

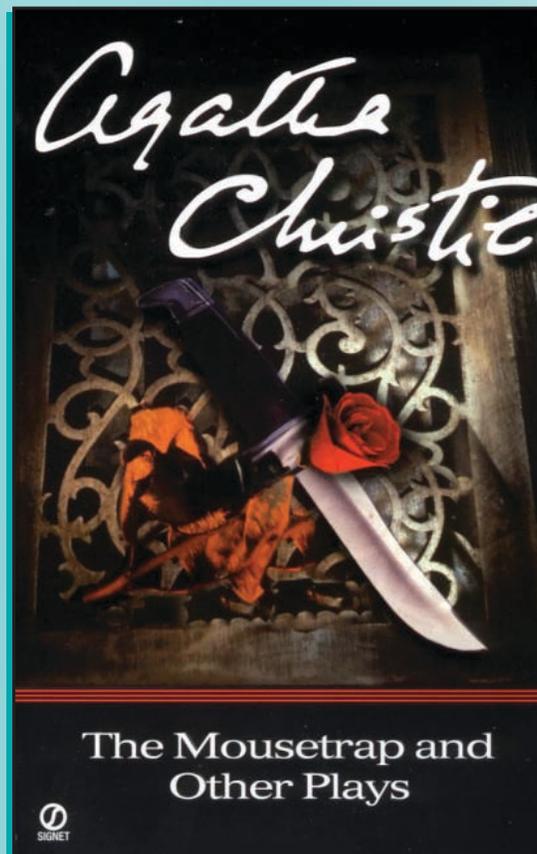


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE SIGNET EDITION OF

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S

THE MOUSETRAP AND OTHER PLAYS

By LAURA FACCIPONTI and ARTHEA J.S. REED, Ph.D.



S E R I E S E D I T O R S :

W. GEIGER ELLIS, Ed.D., UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA, EMERITUS

and

ARTHEA J. S. REED, Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, RETIRED

INTRODUCTION

The plays in *The Mousetrap and Other Plays* are presented chronologically and cover Christie's work from 1944 to 1960. According to Ira Levin in his introduction to the book, "No playwright except Christie . . . has given us more than one great stage mystery." (1) In this anthology we have eight plays to savor. Christie adapts three of the plays from Poirot novels (*Appointment With Death*, *The Hollow*, and *Go Back for Murder*) yet her famous detective never appears in them. Why? Because these plays, unlike the intricate novels on which they are based, have been simplified so that they can be presented on the stage in two hours or less. *Ten Little Indians* and *Towards Zero* were adapted from the novels of the same name. (The U. S. edition of the novel *Ten Little Indians* is *And Then There Were None*, and the U.S. edition of the novel *Towards Zero* is *Come to be Hanged*.)

Witness for the Prosecution is based on a short story of the same name. *The Mousetrap* is based on a radio sketch. Only *Verdict* was not adapted from another of Christie's works. Three are considered among the great mystery dramas of all time: *Ten Little Indians*, *The Mousetrap*, which has been continuously running in London since 1952, and *Witness for the Prosecution*, which Christie considered her best play.

One of the wonderful things about teaching these plays is that they are accessible to all students. Students who have difficulty reading will appreciate their short length and lack of description. Students with intellectual prowess will enjoy their complexity and excellent style. All students will find them fun to read and discuss.

This teachers guide is longer than most. Following the introduction is a short biography of Dame Agatha Christie. Next are some generic activities for teaching mysteries and plays. A synopsis of each play appears before suggested activities and discussion topics that specifically relate to it. Finally, there is a bibliography of works about Agatha Christie, a *Webliography* of Internet sources, and a list of the movies made of these plays.

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S LIFE AND WORK

Agatha Christie was one of the most prolific and admired mystery writers of the twentieth century. In 1971, five years before her death, she was named Dame of the British Empire. She was honored for her 66 mystery novels, numerous short stories and screenplays, and a series of romantic novels she wrote under the name of Mary Westmacott.

She was born Agatha May Clarissa Miller in 1890 in the southwest part of England where many of her novels and plays are set. Like most English children of affluent families of her time, a governess and tutors taught her and her two siblings at home. She was a lonely and shy child who learned to invent and play games to keep busy. Finding it difficult to express herself, she first turned to music. Later in life she took up writing.

During World War I, Christie worked as a nurse while her husband Archie Christie, a fighter pilot, was off at war. Shortly after her 1914 marriage, she wrote her first mystery novel. Although she completed it in a year, it was not published until 1920. Her famous detective Hercule Poirot was introduced in this novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. It was not until 1930 that she introduced her other beloved sleuth, Miss Jane Marple, in *Murder in the Vicarage*. She featured Poirot in over 30 novels, some of the most popular being *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), and *Death on the Nile* (1937). Poirot, now the lead character of a PBS series, is a humorous retired Belgian police detective with a waxed moustache and tidy ways. He has been the model for numerous literary and screen detectives since. Although slightly absurd and silly, he is extremely cunning and intelligent.

In 1926 the Christies divorced after Archie fell in love with another woman. Following the divorce, Agatha disappeared from the public eye. She reappeared three weeks later in a small hotel, claiming to have lost her memory. She was criticized by the British press, yet Christie refused to talk or write about this time of her life. However, some critics believe she addressed her psychological condition in *Five Little Pigs* (*Retrospect* in the U.S. edition). This novel was later turned into the play *Go Back for Murder* and is included in *The Mousetrap and Other Plays*.

It was during her long, stable marriage to Max Mallowan, an archaeologist she met in Mesopotamia, that she created her most loveable antagonist. Miss Jane Marple, a senior citizen in the fictional but very British village of St. Mary Mead, appears to be bumbling, but solves complex mysteries in twelve novels through her observation and intuition. Miss Marple represents the homely style of mystery that defined the Golden Age of British fiction of the 1920s and 1930s. Agatha Christie has been acknowledged as the Queen of this Golden Age.

ACTIVITIES FOR EXPLORING MURDER MYSTERIES

I. *WebQuests* on Mysteries

A *WebQuest* is an inquiry-oriented activity in which students access most or all of the information they need from the Internet. *WebQuests* are designed to help students leverage their time by focusing on using information rather than looking for it. You will find detailed guidelines for developing a *WebQuest* at: <http://edweb.sdsu.edu/webquest/>.

Other *WebQuest* sites include:

- www.thinkquest.org. This site provides step-by-step assistance for setting up a *WebQuest*, and connects you with other teachers using the technique.
- www.edhelper.com. Links are provided to over 1,000 different *WebQuests* as well as to free software, discussion boards, worksheets, and lesson plans.

II. Experiencing the Witness Perspective

Set up a witness game by preplanning for a stranger to enter the classroom that dresses and acts out of the ordinary. Perhaps the stranger could be lost and asking for directions, confronting you with a private issue or trying to take something out of the classroom. Have the stranger dress in easily identifiable colors and accessories, carrying a number of props. Then after the stranger has left, ask the students specific questions about what the stranger was wearing, saying, carrying, doing, and the direction he/she was headed. Students learn how descriptions vary from one person to the next. Which students are able to provide the most accurate description? How? Why?

III. The Victim's Perspective: Values Clarification

Have students engage in a values clarification game to help them relate to victims in life-threatening situations. Create a list of ten survivors of a shipwreck. Give each survivor a specific set of personal attributes: profession, age, gender, race, family, strengths and weaknesses. There is only room in the lifeboat for eight people. Who stays in the lifeboat? Who must go? Have students write or conduct a small group discussion from the victim's perspective.

IV. How To Host a Murder Mystery

Neal Shusterman developed this popular game. Assign each student a role with specific characteristics. You might use the characters from one of Agatha Christie's plays. If the class is too large for each student to play an individual character, half the class could be assigned to be judges, investigators, maids or other supporting characters.

V. Dramatic Terms Relevant to Mystery Plays

Review these terms with students and discuss them in the context of each play.

Plot—The arrangement of dramatic incidents or the story of the play's actions.

Subtext—The meanings beneath the text usually revealed through oral delivery of the text or the actions of the person speaking the text.

Exposition—That part of the play that reveals what has happened before, exposing theme, characters, and previous events.

Climax—The culminating event of a series of events; the point of highest dramatic tension; the decisive turning point of the action.

Crisis—A decisive state of things, the turning point at which something must soon terminate or suffer a material change; a crucial situation whose outcome decides which consequences will follow.

Denouement—Unknotting or unraveling of the main dramatic complication of the plot, producing the final outcome.

Foreshadowing—An event that predicts future outcomes often through symbolic objects, actions or sayings.

Symbolism—Investing objects with non-intrinsic meanings.

Red Herrings—A term derived from the practice of drawing a smoked herring across a trail to confuse hunting dogs; later became known as something that distracts attention from the real issue.

VI. Using Mysteries to Encourage High Levels of Thinking

Using Benjamin's Bloom's cognitive taxonomy as a guideline, below are some ways to move students to higher levels of thinking during the reading of any of Agatha Christie's plays.

Knowledge—Have students arrange the characters and events in the mystery in order.

Comprehension—Have students classify events, describe characters, and explain precisely what has occurred.

Application—Students can apply existing knowledge to the mystery by illustrating, dramatizing, and writing their interpretations.

Analysis—Have students analyze, categorize, and differentiate characters and events.

Synthesis—Students can collect and organize facts to form hypotheses. They can attempt to solve the mystery, using evidence presented during the play.

Evaluation—Have students appraise, argue, assess, and evaluate their opinions in the process of solving the mystery.

THE PLAYS

I. TEN LITTLE INDIANS (1943)

A. SYNOPSIS

Seven guests and three staff members are invited to a private island home on Indian Island off the coast of Devon, England. Host and hostess, Ulick Norman Owen and Una Nancy Owen, are mysteriously detained from arriving on the island. As the guests wait for their hosts, they notice ten little ceramic Indian statues on the mantel with the nursery rhyme "The Ten Little Indians"¹ written above it.

Once the guests are assembled, a recorded voice announces that each of the ten people present are charged with murder and asks if they have anything to say in their defense. It is soon discovered that Roger, the servant, was instructed by a letter from Mr. Owen to play the record once everyone had arrived. He had no idea of the record's content and is visibly shaken by its announcement. Soon the guests exchange stories and letters of proof of their invitation to the island by U.N. Owen. They quickly determine that there isn't a Mr. or Mrs. U. N. Owen and that U. N. Owen is an acronym for "Unknown."

The guests realize they are trapped on the island with no boat or phone and they very well might become the victims of a homicidal maniac. They exchange stories explaining their connections to the deceased individuals they are accused of murdering. All but Lombard plead their innocence. He claims simple self-preservation in his supposedly murderous act. Marston takes a drink, gasps, convulses, and dies. As Act One closes, Emily discovers that one of the Indian statues has fallen and broken.

In Act Two one person at a time mysteriously dies, and a different Indian statue disappears or breaks with each death. The guests try to determine who is detaining them on the island, who is killing them, and why. They soon discover that each murder matches the circumstances in the "Ten Little Indians" nursery rhyme and surmise that the murderer is one of them.

When the guests are finally down to two, Vera and Lombard, they suspect each other as the killer. Vera manages to shoot Lombard with his own gun. The final surprise is when Wargrave, thought to be dead, enters and confesses he was the murderer all along and must now complete the rhyme by hanging Vera. In the last possible moment Lombard recovers from his wound and shoots Wargrave. Vera and Lombard embrace and create their own ending to the nursery rhyme, "One little Indian boy, left all alone, he got married—and then there were none."

B. ACTIVITIES FOR TEN LITTLE INDIANS

- Using Nursery Rhymes as a Story Frame

Take a common nursery rhyme and have students construct a mystery around it, using the events of the rhyme as the basis for plot and theme.

- Exploring Acronyms

Have students create acronyms for names that spell out words or phrases (e.g. B. E. Ware or U. R. Mine). Have them create a mystery around this acronym.

- Comparing the Play to the Novel

You can do this with many of the plays in this anthology. Christie changed many things in the plays, all of which were scripted after the novels were published. Why did she make these changes? You might read another of her novels that was not turned into a play and try your hand at scripting it.

C. DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR *TEN LITTLE INDIANS*

- The Suspicions Game

While reading, have students engage in the Suspicions game that Lombard introduces in Act Three, Scene One. Who does each student suspect as the murderer and why?

- Track Wargrave's Activities

After students read the play have them go back over it and discuss how Wargrave might have accomplished each murder and taken or broken the Indian doll without being seen by the other guests or by the audience. Discuss how different the play might be perceived by an audience if they saw Wargrave complete any of these acts.

- Justice, Revenge or Sheer Madness?

What has driven Wargrave, a court judge, to such a deadly game of committing multiple acts of premeditated murder? Does he believe he is seeking justice and punishing murderers whom he believed slipped through the cracks? Is he seeking revenge for the victims, for himself or for the court? Has he simply gone mad and lost all sense of reality?

- Challenging Staging Requirements

Since plays are meant to be seen, imagine the staging of this complicated play and how the removal or breaking of each statue might be accomplished. How might each murder that occurs on stage be accomplished without the audience seeing it in advance? Have students try to stage some of these scenes after discussing the staging needs.

- Historical Context

The word "nigger" appears in the play. You can discuss with the students that the original British novel *Ten Little Niggers* was based on an old English nursery rhyme of the same title. Agatha Christie wrote the novel during the British colonial period, a time in which the English colonized other countries believing themselves to be superior in governance, intellect, and culture. It was not an historical period known for equality and tolerance. The play, scripted later, is based on the novel and hence the original rhyme. Culture, mores, and language change over time, often, although not always, for the better.

II. APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH (1945)

A. SYNOPSIS

The play begins in Jerusalem at the King Solomon Hotel as travelers from different countries check into the hotel during their respective vacations. One party of particular interest is the Boynton family headed by Mrs. Boynton. Her three adult stepchildren; Ginevra, Lennox, and Raymond and Lennox's wife, Nadine, dutifully follow the matriarch. The family appears as a ghostly statue, unmoving, permanently attached, and staring off with blank faces or burrowing them into books held upside-down. It is soon discovered that Mrs. Boynton has a profound manipulative power over her family. This power is fueled by her poor health, requiring constant attention from her brood, and her financial control of her late father's estate. She expertly masks her power in familial devotion and has done so since the stepchildren were very young.

The other vacationers are drawn to this peculiar family, each traveler intrigued by one particular family member, and all speculate about Mrs. Boynton's control. Dr. Theodore Gerard from France is a renowned psychiatrist who takes it upon himself to study the family's activity from afar, taking note of Ginevra, who appears to have escaped into her own fantasy world. Gerard confides his discoveries in Dr. Sarah King, also a practicing psychiatrist, who has taken a fancy to Raymond

and vows to save him from the manipulative vices of Mrs. Boynton. Jefferson Cope, a friend of the Boynton's, was a past acquaintance of Nadine's and is secretly still in love with her. Mrs. Boynton is suspicious of all the attentions to her family embers. She commands Raymond to break it off with Sarah and tries to keep Nadine close to her side and away from Cope. Cope, hoping to get Nadine away from the dull Lennox and controlling hands of Mrs. Boynton, asks Nadine to come on an excursion with him to Petra. Sarah also invites Raymond on the same trip hoping to break Mrs. Boynton's hold on him. Much to everyone's surprise, Mrs. Boynton agrees that she and the entire family should go to Petra.

The rest of the play takes place in the travelers' camp at Petra. The family, their companions, and other members of the excursion stay in tents near the mouth of a great cave. Mrs. Boynton sits on a stool at the mouth of the cave, watching the party's every move and doling out her demands. Tensions are high as the stepchildren discover their potential for freedom and gain confidence from their respective allies. Sarah confronts Mrs. Boynton about her merciless control over the stepchildren and claims that her illness will be her end, as she has an "appointment with death." The frustrated Raymond tells Lennox, "Someone must kill her." Ginevra is found carrying a knife professing that she must protect herself from her family members. Nadine confronts Mrs. Boynton about her control over Lennox and Lennox claims that he must be freed from his stepmother. Soon afterward Mrs. Boynton is found dead, still sitting at the mouth of the cave, apparently having died of heart failure.

Colonel Carbery makes an appearance as the head of the Transjordanian Police, investigating the sudden death of Mrs. Boynton. Clues lead to each of the family members and some of their companions as possible murder suspects. While the passing of Mrs. Boynton outwardly relieves each member of the party, they soon recognize her influence lives on. Although each has professed innocence, they each suspect the others of the deed. The family is temporarily immobilized by these suspicions as they sit in the very spot where Mrs. Boynton died, once again unmovable. They are saved by Sarah's detective work as she analyzes Mrs. Boynton's pathological mind and, aided by Miss Pryce's observations of Mrs. Boynton "taking dope," Sarah concludes that she committed suicide, carefully constructing clues surrounding her death implicating each of her stepchildren. The family is saved from the eternal control and torture of Mrs. Boynton, and all go on to a better life.

B. ACTIVITIES FOR APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH

- Comparing the Play and the Novel

The play is based on a novel of the same name that appeared in 1930, but there is one important difference between the two. In the novel Hercule Poirot is the detective who, while traveling for pleasure, solves the crime. In addition, the murderer of the novel is innocent in the play. Students could re-plot the play with Hercule Poirot in it. Likewise, they could write their own dramatization of the novel.

- Fictionalizing Real People

It is believed that Lady Westholme, one of the vacationers, is modeled after Lady Astor. Students can research Lady Astor and compare their similarities and differences. They can then try their hand at including a real, fictionalized character in their own writing.

C. DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH

- The Role of Nationality in the Play

Agatha Christie emphasizes the guest's nationalities as they check into the hotel and throughout the play. The play's exotic, Eastern locale and the nationalities of the servants are also noted. It is important to keep in mind that the novel on which this play was based was written during the British colonial period. You might ask students these questions: What statements are made about nationality and character? Are these stereotypes? How does nationality play a role in such issues as legal procedure, personality traits, financial status, social status, and politics? How did the time in which the novel, on which the play is based, affect Christie's treatment of location, characters, and discussions of nationality?

- Status and Power

Status may be altered through exertion of power over others through language, eye contact, physical proximity, body language, social standing or rank, education, emotional context, and money. Discuss the issue of control and the manner in which characters gain control over others. The most obvious example is Mrs. Boynton's control over her stepchildren and others who come in contact with her. Have students also examine Lady Westholme's power with Miss Pryce, Dragoman, and Alderman Higgs. Additional power relationships to investigate include those between Dr. Gerard and Ginevra, Cope and Nadine, Sarah and Raymond.

III. THE HOLLOW (1951)

A. SYNOPSIS

The play begins as Henrietta, Henry, and Lady Angkatell prepare for some regular weekend guests to The Hollow, their home outside of London. Midge Harvey, a cousin, arrives early and learns that her unrequited love, Edward Angkatell will be arriving from his beautiful family estate, Ainswick. When he arrives it is clear that his affections are for the sculpture artist, Henrietta, and he still sees young Midge as a child. The final guests to arrive are the handsome yet brusque Dr. John Cristow and his timid and dim wife, Gerda. It is revealed that Henrietta is John Cristow's mistress, a knowledge that most others have, with the exception of Gerda. It is also discovered that the famous Hollywood actress, Veronica Craye, is staying in the cottage down the lane. John Cristow is alarmed by Ms. Cray's residence being so close by and mentions that he was engaged to her ten years earlier.

That evening before dinner, Edward proposes to Henrietta but is turned down. He claims that she will never marry him as long as John Cristow is around. Veronica Craye then makes a surprise entrance claiming to need a light for her cigarette. Seeing John Cristow, she invites him to visit her in her cottage after dinner to catch up on old times. He accepts and does not return to his own room until 3:00 a.m., sneaking in while Gerda sleeps.

The next morning all are suspicious of John's late night activities with Ms. Craye. They amuse themselves by shooting pistols in the target alley. Meanwhile, Veronica pays a second visit to John confessing that she organized her trip to the estate to see him. She wants him to divorce his wife and marry her. John declines her offer, saying he won't leave her. Veronica vows that she will make him suffer for his refusal and says, "If I can't have you, nobody else shall have you, John." She exits through the terrace. Soon afterward John goes out to the terrace and is shot and killed.

For the rest of the weekend Inspector Colquhoun and Sergeant Penny investigate the murder of John Cristow. Clues and motives lead the Inspector to believe that Gerda, Edward, Henrietta, Lady Angkatell, Gudgeon, and Veronica could have murdered John. Veronica tries to blame Gerda, and Gerda blames Veronica. Henrietta defends Gerda and Lady Angkatell appears to confess to the murder in her own confusing banter. On the morning of the inquest, an official hearing to determine the cause of a suspicious death, Edward finally sees Midge as his one true love and proposes. Midge accepts, but soon thinks that he may be proposing to escape suspicion and turns him down, only to accept again after Edward convinces her of his innocence.

After the inquest Henrietta gets Gerda to confess that she killed John. Gerda is proud of her act, explaining how no one would have suspected her. Henrietta promises to cover up Gerda's crime and take care of her as this is what John would have wanted. She offers Gerda tea to calm her. Upon Henrietta's return from the kitchen, she sees Gerda slipping poison into her glass of water and avoids drinking it, getting a cup of tea instead. While Henrietta is in the kitchen, the Inspector finds Gerda with a gun. He takes the gun from her and claims to have suspected her all along. Gerda becomes very upset and collapses. The Inspector gives her Henrietta's glass of water. She drinks it and quickly dies as the play comes to a close.

B. ACTIVITIES FOR THE HOLLOW

- Identifying the Red Herrings

The Hollow is filled with red herrings. After making sure that students understand the term, have them identify the red herrings in the play. Here are some of them: Guns are fired regularly in Act II and left in unusual places. Lady Angkatell makes misleading comments, making many believe she is the killer. Gudgeon exhibits odd behavior and Doris accuses him of the murder. Lady Angkatell appears to defend him, drawing even greater attention to Gudgeon and then to herself. Edward claims that John said nothing when he died, while everyone else heard him saying, "Henrietta!" Veronica displays suspiciously threatening behavior before and after the murder. Sir Henry suggests to Midge that Edward has proposed to her to deflect suspicion from himself.

Assign small groups a red herring. Students should prove that it is a red herring based on action from the play.

- Is *The Hollow* a Mystery or Soap Opera?

The Hollow has many similarities to contemporary soap operas. Have students compare the plot and characters of the play to a soap opera of their choice. What are the similarities between the structure of this mystery and any popular TV soap opera? Discuss such elements as: love triangles, secret relationships, tensions inherent in passing on great wealth, how innuendo and gossip leads to suspicion, and how trust is lost and gained. Have students segment *The Hollow* into an episodic soap opera.

- Comparing the Novel and the Play

The novel *The Hollow or Murder After Hours* was written during World War II. Although similar in many ways, the novel and the play are also quite different. The most glaring difference is the absence in the play of detective Hercule Poirot who is prominent in the novel. In *An Autobiography* (1977) Agatha Christie wrote that introducing Poirot in the novel had been a mistake caused by habit. If students read both the novel and the play, they can discuss whether the story is better with or without Christie's famous detective.

More importantly, the novel focuses on the development of the characters, whereas the play is a puzzle mystery centering on the plot. Ask students for their thoughts on why this is. This can lead them to an understanding about the differences in the genre of play and novel. In addition, the novel has some anti-Semitic language that has been removed from the play. A discussion of this language could result in a lively dialogue about attitudes toward Jews throughout Europe during WWII.

C. DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR *THE HOLLOW*

- Plot Twists and Turns

The Hollow begins with a character study as the guests arrive for the weekend. This character study continues for a large part of the play setting up the action for the murder. Then the play continues with plot twists and turns, often caused by red herrings. These confuse the characters as well as the audience. Soon no one trusts anyone else; the characters do not trust each other, and the audience loses confidence in the observations and opinions of the characters. Discuss the effect of this on the audience and the characters. How do the characters treat the topic of trust? How is trust lost or won with each twist or turn of action? Whom does the audience trust?

- Class Distinctions and the Perspective on Work

Discuss with the students the period of British Colonialism in which Agatha Christie lived and set her plays and novels. How did British class distinctions differ from those in North America during the same period? How were they similar? What American works of fiction talk about class distinction? When were these written? How did and does the inheritance system of Great Britain differ from those in North America? How does this system affect how people view work? Some answers can be gleaned from reading the play.

Gudgeon, the butler, gives Doris, the maid, a speech on service with heavy emphasis on how the status of their employers allows them to live comfortably without working. Midge argues that her inheritance does not permit such a life. Discuss how class distinction affects the characters attitudes towards work, play, intelligence, status, character, dignity, and taste. Also discuss how such class distinction affects how characters relate to each other and how the Inspector hopes to find more or less information from some characters than others. What class stereotypes does Agatha Christie debunk in this play?

- The Importance of Stage Directions

Although the play is filled with red herrings, plot twists, and suspicious characters, Inspector Colquhoun appears to be quite forthright until you read one of the last stage directions: "The Inspector crosses to the coffee table, picks up Henrietta's glass, sniffs it, takes it to Gerda and hands it to her." Why did he do this? How do stage directions lead readers, actors, and the audience into a better understanding of the play's subtext? Ask students: Why would the Inspector sniff the glass? Did he purposely give Gerda a poisonous drink? How does this stage direction alter your opinion of the Inspector?

IV. THE MOUSETRAP (1952)

A. SYNOPSIS

Mollie and Giles Ralston are opening their guesthouse, Monkswell Manor, for its first guests. They are new to the business and struggle with the details and an unusually heavy snowstorm. They hear on the radio that a Mrs. Maureen Lyon has been murdered in London and the suspect is wearing a dark overcoat, light scarf, and soft felt hat. Giles is wearing similar outerwear, as are many of the guests. After all the guests have settled in, Mollie receives a phone call from the police station. She is informed that Sergeant Trotter will be coming to the Manor and everyone must fully cooperate with him.

The Sergeant arrives on skis, informing everyone that a notebook was found at the London crime scene, listing the address at which the murder occurred and also that of Monkswell Manor, implying that the guesthouse could be the site of a second murder. Soon after his arrival, the phone lines go dead and all are stranded at the guesthouse in the snowstorm.

Sergeant Trotter informs the group that the rhyme “Three Blind Mice” was written below the addresses, and a picture of three little mice and a bar of music were found on the dead woman’s body. Further, the murdered woman was the wife of a farmer named Stanning. They resided on Longridge Farm, not far from Monkswell Manor. The Stannings allegedly neglected and abused children who were in their care. One child died; his two siblings survived. The Stannings were sentenced to prison. Mr. Stanning died in prison, but Mrs. Stanning served her time, was released, and later changed her name. She was the Maureen Lyon who was murdered and found dead in London.

Sergeant Trotter theorizes that the killer is one of the children, most probably the boy since he later served in the army and was diagnosed a schizophrenic. The Sergeant informs the group that any of them could be the next victim. He interrogates them to see if they have any connection with the Stannings or the abused children. All deny any connections, but Mollie later points out that Mrs. Doyle was the magistrate responsible for sending the three children to Longridge Farm. Later that night while the residents are settled throughout the manor, Mrs. Doyle is found strangled.

For the remainder of the play, the residents of the Manor, including Mollie and Giles, suspect each other. Accusatory clues draw attention to characters acting suspiciously. Sergeant Trotter asks the residents to reconstruct Mrs. Boyle’s murder, acting out the actions of each guest while switching roles so as to test the accuracy of their memories. The Sergeant plays Mrs. Boyle. When everyone is in position, he calls for Mollie to come into the parlor. It is then that Trotter reveals that he is Georgie, the surviving boy who was abused by the Stannings. Further, he claims that Mollie was his teacher and that he had sent her a note asking for help which she ignored. Mollie confesses that she was his teacher, but was sick when the note was sent and did not receive it until after the children had left the Stanning’s care. She has lived with the guilt ever since. Georgie attempts to strangle Mollie, but is thwarted by Miss Casewell and Major Metcalf. Miss Casewell confesses that she is Katherine, Georgie’s grown sister. She calmly coaxes Georgie upstairs and gives him a sedative to calm him until the police arrive. Major Metcalf reveals that he is an undercover policeman who has played the role of a guest. He had suspected Trotter all along, but needed proof. The play ends with Mollie and Giles exchanging anniversary presents as the work of their guesthouse continues.

B. ACTIVITIES FOR THE MOUSETRAP

- Disguises and Double Identities

Several of the characters have double identities, worn like actors’ masks. Have students discuss each character’s double identity and how he or she wears the mask throughout the play, occasionally dropping it to reveal her or his true identity in words in actions. Some characters to consider are Trotter, Mollie, Paravicini, Miss Cantwell, and Major Metcalf.

Students can compose letters or stories that reveal the characters true identities. For example, Mollie could pen a letter of apology to Georgie. Or, they can create two masks for each character, each revealing another element of her or his identity.

- Nursery Rhyme as Plot

Read the nursery rhyme “Three Blind Mice” and discuss how it provides the structure for the play’s plot. Compare the nursery rhyme plot structure in this play with that of *Ten Little Indians*. Have students locate other common nursery rhymes, folk tales or famous stories used to provide the structure of popular movies or TV dramas. Examples include *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*. Bring to class a book on children’s literature and read about how nursery rhymes are constructed. Discuss why they provide a good plot structure for other types of literature, particularly drama.

- Selecting a Title

The Mousetrap is based on the nursery rhyme “Three Blind Mice.” Although Christie’s original radio play shared the title of the rhyme, it was changed when Peter Saunders, Christie’s longtime director and friend, remembered another moderately successful play of the same title. Is the name *The Mousetrap* appropriate for the play? Why? What else might it have been titled?

B. DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR THE MOUSETRAP

- The Nightmare: Being Suspicious of Everyone

In Act Two, Mollie is distraught by all the suspicious clues that are making her question even her own husband’s integrity. She describes her feelings in the following passage, “That’s what happens in a nightmare. You’re somewhere in the middle

of friends and then you suddenly look at their faces and they're not your friends any longer—they're different people—just pretending. Perhaps you can't trust anybody—perhaps everybody's a stranger" (355). Draw a diagram of how the nightmare developed in *The Mousetrap*. Is the audience affected by the nightmare as the characters are? How does Christie plant doubt and suspicion in the minds of the characters, through actions rather than words, so that those seeing him or her are suspicious?

- The Longest Continuously Running Play In History

The Mousetrap has been running continuously in London's Ambassadors Theatre since 1952. Ask if any of the students have seen the play. What has kept this play popular for so long? What elements draw audiences year after year? What would make you want to see the play? Does reading it make the prospect of seeing it more or less appealing? Why? Research reviews about the play and determine what contributes to its long-running success. Note that the actors change every few years. How would changing the actors help keep the play alive and entertaining?

V. WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION (1953)

A. SYNOPSIS

This play is a legal thriller with many unexpected twists and turns and seeks to find who has killed Miss Emily French, "a maiden lady, living alone but for an elderly housekeeper?" (394) The opening scene of the play takes place in the private office of Sir Wilfrid Robarts. Q.C. Mr. John Mayhew, a solicitor, brings Leonard Vole to meet with the renowned Sir Robarts. Vole fears that he is about to be arrested for the murder of Miss French, as all evidence seems to indicate that he is guilty. By his own admission, Vole is "a bit of a drifter" (392), unable to keep a job. He describes himself as an inventor of gadgets. While in the military, he met his wife Romaine, a German actress, who was living in the Russian sector of East Germany. He rescued her by bringing her back to England and "marrying" her.

As Mayhew questions Vole he paints a grim picture of the case against him. Miss French was an elderly lady with few friends. After a chance encounter with Miss French, Vole cultivated a relationship with her, excluding his wife Romaine from their meetings. Vole is an attractive and personable young man who claims that he thought of Miss French as an elderly aunt. According to Vole, her interest in him was also based solely upon friendship.

Even so, briefly before her death Miss French changed her will so that her entire estate went to Vole. He claims to have not known that, although he admits he assumed she had money and was hopeful she would advance some to him for his latest gadget invention. Vole seems to be forthright and honest in his descriptions of what occurred and does not attempt to hide anything from the solicitors. He admits to being in financial difficulty and to advising Miss French on her investments.

Sir Wilfrid points to how bad this might appear to the jury, "Now, Mr. Vole . . . You were in low water financially, you had the handling of this lady's affairs. Now did you at any time convert to your own use the securities that you handled?" (399) Sir Wilfrid suggests to Vole that if he answers this in the affirmative, he could be vindicated because it would lead the jury to believe that he had no motive for murdering her. She was worth more to him alive. However, Vole answers forthrightly, "I assure you, Sir Wilfred, I played dead strait" (399).

The only person who can provide an alibi that Vole was home at the time of the murder is Romaine, and she meets with the solicitors next. She learns that Vole has been arrested for the murder, but that Mayhew and Sir Wilfrid believe in his innocence. They tell her that they understand her wifely devotion. She hedges, using language that suggests that Vole's interpretation of their relationship might not be accurate. She also makes it clear that she and Vole are not married. Although she gives Vole an alibi, his innocence seems doubtful. However, ultimately, the solicitors find her ungrateful and "cool as a cucumber" (414) and believe in their client.

The second act moves to the courtroom. We hear the testimony of Inspector Hearne, who reports that the broken window does not appear to have been smashed from the outside of the house and further, that nothing was stolen, including jewelry the deceased was wearing. Next, the housekeeper Janet Mackenzie tells of her long devotion to Miss French and her suspicion of Vole. She explains that she returned to the house the night of the murder to collect something she had forgotten and heard a voice she believed to be Vole's. Her testimony is negated because she suffers from a hearing loss. A knife wound that occurred while he was slicing ham explains testimony about blood discovered on Vole's jacket cuffs. Although the evidence against him is significant, Vole's solicitors are scoring points with the jury. Romaine's testimony, however, points to his guilt. She testifies for the prosecution that Vole did not return home until after the murder and admitted to killing Miss French.

Despite Vole's convincing testimony and his appealing personality, he seems sure to be convicted. Back in their chambers the solicitors agonize over the case when a "flamboyantly but cheaply dressed" (458) blond-haired woman is ushered in. She claims to have evidence that will free Vole—letters written by Romaine. She reveals a scarred, disfigured cheek and claims that her boyfriend did this after she discovered him with Romaine. Her contentions confirm the solicitor's opinion of Romaine.

The letters are, indeed, in Romaine's handwriting. They seem to support the existence of this man Max and Romaine's relationship with him. Leonard tries to protect Romaine in court, protesting that it is not true. The letters to Max seem to show that Romaine was framing Vole to gain her freedom. Sir Wilfrid tricks her into confirming the veracity of the letters by stating something that was not in them that she denies having written. "So, you know what is in the letter – before I have read it" (468). Vole protests her innocence, "Romaine, tell him you didn't write it." She replies, "Of course I wrote it" (469). Leonard Vole is acquitted.

However, Christie provides an ironic coda to vindication with a final twisting of the tale. Readers soon learn that Romaine is the "flamboyantly but cheaply dressed" woman. Her initial testimony against Vole was to make the jury and solicitors dislike and distrust her. She wrote the letters, but there was no Max. She is an actress, as we were told early in the play, and she has played her best part. Her testimony and the letters have freed Vole even though he was guilty of the crime. However, the play is not yet over—there is one final, unbelievable twist. The court had heard early testimony about Vole being seen with a blond woman, yet the revelation about Romaine's character had pushed this to the background. But now, the blond does appear to claim her lover, Leonard Vole. He confesses to loving this girl, not Romaine. In a passionate rage, Romaine picks up the kitchen knife from the evidence table and fatally stabs Leonard Vole, her beloved husband whom she had protected so well.

B. ACTIVITIES FOR WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION

- Discovering Courtroom Dramas

Courtroom drama has been very popular over the years on stage, television, and in the movies. Have students list courtroom dramas they have seen, including some of the docu-dramas appearing on television today. Show a videotape of an old *Perry Mason* episode. Discuss the similarities and differences between Christie's play, the *Perry Mason* mini-drama, and the virtual courtroom dramas of today. Another twist on this activity is to explore novels that are set in courtrooms. Students might read and discuss the works of such attorney authors as British novelist Jeffrey Archer and American John Grisham.

British legal procedure as shown in Christie's plays may be different from what students have come to expect from television courtroom dramas. Ask them to define the difference in Britain between a queen's counsel and a solicitor. Does the inquest take a different form of a grand jury hearing in the U.S.: In Christie's *The Verdict* (see p. 22 of this guide) would the accused Professor Handruyk be allowed to go home while an American jury deliberated?

- Classroom Courtroom Drama

This is an excellent play for a readers' theater production. There are almost enough speaking parts for every student to have a role. Several students might play the parts of Leonard Vole, Romaine, Sir Wilfrid, and Mayhew. A different cast can be assigned to each of the three acts. Each act can be practiced in a small group, with one member acting as the director (perhaps a student with some acting experience). If there is time, the entire play can be read as a reader's theater production in class.

C. DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION

- Red Herrings

Discuss with students how writers plant *red herrings*, or false evidence, in mysteries to lead readers in the wrong direction. Not only are the readers and the audience misled by Christie's many red herrings in this play, but so are the jury, the solicitors, and even Romaine.

Have students brainstorm and list all the red herrings. Discuss the conclusions or incorrect impressions they lead us to. Examine whether the concept of a red herring exists in real life detection.

- Foreshadowing – How did we miss that point?
-

Have students go back and remember all of the foreshadowing Christie used. For example: What was Romaine's profession? How about Greta's line, "The wrong wife got the money" (388). Or, her amusing quotations, "The Law's an Ass" (389), "We're probably three credulous fools" (407), and "It's not as thick as the fog we're in over Mrs. Heilger's antics" (453). How do these foreshadow the conclusion of the play?

- Exploring Theme: What is justice?

If this play has a theme, the ambiguity of justice must be it. Have students search the play for evidence of the theme. Here are some examples: "The Law . . . is a serious business and should be treated accordingly" (388); "Our English judicial system is . . . the finest in the world" (391); The case of Adolf Beck is discussed on page 391; "It gives me satisfaction to beat anyone" (393); "Nine out of twelve jurors believe a foreigner is lying anyway" (405); "We believe, you know, that our British system of justice upholds the truth" (474).

- Irony in Mystery is Fun

Mystery is always filled with examples of irony. Most of the quotes above are interesting examples to explore. Here are a few more: Sir Wilfrid and Mayhew discuss Vole's relationship with Romaine. "He's in love with her all right. And trusts her completely." "More fool he. Never trust a woman" (414). Romaine disguised as the blood-haired woman says to Sir Wilfrid, "Didn't recognize you without your wig" (458). Discuss or have students write about the irony in each of these. Then have students find other examples that they enjoy.

- Literary Allusions

Have students seek the allusion to Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* if they have previously studied it. Of course, it's the many references to the blood on Vole's cuffs that will not wash out (424). Discuss or have them write about the point of this allusion, both here and in the play *Macbeth*.

- What's in a Name?

Readers of Dame Agatha's works know that her names are often very telling. She has a wonderful time with names in *Ten Little Indians*, for example. Although she does not use acronyms in this play, she does have fun playing with the name of the prisoner: Leonard Vole. Ask students: What is a vole? What is the humor in this name? What do we know about the character as soon as we know his name? Have students make up names that describe the personality or character traits of famous people in history.

V. TOWARDS ZERO (1956)

A. Synopsis

Towards Zero is a play that utilizes one of Agatha Christie's favorite settings: the drawing room of a seaside home, this one in Cornwall. Even before the first word is spoken, the mystery commences—Kay Strange tears a picture from its frame, rips it in half, and throws it in the waste can. We are introduced to Thomas Royde who has been living out in the wilds of the British Empire. In his conversation with Mary Aldin, Lady Tressilian's lady-in-waiting, we learn who the other guests are for this intriguing summer holiday: Nevile Strange and his new wife Kay, the estranged Mrs. Audrey Strange, old Mr. Matthew Treves, and Kay Strange's good-looking young friend Ted Latimer. As Royde and Mary agree, the list of guests is "very odd indeed" (481).

We learn that Lady Tressilian and Audrey were partial to Adrian, Thomas's more gregarious brother who was killed in a motor accident two years before. In fact, it is suggested that Audrey was in love with him, while Thomas quietly pined for her. Everyone is critical of Nevile's treatment of Audrey, encouraging her to come to Gull's Point when he was bringing his new wife there as well. Kay is looked upon as the "creature" that came between Nevile and Audrey.

Audrey confides in Thomas that something is not right about the house. Thomas confesses that he has always hated Nevile. He suggests that she should forget the past and find a future with him. Nevile encourages Audrey to go swimming with Kay and him. Kay begs Nevile to take her home. He refuses and Kay joins Ted on the beach. Nevile, when chastised by Lady Tressilian for his poor manners, refers to Audrey as his wife, momentarily forgetting he is married to Kay.

Audrey confides in Treves, a solicitor, that she is not set financially and is forced to work. Treves tries to convince her to take money from Nevile and that she is being foolish. When Mary calls Audrey to go to Lady Tressilian, Mary and Treves agree that it is Audrey who planned to be at Gull's Point with Nevile, not the other way around.

The next scene takes place at the house after dinner four days later. The various conversations build tension and intrigue. Kay tells Latimer that she is afraid. They have a row, and we learn that Latimer cares for Kay. She professes to not have married Nevile for his money. They talk about Mary and how she slaves for “that unpleasant old woman” (501), meaning Lady Tressilian, and won't get any of her wealth—all is willed to Nevile and his wife. Kay assumes she is the wife who will inherit the estate. We see how on edge Kay is when she reacts angrily to Nevile. After Kay leaves, Nevile tells Audrey, “You're my wife, Audrey. You always will be” (503). Mary talks about how the tension in the house is exhausting her. She worries that she may not hear Lady Tressilian's bell if she rings it during the night. Latimer tells Mary how bitter he is about Nevile and Kay; he suggests that Mary too must be bitter. She says she is not, but admits she has had no life of her own. She wishes for just “a little money—not very much—just enough” (505). Kay overhears Nevile telling Audrey he wants a divorce from Kay. Everyone else goes to bed and Kay and Nevile have a very loud argument that ends with Kay leaving the room sobbing as a brilliant flash of lightening and a rolling burst of thunder announce the storm and the curtain falls.

Act Two opens on the day after the storm. Nevile and Kay continue their fight as Kay blames Audrey for turning Nevile against her. Just as Treves negotiates a truce, Audrey announces that Mary cannot be awakened. The doctor is summoned and Audrey takes tea to Lady Tressilian. They discuss whether Mary might have taken something to make her sleep, and Treves points out that she wouldn't do that because she was already anxious about not hearing Lady Tressilian's bell. Audrey returns, announcing that Lady Tressilian is dead, not from a heart attack, but from a brutal attack.

Superintendent Battle conducts an investigation. The weapon is discovered to be a golf club, called a niblick. Nevile's prints are found on the club. Blood and hair specimens are also found on the club. Several people talk about a loud fight between Lady Tressilian and Nevile the night before. Water is found around the basin in Nevile's room, and blood is found on the cuffs of his dinner jacket. Nevile claims to have changed clothes after his arguments with Kay and then Lady Tressilian and taken the 10:30 p.m. ferry to the hotel across the bay. According to Nevile, he joined Ted Latimer for a few drinks and a game of billiards. Latimer drove him home, arriving at about 2:30 a.m.

Other pieces of evidence are presented. Lady Tressilian had little money of her own. Her husband's estate provided for her lifetime support and was in a trust for Nevile and his wife Audrey. Kay will receive none of the estate. Royde reports having heard a strange noise in the attic that he attributes to rats. Kay puts all of the blame for Nevile's behavior on Audrey. Audrey and Treves both insist that Nevile could not be the murderer. Although Superintendent Battle thinks that the evidence points to Nevile, it is too obvious and wrong. Battle thinks that the niblick seems to indicate an unpremeditated murder done in anger; the drugging of Mary seems to suggest premeditation. Mary keeps Nevile's arrest from occurring when she insists on coming downstairs to talk with the Superintendent. She tells him that she saw Nevile leave and afterward went to see Lady Tressilian who was still alive.

Superintendent Battle presents a glove to the group. They all deny it belongs to them. He asks each woman to try it on, and Audrey says it may be hers but denies any knowledge of why it would have been found buried in the ivy outside her bedroom window. Superintendent Battle and Nevile meet privately, and the inspector shows Nevile the real weapon—a steel-headed poker. Although it had been cleaned and put back in its place, bloodstains were found on it. Audrey's hairs are the fair ones found on the collar of Nevile's dinner jacket. Her powder is also found on the jacket. The mate of the glove he'd asked the women to try on is covered with blood. Royde interrupts when he overhears Audrey's name, revealing that he had come to Gull's Point to propose marriage to her. The Superintendent suggests that Audrey committed the crime not for money, but for revenge against Nevile. Battle tells Nevile that he plans to arrest Audrey.

Royde tells the story. Audrey left Nevile for Adrian. Adrian was killed in a car accident on his way to meet her, and Nevile agreed to take the blame for the divorce. Royde points out that Audrey does not hate Nevile; she is grateful to him. Kay overhears and says that, of course, Audrey is guilty. Battle says he may have been wrong about the motive, but Audrey is still guilty. The motive must have been the money. Battle arrests Audrey.

The final scene begins with Nevile defending Audrey's innocence. Treves tells Nevile that he does not believe there is any hope of proving that Audrey is not guilty. Treves sends for Latimer. Battle arrives. Treves tells Royde that he remembers the point he'd made about the mystery he had been reading. “The murder should not be the beginning of the story but the end . . . Zero Hour” (553). The murder was not Lady Tressilian's, but Audrey's. Audrey had been arrested to protect her. The rats in the attic Royde had heard were actually someone disposing of a wet rope that had been used to climb up the side of the house during the storm. At first it appears that he is accusing Latimer, but soon it becomes clear that it is the athletic Nevile who could swim the estuary and climb the rope into the house to murder Lady Tressilian. He did this, framing himself first and later Audrey, to get her to hang for a murder she did not commit. He hates her because she left him for Adrian. Nevile admits his crime but escapes by breaking a window and flinging himself down the rocks. Believing him to be killed, the men leave to find his body. Audrey is left alone in the house. Nevile returns, telling Audrey that he

had thrown a stool through the window and had hung on the ledge of the rock. He attempts to strangle Audrey, but is stopped by the returning police officers. Royde returns, at first not seeing Audrey. When he sees her he asks, "Are you all right?" She goes to his outstretched arms and laughing says, "Am I all right? Oh, Thomas!" And, the curtain falls.

B. ACTIVITIES FOR TOWARDS ZERO

- Become a Detective

Do this activity before reading the final scene of the play. Using a technique frequently suggested in detective stories, put each possible clue on an index card and put them in order to attempt to determine the murderer. This can be done in small groups with each group determining its own scenario. Each group can then dramatically present its conclusion to the class.

- Researching the British West Coast

This activity can be accomplished in small groups. Using a map of Great Britain, locate the approximate setting for the play. Find out as much information about Cornwall as possible. Present a travelogue to the class.

- Drawing Room Drama

Ask students to guess what takes place in a drawing room. What would be the nearest equivalent in a modern suburban house or apartment? Ask students to define a Drawing Room Drama and write a list of plays that fit this description.

- Comparing the Play to the Novel

Towards Zero is based on the novel of the same title published in England in 1944. For the most part the novel and the play are similar. However, there are some intriguing characters left out of the play. The novel is more intricate than the play and includes Angus MacWhirter, who had a failed suicide attempt and rescues another, later in the novel, from a would-be suicide. One of the most interesting characters in the novel that does not appear in the play is Don, the wire-haired terrier who finds an important clue. Students can first read the play and then later read the novel, making a list of those elements included in the novel but eliminated from the play. It is important to discuss why Christie would choose to leave out these elements. This activity and discussion can lead to composing an original play from another Christie novel.

- Poet Robert Graves

If students have read the novel, they will note that it is dedicated to Robert Graves. They should research the poet and be prepared to discuss why *Towards Zero* carries this dedication.

C. DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR TOWARDS ZERO

Each small group can select one of the following research/discussion topics and present what they have learned to the class.

- Henry the Eighth

Lady Tressilian suggests that Neville is behaving like Henry the Eighth (486). What does she mean by this? On the surface it may appear she means one thing, but she may actually be foreshadowing the end of the play. Discuss Henry the Eighth and how his actions are similar to Neville's.

- Guy Fawkes

Who is Guy Fawkes? (A British conspirator of the late 16th century executed for his part in the Gunpowder Plot.) Why do Treves and Lady Tressilian refer to him? How does this add to the play's suspense?

- Love Triangles

There are two love triangles in this play. Identify them. What are the twists in these love triangles? What is a love triangle? What other famous love triangles have you read about or seen on film? Why are they so often a part of the plot of a suspense novel, play or movie?

- A Play in Three Acts

Why does Agatha Christie have three acts in her plays? What occurs in each of the acts? How does the three-act format build suspense? Reread what Treves says about the detective story Royde was reading (553). How does this relate to the three acts of this play?

- Predestination

One has to accept predestination, or at least to suspend disbelief, in order to understand the title *Towards Zero* and the lines spoken in the play and appearing in the novel. “The murder should not be the beginning of the story but the end . . . *Zero Hour*” (553). Christie’s assertion in these works is that destiny leads us toward the decisive zero hour. Have students discuss the meaning of pre-destination and how it shapes this play.

- 6. Building Suspense

Have students examine the play to determine how Christie builds suspense. Here are some examples:

- “Yes, there is a suggestion of gunpowder in the air. One little spark might set off an explosion.” (488)
- Kay blames Audrey, “You’ve done all the mischief you wanted to do, haven’t you?” (506)
- Battle asks Neville, “Who hates you, Mr. Strange? Hates you so much that they wanted you to be hanged for a murder you didn’t commit?” (538)

VI. VERDICT (1958)

A. SYNOPSIS

Verdict is unusual in that it is not Christie’s typical murder mystery. Although a murder does occur during the play, it is committed in full view of the audience and there is no mystery surrounding it. The plot revolves around Professor Karl Hendryk, his crippled, chronically ill wife Anya, and his secretary and Anya’s companion and cousin Lisa Koletzky. They have immigrated to England from an unspecified, totalitarian Eastern European country.

The play is also unusual in that it is not really a story of murder, but, instead, the study of the mind of an intellectual idealist. Perhaps, for this reason, it was Christie’s least successful play, booed by its first-night audience. However, in her autobiography, Christie called it her best play, with the exception of *Witness for the Prosecution*.

Helen Rollander, a very self-centered female student, falls in love with Professor Hendryk. She asks him to become her tutor, but he refuses because she is not a serious student. Lisa tells him he is foolish to only take students who cannot pay. This is the first evidence of the professor’s idealism. Helen’s father, one of England’s wealthiest and most powerful men, convinces Hendryk to change his mind. Sir William Rollander does this by bribing the Professor—not with money, but with the promise of a cure for Anya. The Professor knows that a cure cannot be guaranteed, but Sir William offers to use his influence to have her admitted to an American experiment that has had positive outcomes for people with her ailment.

Even with the best of motives, Professor Hendryk’s decisions continually lead to disaster. This is the point Christie made in her autobiography. According to Christie, the idealist is always dangerous and frequently destroys those who love him. Lisa tells the Professor this in the play.

The Professor’s decision to take Helen as a student leads to her giving Anya a lethal dose of her heart medicine. However, the play does not end with Anya’s murder. The Professor’s unwillingness to tell the police what he knows about Helen results in Lisa’s arrest for Helen’s crime. After Lisa’s arrest, Professor Hendryk finally attempts to reveal to the police what he knows. Yet his honesty backfires when it comes to light that Helen has been killed while crossing the street. The police assume the Professor is attempting to pin the murder on Helen because she is dead and cannot defend herself.

It appears that Lisa’s conviction is likely when Mrs. Roper, the nosey housekeeper, testifies that she saw Lisa and the Professor in a loving embrace. Her testimony is true, but the Professor had honestly always loved his wife at the same time that he secretly loved Lisa. The embrace occurred when Lisa insinuated that part of the reason why the Professor did not want to turn Helen in to the police was because she was young and beautiful. Not wanting Lisa to believe that he was in love with Helen, the Professor took Lisa in his arms and assured her of his love for her.

The Professor cannot remain in the courtroom while the jury deliberates. He and Anya’s doctor return to his home, where he nervously awaits the verdict. Finally, he sends the doctor back to the court. Shortly thereafter Lisa returns home telling him that she has been found innocent. When he attempts to embrace her, she tells him she is leaving. She lectures him about how his idealism has always hurt those he loves and she is not willing to endure the hurt. “You put ideas first, not people. Ideas of loyalty and friendship and pity. And because of that the people who are near, suffer. . . . Because of your ideas, because of your mercy and compassion for the girl who killed your wife, you sacrificed me” (641-2). Lisa further

tells the Professor that he is just like Helen, “ruthless.” He begs her not to leave, but she walks out. When the Doctor returns to say that Lisa has been acquitted, the Professor says she has left him. The Doctor suggests that she is probably right – he is dangerous. The Professor recites the words of Walter Savage Landor that have been repeated throughout the play, “There are no fields of Amaranth this side of the grave” (645). However, those that know the work of Agatha Christie, realize that she will not end the play in this way. Lisa does return, kneels beside the Professor, and when he asks why, she says, “Because I am a fool” (646). And, with those words, the curtain closes.

B. ACTIVITIES FOR THE VERDICT

- Citing Other Works of Literature

Usually when a playwright or novelist cites a work of literature there is a good reason. Research the life and work of Walter Savage Landor. Lines from his *Imaginary Conversations* are quoted in the play: “There are no fields of Amaranth this side of the grave. There are no voices, oh Rhodope, that are not soon mute, however tuneful: there is no name, with whatever emphasis of passionate love repeated, of which the echo is not faint at last.” What do they mean? Since they are rather obscure, it might be fun to have a contest. The first student or small group of students who identify the meaning of these lines wins. (Note: They were also obscure to Christie’s audience. She had wanted to call the play *No Field of Amaranth*, but this title was rejected. In fact, even she misquotes Landor’s line in her autobiography. The lines were partially defined in the program and also in the acting edition of the play. Amaranth, according to these sources, is a plant, also called “Loves-lies-bleeding.” It has an imaginary flower that never fades, derived from the Greek *amarantos*, never fading.)

- Exploring Relationships

The relationships between the characters in this play are rather unusual. Have students compose letters that were written but not sent by Professor Hendryk to Lisa Koletzky, Anya, and Helen. Or have them write a letter written by Helen, Anya or Lisa to the Professor but not seen by him.

C. DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR THE VERDICT

- Exploring Theme

The theme of *The Verdict* is very different from Agatha Christie’s other plays. Have students discuss and write about the theme. What does it mean to be an idealist? Idealism is often thought of as a virtue. Does Christie consider it to be a virtue? How can idealism be dangerous? To whom can it be dangerous? Give examples from history of when idealism was a virtue and when it was dangerous. This play was written in 1958, what historical/political events might have led Christie to script a play about the dangers of idealism?

- Memorable Lines

The Verdict has many memorable lines that are worth quoting, discussing, and writing about. Here are a few:

- Sir William Rollander to the Professor, “The Spanish have a proverb, ‘Take what you want and pay for it, says God.’” (587)
 - The Professor, “I’m a very simple man.”
Lisa, “Yes. That’s what’s so frightening about you.” (590)
 - Anya, “Men...only think of their ideas of what is right, or just, or one’s duty.” (605)
 - Helen, “I killed your wife. I’m not ashamed of it. People who are sick and worn out and useless should be removed so as to leave room for the ones who matter.” (618)
 - The Professor, “Is it wrong to feel pity? Can mercy ever be wrong?”
Lisa, “It can lead to a lot of unhappiness.” (620)
 - Lisa, “She always has got everything she wanted all her life.”
The Professor, “That’s just what has been her tragedy. She has never had a chance.” (621)
 - Lisa, “You put ideas first, not people. Ideas of loyalty and friendship and pity. And because of that the people who are near, suffer.” (641)
-

VII. GO BACK FOR MURDER (1960)

A. SYNOPSIS

This is an interesting tale with psychological overtones. It focuses on a young woman (Carla LaMarchant or Carla Crale) who does not believe her mother (Caroline Crale) murdered her father (Amyas Crale) sixteen years earlier. To prove her point, she convinces Justin Fogg, the son of her mother's solicitor, to reassemble the cast of characters who might have been involved in the murder at her parent's, now abandoned, country home.

Carla and her fiancé Jeff Rogers travel from Canada to visit Justin Fogg's London office. Justin was a young man when his father defended Caroline Crale, but he secretly loved her. Carla looks much like her mother, though her temperament seems very different. Carla tells Fogg that she doesn't think she can marry Jeff until she proves her mother's innocence. Upon her mother's death, Carla received a letter that her mother had written from prison. In the letter Caroline revealed Carla's true identity (Carla had been adopted by a French Canadian family) and professed her innocence of the murder of Carla's famous father. Carla's father was a well-known painter and notorious lover, falling in love and having affairs with the women he painted.

Initially, Fogg resists Carla's request. However, when Jeff takes him aside and tells him he is uncomfortable marrying Carla without knowing if her mother was a murderer, Justin decides to help. Prior to arranging the gathering at Alderbury, the Crale country home, Carla visits with those who were closest to her parents. She discovers that everyone has a different version of the events leading up to the murder. Also, she learns that no two people perceived Caroline and Amyas the same way.

Act Two takes place mostly in flashback at Alderbury. The events leading to the murder and immediately following are acted out by the cast. The audience meets the beautiful Elsa, model for Amyas's most famous painting, which still hangs on the wall at Alderbury. Since the house was abandoned immediately following the murder, it remains much as it did sixteen years ago. We learn that Elsa and Amyas were planning to marry and that she had made sure that Caroline knew. Elsa announced, "When I am living here I shall throw all this rubbish out" (711). Caroline tells Elsa, "I'd kill Amyas before I'd give him up to you" (712).

Everyone has a motive to kill Amyas, as it seems that he treats everyone badly. Angela, Caroline's much younger sister, who was cut by Caroline out of jealousy when she was a baby, is introduced. Angela is being sent away to boarding school and blames Amyas. Elsa is angry that Amyas won't confront Caroline about his love for her and is more interested in painting her than in her. He yells at Elsa because she does not seem to recognize how important his art is; if she creates a scene, it could ruin his opportunity to paint her. Even his neighbor and good friend Meredith is furious at Amyas. Near the end of the scene, they all go for an evening drink at Meredith's home and tour the laboratory where he makes "cordials and potions" (716). When Angela asks how Socrates committed suicide he replies, that it was by using conine. Later Meredith reports to his brother Philip that conine is missing from his laboratory.

Amyas confesses to Caroline that nothing can stop him from marrying Elsa. Caroline says, "Do as you please—I'm warning you" (722). When Elsa does not recognize *La Gioconda* as the Italian name for the *Mona Lisa*, Amyas berates her for her stupidity. A few minutes later Caroline brings Amyas the bottle of beer he has asked Angela to fetch for him. Shortly thereafter Amyas complains of stiffness, and everyone else goes into the house for lunch. When they return to the patio, they find Amyas on the ground. Miss Williams, Angela's nanny, pronounces him dead.

Caroline had brought Amyas his beer and has the most obvious reason to murder him, thus, she is arrested for the crime. But did she do it? The cast of characters now gathered at Alderbury argues about whether she is the murderer. In true Agatha Christie fashion, the tables are turned. Miss Williams, who seems to be the only one without a reason to murder Amyas, had provided the evidence that convicted Caroline—she saw her wipe her fingerprints from Amyas's beer bottle. However, Justin points out that no conine was found in the bottle; it was found in the glass. Therefore, if Caroline had been the murderer she would have known where the poison was and would have cleaned off the glass. Caroline was trying to protect Angela, believing that she had put the poison in the bottle. Caroline had been contemplating suicide if Amyas left her and had stolen the conine from the laboratory the previous evening. But just before lunch a dying Amyas told her he intended to leave Elsa as soon as the painting was completed, just as he had loved and left all the other girls he had painted. She recognized that he would return to her, and she was willing to accept him on those terms. Caroline, however, criticized Amyas for the way he was treating Elsa. Elsa overheard the conversation between Caroline and Amyas in which he said, "I'll send her packing" (740). She went and found the bottle of conine, put the poison in a phial, poured the beer from the bottle into a glass, and placed the poison in the glass. When Elsa admits her crime, Carla says she wants no further revenge—Elsa had already been sentenced by having to live with murdering the man she loved. The play ends with Justin Fogg telling Carla she is now free to return to Canada and marry Jeff. Caroline tells Justin it is not Jeff she wants to marry. She wants to marry an English husband.

B. ACTIVITIES FOR GO BACK FOR MURDER

- Comparing the Play to the Novel

The play was based on the novel *Five Little Pigs* (1942); published in the U.S. as *Murder in Retrospect* (1942). She changed many aspects of the novel to make it appropriate for the stage. The major change is in how the recollections of the days before the murder are assembled. The play replaces detective Hercule Poirot with solicitor Justin Fogg. In the novel, Hercule Poirot contacts the five remaining possible murderers and convinces each to write a memoir of the events preceding and immediately following the murder.

Prior to reading the novel, students can assume one of the characters in the play and write her or his memoir of the events.

Another less important difference between the play and the novel is that the novel uses the nursery rhyme “Five Little Pigs” as a plot organizer. After students have read the novel, they can discuss or write about how effective the use of this nursery rhyme is in the novel. Why did Christie remove it from the play? If they have already read *Ten Little Indians*, they can compare the use of the nursery rhyme in this play with the use of the nursery rhyme in the novel *Five Little Pigs* (*Murder in Retrospect*).

- Whose Truth is True?

In this play there are as many different impressions of Caroline and Amyas Crale as there are characters who knew them. Likewise, each of the five people who were present the day of the murder remember the events differently. Have the students individually write a memoir of an important event they have witnessed (preferably in common). Perhaps they can be divided into small groups based on commonly witnessed events: an important football game, a fight in the hallway, an argument between two people that was witnessed by many, etc. They can then compare their memories of the event. Why does each person see it differently? How does previous knowledge or prejudices affect their perceptions? Would it be possible to write one common memoir?

- A Party Game

Agatha Christie loved to use the technique of bringing people together to review the events of a crime. This comes from the British tradition of an inquest prior to a trial. There are numerous party games that use this technique. Research party games and select one to play that deals with the idea that things are seen uniquely through the eyes of each beholder.

- A Trial

Reenact Caroline Crale's trial. Have each witness tell her or his version of the murder. You might want to change the outcome of the trial in true TV drama fashion—at the last moment she is proven innocent and the true murderer is revealed.

- Autobiography or Fiction

Critics have suggested that the novel *Five Little Pigs* and the play *Go Back for Murder* may be fictionalized autobiography. Agatha Christie never spoke or wrote about her three-week disappearance in 1926; however, this novel and play have many curious similarities that suggest she may have been addressing her psychological condition at the time. Students can conduct research on the life of Agatha Christie. They can focus on the 1926 mystery of her disappearance. After doing this research, they can search the play for similarities and conjecture about what Christie might have been revealing about herself at the time of her disappearance.

C. DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR GO BACK FOR MURDER

- The Use of Flashbacks

The play uses flashbacks to reenact the crime. Students can discuss or write about this technique as they have seen it used in other literature, plays, films, or TV dramas. How effectively is it used in this play? Have you seen it used more/less effectively elsewhere? Is there any other way Christie could have told this story? This question might lead to reading and discussing the novel on which the play was based.

- It's All in the Title

The play has one title and the novel two. Have Students brainstorm other titles and discuss. Why was the title of the novel changed for U.S. audience? How does marketing affect the title? Search for examples of unfortunate titles or names of products. How does what something is called affect our willingness to purchase it?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

The Complete Christie: An Agatha Christie Encyclopedia, Matthew Bunson. Pocket Books. September 2000.

An Autobiography: Agatha Christie. Agatha Christie. Berkley Publishing Group. February 1996.

Agatha Christie: Writer of Mystery. Carol Dommermuth-Costa. Lerner Publishing Group. December 1997.

Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries. Gillian Gill. Robson Books, Limited. January 2001.

The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie: A Biographical Companion to the Works of Agatha Christie. Charles Osborne. St. Martin's Press, Inc. May 2001.

The Mystery of Agatha Christie: An Intimate Biography of the Duchess of Death. Gwen Robyns. Viking Penguin. March 1989.

MOVIES

And Then There Were None. Directed by Rene Clair, starring Barry Fitzgerald, Walter Huston and Judith Anderson. 1945. (The short story from which Christie based *Ten Little Indians*.)

Agatha. Directed by Michael Apted, starring Dustin Hoffman, Vanessa Redgrave, and Timothy Dalton. 1979. (A story of Agatha Christie's life starting in 1926.)

Appointment with Death. Directed by Michael Winner, starring Peter Ustinov, Lauren Bacall, Carrie Fisher, John Gielgud and Hayley Mills. 1988.

Ten Little Indians. Directed by Alan Birkinshaw, starring Herbert Lom, Frank Stallone and Donald Pleasence. 1989.

Ten Little Indians. Directed by Peter Collinson, starring Herbert Lom, Richard Attenborough, Elke Sommer, Orson Welles and Oliver Reed. 1975.

Witness for the Prosecution. Directed by Billy Wilder, starring Charles Laughton, Tyrone Power and Marlene Dietrich. 1957.

WEBLIOGRAPHY

MysteryNet.com. According to their site description, *MysteryNet* is the world's leading developer and producer of short-form and interactive mysteries for distribution and syndication across multiple media and platforms, including the Web and wireless phones. *MysteryNet* also provides a free resource, MysteryNet.com, a source of information about and shopping for mystery books, TV, movies, and games. *MysteryNet* is also the official online home for mystery greats Agatha Christie and Nancy Drew. *MysteryNet* provides online mysteries for Sprint PCS and AT&T Wireless. These mysteries are also available on all WAP enabled phones at: wap.MysteryNet.com. *MysteryNet* has marketing and content partnerships with Agatha Christie Ltd., AT&T Wireless, HarperCollins Publishers, MysteryGuild Book Club, Phone.com, Simon & Schuster, and Sprint PCS.

Mysteries.com. The site is produced by A&E and the History Channel. It provides an excellent search engine for other sites on mystery topics, or you can simply search "Agatha Christie" and use the site as a *WebQuest* for your class. The site also offers a link to shop for mystery videos, TV listings, book clubs, mystery site of the week, and a message board to leave messages for other mystery enthusiasts. The site is interactive, allowing for *WebQuest* activities. It offers a mystery quiz, "This Day in Crime History," a Mystery of the Day, and the ability to search over 10,000 mysteries.

Thinkquest.org. This is an excellent site for developing interactive *WebQuest* searches with your students. It is user-friendly, providing you and your students with other *WebQuests* designed by students and teachers from around the world. It also provides initiatives, competitions, and on-line communities with whom your students may interact. On their opening page, they describe the site as follows: "*ThinkQuest* is a global network of students, teachers, parents and technologists dedicated to exploring youth-centered learning on the Net. *ThinkQuest* is an online community where young people learn, teach, mentor, discover, research and grow through *ThinkQuest* programs. The *ThinkQuest* World encompasses young people, educators and technologists in more than 100 nations who come together as digital learners, web creators, and Net entrepreneurs." Here is an example of a *Thinkquest* site that was developed for interactive study in mysteries <http://tqjunior.thinkquest.org/4590>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

LAURA FACCIPONTI is an assistant professor of Drama and head of the acting program at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. She teaches courses in acting, voice production, storytelling, and oral interpretation. Ms. Facciponti is a professional actress, director, storyteller, and playwright. She recently wrote *The Place of the Great Turtle's Back*, a play for young people, based on the folklore and history of the Lenape Indians. While studying theater at Syracuse University and performing with Syracuse Stage, she worked as a teaching artist in the public school system for the Utica Arts in Education Council, designed after New York's Lincoln Center for the Arts in Education Program. Ms. Facciponti was the artistic director and regular performer for World Theatre Works, a folklore-based theatrical company for young audiences which performed folktales in schools and festivals and provided workshops for teachers and librarians on how to incorporate creative dramatics in an educational setting.

ABOUT THE EDITORS OF THIS GUIDE

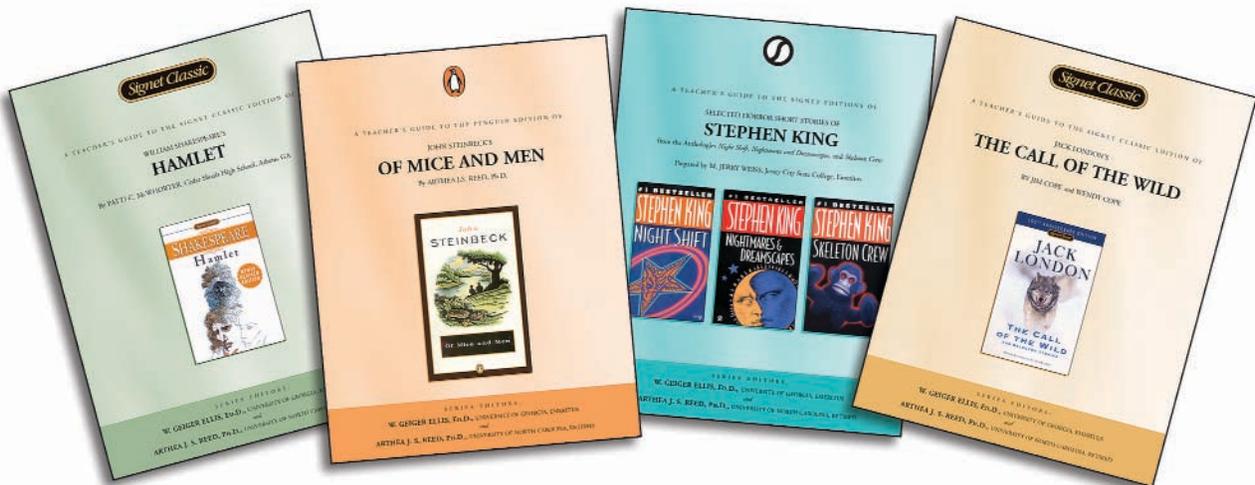
W. GEIGER ELLIS, Professor Emeritus, University of Georgia, received his A.B. and M.Ed. degrees from the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) and his Ed.D. from the University of Virginia. His teaching focused on adolescent literature, having introduced the first courses on the subject at both the University of Virginia and the University of Georgia. He developed and edited *The ALAN Review*.

ARTHEA (CHARLIE) REED, PH.D. is currently a long-term care specialist with Northwestern Mutual Financial Network and senior partner of Long-Term Care and Associates. From 1978 to 1996 she was a professor of education and chairperson of the Education Department at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. She is the author or co-author of 15 books in the fields of adolescent literature, foundations of education, and methods of teaching. She was the editor of *The ALAN Review* for six years and president of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English (ALAN). She is currently co-authoring the 5th edition of *A Guide to Observation, Participation, and Reflection in the Classroom* (McGraw-Hill 2004). She has taught almost every grade from second grade through doctoral candidates. She lives in Asheville, North Carolina with her husband Don, two dogs, and a cat.

FREE TEACHER'S GUIDES

A full list of *Teacher's Guides* and *Teacher's Guides for the Signet Classic Shakespeare Series* is available on Penguin's website at:

www.penguin.com/academic



TEACHER'S GUIDES

Animal Farm • Anthem • Beloved • Beowulf • The Call of the Wild • Cannery Row • City of God • The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories • The Crucible • Death of a Salesman • Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde • Dubliners • Ethan Frome • The Fountainhead • Girl in Hyacinth Blue • The Grapes of Wrath • A Journey to the Center of the Earth • The Jungle • The Life of Ivan Denisovich • Looking Backward • Lysistrata • Main Street • Of Mice and Men • The Mousetrap and Other Plays • A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave • Nectar in a Sieve • 1984 • The Odyssey • The Passion of Artemisia • The Pearl • Persuasion • The Prince and the Pauper • A Raisin in the Sun • The Red Pony • Redwall • The Scarlet Letter • The Scarlet Pimpernel • Silas Marner • A Tale of Two Cities • The Time Machine • Up from Slavery • The Women of Brewster Place • Wuthering Heights

TEACHER'S GUIDES FOR THE SIGNET CLASSIC SHAKESPEARE SERIES

Antony and Cleopatra • As You Like It • Hamlet • Henry V • Julius Caesar • King Lear • Macbeth • Measure for Measure • A Midsummer Night's Dream • Much Ado About Nothing • Othello • Richard III • Romeo and Juliet • The Taming of the Shrew • The Tempest • Twelfth Night

Visit the Penguin Group (USA) web site at www.penguin.com to browse all Signet Classic paperback editions and www.penguin.com/scessay for information about the Annual Signet Classic Scholarship Essay Contest