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## “Murder” They Read

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by Diana Doyle

As a teacher of English I am constantly looking for ways to excite my students about reading. Many of the middle school children I teach are good but reluctant readers, only picking up a book for the dreaded book report. I have tried to interest them in a variety of books from classical mythology to stories of the settling of the American West, with both successes and failures. As I continue to try to convert the unconverted, I look for new approaches and I look for new (at least to my students) books and authors.

I plan to introduce my students to the mystery—a particularly favorite genre of mine. I love to read mysteries of all kinds—gothic lady in distress, hard-boiled detective, spy novels, polite English country house parties, police procedurals and suspense novels: if they are well-written, I love them. However, to initiate children into the joys of mystery reading is not as easy as it sounds. Mystery novels written for middle school children are fine and fun to read, but students can very easily read them on their own. They don't need the guidance of a teacher. However, most adult mysteries are not appropriate for younger readers in terms of language and situation. These books are written for adults and should be read by mature readers. Where do we find good mysteries for younger readers to learn about and enjoy the genre?

I think that many of the novels, plays and short stories of Agatha Christie are particularly appropriate for middle school children. Although she was a very English writer and portrayed an unfamiliar kind of life, I feel Christie's works can be read, understood and enjoyed. She created puzzles, ingenious puzzles, and children love puzzles. Christie's writing style is very direct and clear and as such her writing accessible to middle school readers. Although her plots are sophisticated, her writing style is not. She writes in relatively short sentences and paragraphs. With some teacher guidance and direction, her vocabulary, settings and background can be clarified. She is a master of plot and surprise endings, and although she misleads her readers by sprinkling her stories with false clues called red herrings, she is always scrupulously fair. She does not withhold information from the reader. She does not present the answer to a puzzle by creating new evidence not available to the reader. All the clues are in front of us. We just do not interpret them correctly. Christie's has also created some interesting and even memorable characters. Once one meets Hercule Poirot who can forget him or his mannerisms? Agatha Christie has written some classic unforgettable works, I want to share them with my students.

I propose to use at least one of each: a novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* ; a play—either *The Mousetrap* or *Ten Little Indians* or both, and some short stories. With older children I would also include the play *Witness for the Prosecution* . Where possible, I will, of course, show movies -or videotapes to the class. The “Mystery”

series on PBS has shown some wonderful versions of the Jane Marple series. If the students read a few Jane Marple short stories, they will at least be familiar with the character. There are at least three versions of *Ten Little Indians* on film, although I think the earliest black and white one follows the play the most closely.

I plan to start with the play *The Mousetrap*. Usually plays are easier for students to read and to understand. Plays are active. Plays must be read aloud. Everyone wants a part, everyone wants to act out a scene and every gets involved.

What makes *The Mousetrap* so wonderful is that the students really do get involved immediately. From the first murder in London to a snowbound Monkswell Manor, the student are interested. They discuss the characters as though they knew them, and when the first murder is committed, have decided on and now argue about the identity of the killer. They look for suspicious lines from each character as proof of their conclusions.

Some of the actions, vocabulary and dialogue of the characters can be very strange to the students, especially the parts of Christopher Wren, Miss Casewell and Mr Paravicini. The students are unfamiliar with World War II and the London Blitz and the practice of sending children from London to be safe from air attacks. Some background will have to be explained to them, so they will understand what happened to the Corrigan children and who was responsible. However basically the story line is simple. Innocent people are trapped in a house with a killer. The telephone lines are down, a storm rages outside and a mad killer stalks the helpless victims.

The use of nursery rhymes is a favorite ploy of Christie's and the students will meet it again. They do find it eerie however and very significant. They just know there will be another victim. Of course, with *The Mousetrap* the fun is figuring out the next victim as well as the killer. Everyone is connected somehow—or so it seems. Everyone is hiding something—is the secret connected with the crime or is it unrelated? Everyone was in London at the time of the first murder, even the young host and hostess of Monkswell Manor, so no one has an alibi. Even Molly and Giles have kept secrets from each other. Everyone is suspicious of everyone else. And everyone hears the tune of "Three Blind Mice".

For the first reading of Agatha Christie, I don't want to do too much analyzing of the play or the story or the characters. I want the students to sit back and let suspense and the surprise take over. Except for the necessary background information, I will let the student read and guess and gasp with surprise. Students are always surprised at the ending of the play. They have really taken Trotter for granted. He is a part of the background noise, not a real character like Giles or Miss Casewell. How can he be the killer? Has the author been fair? Then they look back and check everything Trotter said. They were taken in as they were meant to be, but everything was fair.

Now the students will be on their guard. Now they will be ready to read very carefully and to pay attention to every clue. With the next play *Ten Little Indians*, they are very suspicious of everyone. They read very carefully and are immediately interested as another nursery rhyme is used as a framework. How does it go? What's the whole poem? They are disappointed that only a few lines are given in the beginning of the play.

Each character is checked off and noted. One is immediately suspicious of Lombard because he appears to heroic and dashing. Vera Claythorne, as the secretary is also obviously not at all trustworthy. She is too attractive, especially to Lombard. They are the first characters to appear because of Lombard's tactics; he wanted to be alone with her. Therefore they are both under intense scrutiny. Then the rest of the characters arrive; Armstrong the doctor, Wargrave the Judge, Emily the righteous (the students take a strong dislike to her), Marston the young playboy, Mackenzie the soldier, Blore the policeman and Mr. and Mrs. Rogers, the

staff—butler and cook.

The play is fast-moving; the characters are introduced and they converse over cocktails, obviously expecting a pleasant weekend. Suddenly a recording blares out, indicating all of them for certain crimes, each one causing the death of a fellow human being. After the shock, comes outrage. Who has done this? Why have they been gathered here on this remote isolated island? Then comes even more of a shock. The host is unknown—literally U.N. Owen—to all of them. Or is he? Ultimately it appears, one of them is the grim M. Owen. As the deaths begin, the students grow more and more puzzled. Like the characters in the play, they grow suspicious of first one, then another. Is it Vera, is it Lombard or is it Blore? They, the characters and the students, all think Armstrong is hidden, pretending to be drowned. But when his body appears, the suspects are few.

At this point, I have stopped reading the play. As we discuss the final outcome, I may show the old original black and white movie—at least to this point. We can discuss the differences and similarities. Why do you think Marston was changed from an Englishman to a European nobleman? Why were the soldier's and Judge's names changed? Do you think the ending will be different? What will happen next?

Before I show them the end of the film, the students will go back to the play and read the ending. They are always surprised at the ending. The sleight-of-hand always work. The judge was said to be dead, therefore he was dead. He had to be dead, therefore he was innocent and out of the play. How can he come back to it now? How can she fool us like that? Of course they really like the happy ending. It finishes the play in an orderly note and keeps a kind of sanity in the world. I'm not sure they would like the ending of the novel *And Then There Were None* because at the end everyone is dead. The end of the novel is quite disquieting and disturbing and ultimately too artificial. Since the play is theatrical, it works better with a happy ending of sorts.

Students, at this point, would be ready for a novel, the great classic, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. This novel, which is regarded as one of Agatha Christie's best, the epitome of the surprise ending. It is a novel with a strong plot, lots of characters with strong motives, clues and red herrings galore and a real surprise, a shock ending. In fact, the ending is so important, that it is crucial to devise a way to keep the students from "peeking" at the end. If the students know the killer halfway through the book, there is no point in reading it. Without mutilating and ripping the books, I can only suggest oral and silent reading in class and not allowing the books to go home. The other alternative is to remove the last ten pages of the book and not to distribute them until every one is ready for the solution. With paperbacks this can be done.

In this novel, we can look at some of the author's strategies for deception. We have already seen some at work in her plays, but never so much in evidence here. The trick here, of course, comes from point of view. We exclude one character from our suspicions because we see the action through his own eyes—just as we exclude the character Trotter in *The Mousetrap* because he is a policeman and we exclude Judge Wargrave in *Ten Little Indians* because he is dead. We exclude Dr. Sheppard because he is a Watson to Poirot, he is a deputy, he is "in" on everything, he is above suspicion, he is telling the story.

The story itself is very simple. A country squire in a very small English village is murdered. The body is found in the library of his house, a butler and a housekeeper both act suspiciously and there are several others, friends and relatives with motives for murder. Village life with its gossip, idle and malicious, plays a role. We see the creation of a puzzle from a master hand.

The students are also introduced to Agatha Christie's renown creation, one of the detective fiction's most famous detectives, Hercule Poirot. We see all the eccentricities that have made this Belgian so appealing and

so amusing. We learn about the little “gray cells” that do the real work, the vanity, the black waxed mustaches, the passion for order, method and truth that will solve the case. We see a detective that must find an explanation for everything that is not explained—that is his order and method. We also see his dissatisfaction with retirement and vegetable marrows and a commitment to finding out the truth. He warns Flora at the beginning—if he takes this case, he will pursue it to the end; he will not stop for her if she is afraid of what he will find. Once started he is like a bloodhound and will not be deterred.

The setting of this novel is a small English village that Christie has immortalized. She doesn't spend much time on actual physical description of King's Abbot, saying that it is much like any other village with two important houses, a railway station, post office and two general stores. We are left to imagine the small houses clustered around a green or down winding lanes. What she does create is the atmosphere of these small towns where nothing goes unnoticed. Everything that happens is talked about, speculated on and discussed. News travels quickly; no need for a newspaper. The village has the mailman, the postman, the delivery services and the maids—all travel from house to house with gossip. When Dr. Sheppard returns to his house from attending to a patient who has died, his sister has already heard the news via the village grapevine. We see this transmission of news over and over again. This is a small village.

Unfortunately, this novel has not been made to a movie, at least recently, and so the students will have to see other films for a visualization of Hercule Poirot.

Agatha Christie wrote many short stories. I plan to use at least two of them, although possibly more. I would like to use one featuring Hercule Poirot again, and one which introduces Miss Marple.

The story “Triangle at Rhodes” is another excellent example of Christies' skill at misdirection. Vacationing at an exclusive holiday resort, Poirot watches a love triangle unfold before him. Is the one he sees the same as the one we, the readers, think we see? Will the students be fooled again? I certainly think so. We see two couples interact. Valentine Chantry, an exotic beautiful no longer young woman is on her fifth husband, a silent sullen man, obviously appearing unhappy at her flirtation with Douglas Gold, a much younger and a very handsome man. His wife Marjorie seems troubled by the attention Douglas pays to Valentine. Some is going to happen. Can the students predict? Who is the intended victim? Who will really be the victim Agatha Christie's strategy of intentional misdirection and implication is bound to fool all of us again.

This short story is similar in structure and theme to the novel *Evil Under the Sun* . I plan to show the video tape of the movie after my students read the short story, “Triangle at Rhodes”. The movie is really delightful, full of red herrings and fascinating suspects. It will also be fun for the students to watch Peter Ustinov portray Hercule Poirot. Does he fit the character as they have envisioned him? Is he too comical and not dignified enough?

Miss Marple has always been a favorite character of mine and I wish to introduce her to my students. I love the idea of a fluffy, old-fashioned, nosy elderly lady with a sharp mind that sees the wickedness in the world and solves crimes by finding parallels with village life. She knows that human nature is the same everywhere. Students are used to the macho hero detective from movies and television, or the comic hero such as Inspector Clouseau or even Peter Ustinov. An old lady quietly knitting and yet shrewdly solving crimes is a new twist. I can also show my students the excellent series starring Joan Hickson as Miss Marple that has appeared on PBS. The Margaret Rutherford movies were delightful because Miss Rutherford was delightful, but they were not about Jane Marple. These movies are recreations of the village scene and depict some wonderful characters, especially Miss Marple. After reading a few short stories the students will recognize and be familiar with the idea of village life and murder.

I will introduce Jane Marple with two short stories mainly because these are easy to read and because they can be duplicated more easily. Certainly if the student enjoy these and want more, there are several as appropriate. The two that I have selected are “The Companion” and “Greenshaw’s Folly.” Both are small gems of misdirection. Nothing is what it seems but the author plays fair. We fool ourselves because we accept what we are told. Only Miss Marple looks beyond the seemingly unbelievable situations and goes straight to the truth using village experience and her knowledge of human nature to guide her.

“The Companion” deals with two English woman recently arrived in Spain. One is a wealthy spinster, the other her poor companion. The companion is drowned as her employer tries to save her. This story is told to Miss Marple by an eyewitness, a doctor who has doubts about the woman’s story but no proof. After all who would want to harm a poor companion? Miss Marple, hearing the story, has few doubts. Who has established the identity of the two woman? Who’s has really looked at them? Who knows one from the other? Who is to say who is the dead one? “Greenshaw’s Folly” is really the same theme with some variation, but it will still trick and mislead the reader.

Students need to acquire the habit of reading. I think that if they enjoy one kind of book, they will continue and read more. If they enjoy Agatha Christie, they may decide to read more of her books, and find mysteries by other authors. At least that is my hope. The first step is, however, the enjoyment of reading.

## LESSON PLAN

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Lesson plans will be similar in that the emphasis will be on the reading of the mysteries and somewhat on writing or role playing.

### **1. Plot: What keeps us in suspense?**

While reading *The Mousetrap* what grabs at us? What or who do we worry about? What are the details in the first two acts that keep us worried and in suspense? These should be discussion questions that students and teachers should deep in mind.

Do we care about the characters? Do we worry about what is going to happen next? Do we really feel that the characters are in a situation from which they cannot extract themselves? Can they get away from Monkswell Manor or from Indian Island? Are they silly people who got into the situation through their own fault? Students like to have respect for a character. They don’t care about or worry about a fool.

Does the story move quickly? The students want a story to become involved in right away.

Does the author play fair? Do we feel cheated? Students should recheck the crucial moments in each play or book. How did the author mislead them? Why were they fooled? How is it that they can be fooled again and again, especially by the same tricks?

### **2. Characters: Create your own heroes (and villains)**

Students should try to create characters after reading a few mysteries. This can be a small group project with several groups creating characters. Discuss what the students like and dislike about the characters they have already met. They should try to avoid both characters who act like idiots and super heroes such as James Bond. These are cartoon figures that people really don’t care about. Characters who fail and made mistakes

are more interesting.

Put the characters in a scary situation. What are you afraid of? Students can discuss their own fears and ideas of a nightmare situation. Can you identify with your character? Is he or she real? Is the situation real?

Put two or three of the characters together. Can the students create a scene? Do they need to find new characters now? Perhaps now one of the heroes must become a villain. Can the students act out a scene, acting out the character he or she helped to create? Start with these characters, add an ordinary setting, and then give it a twist—and see what happens.

### 3. Create a Mystery Play

*The Mousetrap* was originally a radio play. Have the students choose one of the stories and recreate it as a play. Can they create a radio play? Is it easier? What are some of the problems inherent in writing for the radio? What are some of the advantages? Can they create a play that is fair to the listener? If possible, play some old radio tapes for the students. “The Shadow” or “Martin Kane, Private Eye” are ideal. The students must listen carefully or they will miss the clues.

Can the students act out one of the short stories? How would they interpret certain scenes? Again, they must be fair to the audience. Can they do that without giving away the ending? How would they present the scene in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in which Dr. Sheppard first meets Poirot? Or when he goes to Ackroyd’s house because he has had the mysterious phone call?

How can they reveal the setting in a play? Plays like *The Mousetrap* and *Ten Little Indians* are part of the setting, the trap set by the murderer. How can the students show the small village setting?

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