feeling. Like the Wizard of Oz, pretension is the essence of Lucifer's power in the world and in the psyche: unmasked, he becomes something of a joke:

Truly, My Satan, thou art but a Dunce,/ And dost not know the Garment from the Man

Perhaps that was what Chesterton was getting at, in a different idiom, when he said that if humanity were to be suddenly struck with a sense of humour, we would find ourselves automatically fulfilling the Sermon on the Mount. And perhaps, too, this is why the motivation of the crime in *The Name of the Rose* is the suppression of humour. So do join me as a detection buff, for the sheer fun of it, and go and see *The Mousetrap* if you're in London it's fun even if you do know the ending.

Source: John Wren-Lewis, "Adam, Eve, and Agatha Christie: Detective Stories As Post-Darwinian Myths of Original *Sin" infae Chesterton Review*, Vol 19,no 2, May, 1993, pp. 197-99.

Critical Essay #3

Finding The Mousetrap to be conventional and often uninspired, Shorter assesses the play's lengthy theatrical run.

Once upon a time (and a very good time it was) the Abbey's Lady Gregory said: 'We went on giving what we thought good until it became popular'. No better motto could be found for theatrical managers, but how many heed it? The motto now is to give what the manager thinks will be popular until it is generally thought good. Hence *The Mousetrap*. It must be good because it has run for so long.

Agatha Christie's thriller has now been on for 21 years. It has broken every conceivable theatrical record. It has made its manager's West End reputation. It has been visited by successive generations of playgoers. It has caused annual celebrations to be held. It has seen the coming and going of over 150 actors and actresses. It has become a mecca for American visitors ('Gee, look,' said one on the night I went, 'there's George from Philadelphia well, what d'you know?').

What indeed does anybody know to explain the tenacity of this routine, country house whodunnit? *The Mousetrap* has been running at the cosy Ambassadors for so long that not many playgoers can remember to have seen anything else at that address; and yet not many seem to have seen it. This is the oddness, the challenge, the strangeness, the mystery of the longest running mystery in the history of the theatre. Why has nobody (so to speak) seen it? Of course you find critics here and there who saw it, even on its first night. Others recall the roughly annual changes of cast in the spirit of men recalling Hamlets and Macbeths. 'Did you ever see Dickie Attenborough?' they ask in much the manner of my elders who would tell me as a boy that if I hadn't seen Tree or Irving or Forbes-Robertson there wasn't much point in bothering with the Gielguds or Oliviers. What standards, after all, could I possess?

Well I have to admit that until the other night I had no standards at all for *The Mousetrap*. It was just something that had been running at one of my favourite small theatres since the Flood. I had never much liked whodunnits anyway since I could never bring myself to care who had done it; and since my memories of this theatre had always been witty Gingold and Crisham and Kendall in revue (*Sweet and Low, Lower and Lowest*) or the two Hermiones in Coward's *Fallen Angels* why sully them with a coach-party teaser? So I resisted it for 21 years. It did not need much effort.

No one ever asked me in all that time if I had seen it. Nor did I ask them. Somehow *The Mousetrap* was never a subject of dinner table conversation, at any rate not in my part of the world; and although Agatha Christie is not a name to sneeze at the play itself never struck its author either as having contained the seeds of immortality.

Whether those seeds are to be found in the text or the performance, the theatre or its position, its management or its publicity, is a question which nobody can answer for sure. We know the manager is a keen and inventive publicist. Hence those huge cakes,

club ties, and other efforts to capitalize on the show's success. Mr. Peter Saunders is the first to acknowledge that he has never missed a promoter's trick in keeping *The Mousetrap* baited.

Then, there is the theatre itself, one of the smallest in the West End circuit. It has a good position, just off Cambridge Circus, and of course, it doesn't take much filling anyhow. And this, for some observers, is the rub that one of the West Ends most conveniently placed small playhouses should have been commandeered for such an orthodox thriller over such a long period. The argument goes that if so many people want it, let them see it in a bigger house; thus proving the need of it.

It is an argument based on the necessity for cosy theatres (of which London has so few compared to Paris) to be kept for new plays of some artistic ambition or revivals of limited appeal. The idea is that once a play has recovered its basic costs it shall not obstruct the flow of others which cannot otherwise get a central hearing. Therefore to have kept *The Mousetrap* going for 21 unbroken years at one of the handful of theatres seating under 500 is considered to have been an act of managerial self-indulgence without parallel in the history of the drama. And the transfer of it in the spring to the St. Martin's signified not an attack of conscience but merely the expiry of Mr. Saunders's lease on the Ambassadors. In any case the St. Martin's happens to be next door, and though it seats 550 instead of 450 it is still one of the few small West End playhouses.

During the 21 years the new drama in Britain acquired a reputation for social, political and moral urgency which could only find expression in smaller playhouses at least until its authors had made their names while one of the likeliest theatres for testing such talents was given over in seeming perpetuity to a trivial, if well-turned, thriller containing not so much as a line to tickle the moral, political or social fancy of anyone over 10. Mr. Saunders is merely bored by such objections. 'Where are all these new plays?' he will ask you as he once asked me over lunch at the Ivy (just opposite the Ambassadors); and at the time, not being myself a manager, I could not point them out. He maintains that if a manager wants to put a play on (and often at the last minute they funk London) there is usually a suitable theatre.

Meanwhile *The Mousetrap* looks like running for ever to the advantage of everyone associated with it from Mr. Saunders to Peter Cotes who directed it in 1952 and whose fees have since exceeded £30,000 but who has not been back to see it since. The author herself has taken nothing in royalties since she made them over from the start to a nephew then aged 10. And it all began because the BBC wanted something by Agatha Christie, at Queen Mary's request, to celebrate Queen Mary's 80th birthday. So Mrs. Christie ran up a short story called *Three Blind Mice* which she subsequently stretched into a play. Since that title had been used for a pre-war piece, heads were scratched to find another; and finally the author's son-in-law came up with *The Mousetrap* (and its Shakespearean echoes from the play-within-a play in *Hamlet*). Today, of course, at each revival of *Hamlet* an extra snigger can be counted on during the play scene as if Shakespeare had culled the idea from Mrs. Christie.

And the idea of the thriller? Tunelessly conventional. Into the lounge hall of a snowed-up panelled, home counties hotel just opened by a diffident young couple drift a careful assortment of independent types (grave, comical, foreign, peculiar, chatty, silent and so forth), one of whom is in due course bumped off. Thereafter suspicion falls, with the help of red herrings, on the survivors variously in turn; and before the final unmasking a mild degree of curiosity, even excitement, certainly tension is aroused. The suspense, if not intense, is agreeable; and the plotting is unquestionably neat.

What is questionable is the quality of the acting which struck me as not rising to the proverbial level of rep. Most reps I know of could do better but of course they are not allowed to try any more than a film can be made until what Mrs. Christie originally guessed might be 'quite a nice run' comes to an end. In our time? Our children's? Ever? Why in fact must the show go on? Only an Act of Parliament will ever stop it....

Source: Eric Shorter, "Quite a Nice Run" in *Quarterly Theatre Review*, No. 112, Spring, 1974, pp. 51-53.

Adaptations

Although a number of Christie's plays and novels have been adapted for film and television and even by other playwrights, *The Mousetrap* has never been adapted in any other format. Although the play is based on a radio script (*Three Blind Mice*, broadcast by the BBC) there is no tape of that broadcast known to exist. Students wishing to explore Christie's work on film might consider Public Broadcasting's series *Mystery*, which has adapted several of the Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple mysteries for television. A large number of these PBS films are now syndicated on the Arts & Entertainment (A & E) channel.

Ten Little Indians, based on Christie's novel *Ten Little Niggers*, has been filmed at least three times. It was first produced in 1965 by Associated British & Pathe Films. The play was filmed again in 1975 and in 1989. The latter two productions are available on video.

Christie's *Death on the Nile* was filmed by Paramount in 1978. The film offered an all-star cast of Hollywood actors and won several awards for costume design. Hercule Poirot was played by Peter Ustinov.

Witness for the Prosecution has been filmed twice. The theatrical release was filmed by United Artists in 1957 and is considered the best of the Christie film adaptations. The film, staring Charles Laughton, Tyrone Power, and Elsa Lanchester, won several Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director (Billy Wilder), and Best Actor (Laughton).

Topics for Further Study

Agatha Christie's plays and novels are often set in the English countryside and take place in an indeterminate time. This gives them a sort of timeless quality that keeps the plots and characters from appearing dated and, perhaps, accounts for her continued popularity. Discuss the importance of setting, place, and time in respect to Christie's work. Do you think that this timelessness adds to the complexity of the puzzle that readers and audiences must solve?

Critics appear to be divided on Christie's appeal as a feminist. Some think her female characters intelligent and resourceful, while others think that Christie relies on stereotypes that present women as dependent on men, consumed with their appearance, and unable to think beyond how to attract a man. Examine how the women in *The Mousetrap* respond to both criticisms.

After the war, much of England and almost all of London lay in ruins, and a huge effort at rebuilding the country was undertaken. Research this period and comment on whether you agree with some critics who think that the popularity of *The Mousetrap* derives from the need of a populace to escape into entertainment. If you think this is the case, how then, do you account for the play's popularity nearly fifty years later?

The mystery genre is said to date from Edgar Allan Poe, but some critics credit Christie with having had the greatest influence on the genre's development. Research Christie's influence on other mystery writers and decide for yourself if this credit is deserved.

Compare and Contrast

1952: Elizabeth II succeeds her father George VI to the throne. During her reign the British Empire will decline from forty nations to no more than twelve with Elizabeth having a voice only in England.

Today: Elizabeth n is celebrating twenty-five years as England's queen. For the monarch, the scandals of her royal children have caused many of her subjects to question the expense of maintaining a royal household.

1952: Britain tests an atomic bomb on October 2, thus joining the United States and the Soviet Union as a nuclear power.

Today: Testing of nuclear weapons has been banned by most developed countries, and a greater awareness of the ecological damage and health risks inherent in testing leads to increasing pressure on the remaining nations who still test nuclear bombs to cease their testing.

1952: Jonas Edward Salk tests a vaccine designed to combat the epidemic of polio. Salk's live virus vaccine will eventually be replaced by Albert Bruce Sabin's oral vaccine.

Today: Polio has been almost completely eradicated in first-world countries such as Britain and the United States. Now the controversy focuses on whether to continue with a vaccine that has the potential of causing the disease in a small number of recipients of the vaccine.

1952: *Singing in the Rain* is the big Hollywood musical released this year. It spoofs Hollywood in the twenties and provides a musical score that will be nominated for an Academy Award.

Today: Hollywood releases few large musicals. Disney Studio's animated film musicals have largely replaced big-budget productions. Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Evita* is a notable exception but has only moderate box office success.

1952: Playwright Lillian Hellman defies the congressional committee investigating communism and refuses to supply information that might lead to further "witch hunts."

Today: A movie version of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, written as a condemnation of the communist witch hunts, is a box office failure. Reviewers argue that the topic appears dated.

What Do I Read Next?

Tom Stoppard's *The Real InspectorHound*(1968) is one of several parodies of *The Mousetrap*. Stoppard employs many of the familiar Christie elements of the mystery play: the setting, the plot, the country house. And like Christie, Stoppard relies up an unexpected plot twist to keep the audience guessing.

The evolution of the mystery play is evident in Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth* (1970). Shaffer relies on illusion to replace the central themes of victim, murderer, and detective. Rather than simply trying to analyze the clues and solve the puzzle, audiences must first try to determine exactly what has happened. Little is as it appears initially.

Ira Levin's *Deathtrap* (1978) is another play that relies on illusion to fool an audience that cannot rely upon character, setting, or language to provide the necessary clues to solve the mystery.

Ten Little Niggers (1943) is another Christie play that enjoyed success with its audiences. Christie had so many people dying on stage that she initially had difficulties getting the play produced. When it finally appeared on stage, the play proved to be very popular especially in New York where it had a longer run than in London. The play's distasteful title was later changed to *Ten Little Indians*,

Christie's *The Hollow* (1951) deviates from some of her other plays, since the murder occurs later in the play, by which time the audience is absolutely eager to se the victim dispatched. The dialogue is enjoyable and the puzzle lives up to Christie standards of enjoyment.

Witness for the Prosecution (1953) is often cited as Christie's craftiest and most elaborate play. This play is often noted for its courtroom scene, something not often seen in a Christie work. The ending is startling and very much appreciated by the audience.

Further Study

Blain, Virginia, Isobel Grundy, and Patricia Clements, editors. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, Yale University Press, 1990, pp 207-8.

This reference work provides an encapsulated biographies of major women writers, noting their contribution to women's literature

Carlson, Marvin "Is There a Real Inspector Hound? Mousetraps, Deathtraps, and the Disappearing Detective" in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 36, no. 3, September, 1993, pp 431-42.

This article notes the influence of Christie's play on later theatrical parodies Carlson compares *The Mousetrap* to Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector* Hound (1968), Ira Levin's *Deathtrap* (1978), and Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth* (1970).

Fitzgibbon, Russell H. *The Agatha Christie Companion,* Bowling Green University Press, 1980.

Fitzgibben's work is considered by many to be one of the most complete resources assembled on Christie. The text includes a detailed biography, a discussion of Christie's work, and critical reviews.

Funk E. Lewis "*Mousetrap Aves," New York Times*, November, 1960, p. 46.

Funk's review provides an enthusiastic recommendation for the first New York City performance of Christie's play.

Gilbert, Michael, "A Very English Lady" *in Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime,* edited by H. R. F. Keating, Weidenfeld &Nicolson, 1977,pp 51-78.

Gilbert offers readers an easy-to-read biography of Christie that is gossipy in tone and focuses on many of the writer's private moments The article is accompanied by photographs and newspaper duplications that add authenticity to the text

Grossvogel, David I. "Death Deferred: The Long Life, Splendid Afterlife, and Mysterious Workings of Agatha Christie" in *Art in Crime Writing: Essays on Detective Fiction*, edited by Bernard Benstock, St Martin's Press, 1983, pp. 1-17.

Grossvogel argues that Christie is the one author who has done the most to shape detective fiction as the public knows it, focusing on Hercule Poirot as a model for the ideal detective

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

Knepper argues that Christie should be included in a list of feminist writers by attempting to answer the questions: "What are the characteristics of a feminist writer?" and "What are the characteristics of an anti-feminist writer?"

Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English literature*, Clarendon Press, 1994.

Sanders offers a look at the social and political climate of postwar England. He observes that theatre patrons weary of the rebuilding of their nation after the end of World War II sought out Christie's play as escapist entertainment

Times of London, November 26,1952, p 12.

Uncredited, enthusiastic review of the opening of *The Mousetrap* at Ambassadors Theatre on November 25,1952

Tones of London, July 31,1991, p 13.

This unnamed writer ponders the longevity of Christie's play and concludes that the play has become a "national challenge."

Trewin, J C. "A Midas Gift to the Theatre" m *Agatha Christie- First Lady of Crime*, edited by H R F Keating, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977, pp. 131-54.

Trewin examines several of Christie's plays and provides a knowledgeable insight into their construction.

Vipond, M. "Agatha Christie's Women" in *International Fiction Review*, Vol. 8, no 2, Summer, 1981, pp, 116-23.

Vipond argues that Christie's women possess strong qualities that identify them as bright and competent

Young, Robin. "Fresh Blood as *Mousetrap* Enters its 40th Year" m the, November 25,1991, p 7

This article, which appears on the thirty-ninth anniversary of the play's debut, celebrates Christie's work as an institution that has now become a tounst attraction.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) 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, DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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

DfS 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 Drama 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 DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS 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 Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama 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 DfS 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.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama 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 DfS, 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 Drama 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 DfS, 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 Drama 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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