

ASF Study Materials for

The Mousetrap

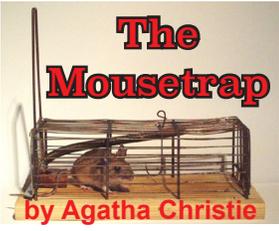
by Agatha Christie

Director James Bowen
Set Design Peter Hicks
Costume Design Jeffrey Todhunter
Lighting Design Travis MaCale
Sound Design Will Burns



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Welcome to *The Mousetrap*—Theatre's Premier Mystery

*An English country house.
Isolated in a snow storm.
Roads impassable. Phone wires cut.
And a murderer on the premises.*

Characters

- Mollie Ralston, co-owner of Monkswell Manor Guest House, early 20s
- Giles Ralston, her husband and co-owner, also in his 20s
- Christopher Wren, a guest, young and neurotic
- Mrs. Boyle, a guest, middle-aged and imposing
- Major Metcalf, a guest, middle-aged retired Army officer
- Miss Casewell, a guest, young and forthright
- Mr. Paravicini, an unexpected arrival, appears foreign and elderly
- Sergeant Trotter, a young Berkshire Police detective

Place: in Berkshire, England
Time: the early 1950s

The Mousetrap is not just a hit in London; it is a tradition. It has been running on the West End (London's "Broadway") continuously since its premiere in 1952.

When it opened, Agatha Christie thought it might run a few months, but since she is world-famous for her murder mysteries, this one has proven compelling to generations of theatregoers. So compelling, in fact, that the last word spoken from the stage is a request that the audience not reveal "whodunit" so others can enjoy the thrill of discovery, too. So you are now enjoined to keep the secret—once you know it. And following that injunction made by Christie herself, we won't divulge the guilty party in these study materials (in over 60 years only Wikipedia is a snitch)!

It was a contemporary mystery when it opened, set in the early 1950s. Theatres still set it in the early 1950s, though now that makes it a period piece, part of the post-World War II scene of battered but brave Britain. We should remember these people have come through the war and are now facing a difficult future; we should also recall that war is not the only experience that can scar individuals. The past is such a rich cave in which to hunt for motives, and Christie links the murders at Monkswell Manor to an earlier crime during wartime. Scars linger, and now those responsible are being killed.

Who is the murderer?



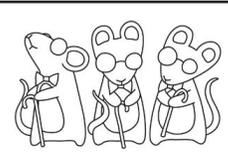
The Mousetrap—

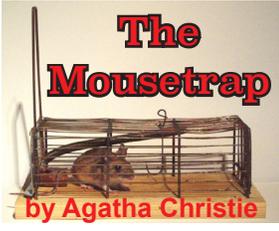
- is the world's longest running initial production of a play. By its 60th anniversary in 2012 it had passed 25,000 performances.
- became the longest running British play in 1958, surpassing Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*.
- now hires a new cast every year for a 47-week contract. Over 400 actors have performed in *The Mousetrap* since 1952.
- still uses the voice of the radio announcer from the 1952 production, so one member of the original cast still performs, and one prop, the clock on the mantelpiece, was also there on opening night.



"They're all interesting, because you never really know what anyone is like—or what they are really thinking."

"EVERYONE IS UNDER SUSPICION."





About the Author: Agatha Christie

"The Queen of Crime"

- The Agatha Christie website states (or boasts) that only the Bible and Shakespeare have out-published Christie's works, currently some 2 billion copies.
- She is also regarded as the most translated author, her work appearing in over 103 languages.
- She began writing crime novels during World War I and continued until near her death in 1976.
- Many masters of the genre consider Christie the originator of many fundamental motifs of mystery writing.



Agatha Christie

"Evil is not something superhuman. It is something less than human."
—Agatha Christie

Her Life

- Christie was born Agatha Miller in 1890 in Torquay, England, the child of an English mother and a wealthy American father who had been educated in Europe.
- Home-schooled at first, she was an avid reader of classic English children's books by Mrs. Molesworth and Enid Nesbit and the fantasy of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. A skilled pianist, her shyness kept her from pursuing that career.
- Her father died when she was eleven, thus ending what she called her happy childhood. She went to finishing schools in Paris and then with her ailing mother to the warmth of Egypt.
- Married and divorced from her first husband, Archie Christie, by 1928, in 1930 she married archaeologist Max Mallowan. They each earned an OBE award for their professional work.

Her Work

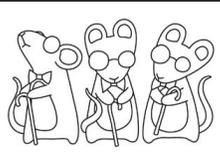
- Christie's first fiction attempts featured her interests in madness and the paranormal (she and her siblings thought their mother had second sight), but none was published.
- She also enjoyed detective fiction, especially Wilkie Collins and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, written in 1916 on a dare from her sister, was published in 1920, the first of her 66 detective novels.
- Her most famous works include *And Then There Were None* (1939), *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), and *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). She also wrote 14 short story collections as well as 6 romance novels under a pseudonym in addition to 16 plays (among them *The Mousetrap* and *Witness for the Prosecution*) and poems.
- Her World War I work as a pharmacological dispenser gave her a useful knowledge of poisons, and she used her archaeological travels in the Middle East with her second husband as setting for a number of her mysteries.
- She is seen as the foremost writer in the Golden Age of Crime Writing, the 1920s and '30s.

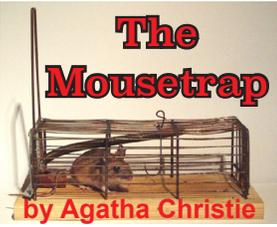
"The impossible could not have happened, therefore the impossible must be possible in spite of appearances."
—Agatha Christie



"Yes—the unexpected guest.... from nowhere—out of the storm.... It sounds quite dramatic. I am the man of mystery."

"EVERYONE IS UNDER SUSPICION."





Performing Poirot

- the first was Charles Laughton on stage in 1928
- then Austin Trevor, followed by Tony Randall, Albert Finney (who got an Oscar nomination for his Poirot in the 1974 film *Murder on the Orient Express*), and Peter Ustinov
- for 25 years, English actor David Suchet (above) played the Belgian, taping every Poirot story for tv

Performing Miss Marple

- Gracie Fields was followed by Margaret Rutherford, a comic Marple; Angela Lansbury was more "austere," and Helen Hayes, then Joan Hickson for the BBC (above, Christie's favorite), and Geraldine McEwan and Julia McKenzie, also in television series



Christie's Most Famous Detectives—Poirot and Marple

Every great mystery writer creates a great detective. After all, setting up a spine-tingling set of crimes does us no good unless someone can solve the case. Christie created some great case solvers, both professional and amateur, but two have gone down in the annals of crime fiction—Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, they are opposites—not simply different genders, but with different styles of observation, "sleuthing," and murder solving. The contrast was salutary for the author and stimulating for her readers.

Hercule Poirot

- the detective who solves Agatha Christie's first published mystery, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), known for his waxed moustache, perfectionism, egotism, and fine mind.
- In her *Autobiography*, Christie said, "Why not make my detective a Belgian?... I could see him as a tidy little man, always arranging things, liking things in pairs, liking things square instead of round. And he should be brainy—he should have little grey cells of the mind."
- during her career he appeared in 33 novels and 54 short stories—and considering that he was already a "former shining light of the Belgian police force" before the war (World War I, in his case) forced him to England, he had a long run. As Christie observed late in her life, she started him off too old, for he must be well over 100 by the later novels—but in fiction he seemed ageless.
- Poirot's character was inspired by the Belgian refugees Christie saw in Torquay while she worked in a hospital during World War I.

Miss Marple

- Jane Marple is Poirot's inverse, instinctual where he is heady. She is a white-haired spinster, an amateur sleuth, not a professional, but she is uncannily successful amidst her knitting and gardening: "she has had every opportunity to observe human nature," and "there is a great deal of wickedness in village life."
- the character appears in 12 Christie novels and 20 stories, very few prior to the 1940s, whereas Poirot figured in many of Christie's early novels.
- Marple's character was influenced by Christie's experience with her grandmother and her "cronies." Christie observed that both Jane Marple and her Gran "always expected the worst of everyone and everything, and were, with almost frightening accuracy, usually proved right."
- Her grandson says Christie as an author used many of Marple's techniques; she "listened more than she talked, ... saw more than she was seen." Story ideas, like clues, are everywhere, even sitting at the next table in the cafe.

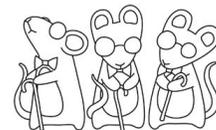
Analyzing Investigation in *The Mousetrap*

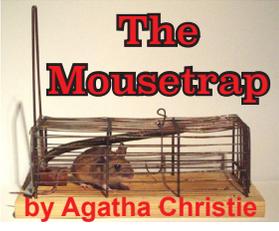
- Consider the presence of the professional view vs. the amateur view in the play. Sgt. Trotter, as the policeman, the professional, organizes the inquiry and seeks information and clues. Mollie, like Miss Marple, begins to ask questions, to widen the consideration of suspects, to see the situation from different angles. How do these two methods work in the play?



"One of you is in danger, deadly danger."

"EVERYONE IS UNDER SUSPICION."





"Three Blind Mice"

Three blind mice, three blind mice,
 See how they run, see how they run.
 They all ran after the farmer's wife,
 She cut off their tails with a carving knife,
 Did you ever see such a sight in your life,
 As three blind mice?

- The jingle first became a children's nursery rhyme in 1842 when it was published in a collection.
- The rhyme and tune itself are older, however, published in 1609. Some think the then-teenaged editor, Thomas Ravenscroft, was its author.
- Without substantial proof, some historians think this early rhyme may refer to Queen Mary I of England and her execution of three Protestant bishops.
- Why might Christie have chosen this rhyme as the original title of the story? Three? Blind? Mice?
- If the logo uses a mousetrap, as here, should it be empty or have a mouse in it? Why?

Mousetrap Lore

The Story

- The play originated as a BBC radio play commissioned in 1946 in honor of Queen Mary's 80th birthday. When offered a special broadcast of her choice, she chose a new play by Agatha Christie so the entire nation could enjoy the broadcast. Christie wrote a 30-minute radio drama called "Three Blind Mice."
 - Christie subsequently turned the radio play into a short story, "Three Blind Mice," which to this day cannot be published in Britain. In America, it appears in a short story collection called *Three Blind Mice and Other Stories* (1950).
- In the story we move with the characters through the house, and a number of key conversations occur in the kitchen. We also get the more of the characters' thoughts than in the play.

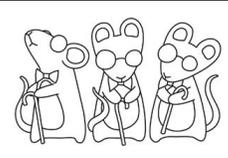
- Christie then revised the story when adapting it for the stage, adding a character, changing a name, and altering a few details, though not the general arc of the tale nor the identity of the murderer. The play could not be called *Three Blind Mice*, however, because another playwright had recently used that title for a play.
- The new title for the play was suggested by Christie's son-in-law, Anthony Hicks. It is an allusion to *Hamlet*, in which "The Mousetrap" is the title Hamlet gives to *The Murder of Gonzago*, which replicates his father's secret murder and which he has performed before the murderer, his uncle, King Claudius, to confirm his guilt.
- Christie gave the rights to the play to her grandson Mathew for his 9th birthday; he was hoping for a bicycle. As he later realized, he lucked out.

WWW.MAMALISA.COM THREE BLIND MICE

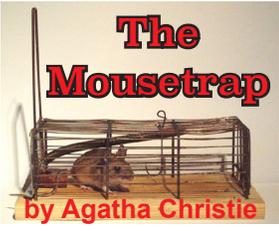
The tune "Three Blind Mice" starts with a third descending. Other famous allusions to the tune occur in music by Robert Schumann, Joseph Holbrooke, Joseph Haydn, and Eric Coates. It was also later used as the theme song for the Three Stooges, and a calypso version was part of the soundtrack of the James Bond film Dr. No (which has 3 villains).



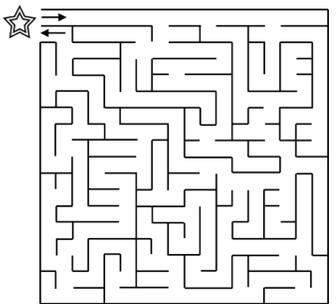
"So we're quite cut off now. Quite cut off. That's funny, isn't it?"



"EVERYONE IS UNDER SUSPICION."



What Is a Red Herring?
 It means a misleading clue, something intended to divert attention from the real issue—alluding to the strong smell and color of smoked salted herring (before refrigeration). Red herrings are crucial to good mystery writing.



Name That Sleuth!
 After creating Hercule Poirot, Christie tired of him but her readers did not. Miss Marple amused her more, and she also created other detectives, including one who dealt with the supernatural (very un-Poirot- like) whose name was Harley Quin [i.e. Harlequin]. Think of three names drawn from known figures or ideas that might make interesting detectives!

Information adapted from The Christie Mystery page @ www.christiemystery.co.uk

Building a Murder Mystery

The Essential Elements of Mystery

Agatha Christie said that she always started her stories with

- **the murder**
- and asked how, who, and why—
- **the method,**
- **the murderer's identity,** and
- **the motive.**

Knowing all that, she could then consider

- **the other suspects** and
- **their motives.**

Lastly, she would figure out

- **the clues** and
- **the red herrings,**

since, like a maze, in a murder mystery there must be a true path and also many paths that lead to dead ends.

Christie's Plot Devices: The Mystery Writer's Toolkit

- **The Murder:** Mysteries are filled with actual murders, attempted murders, and even fake murders. One murder, the real one, may occur amid others, or the murderer can appear to be the intended target. *Christie used all these devices and more to complicate the hunt.*
- Amid an urban center, anyone could be the murderer, but in a **"locked room"** or **"closed community"** only a fixed number of people can be suspects. *Christie uses this tactic to enhance the reader's chance to play detective.*
- **Clues:** the mystery has to have a solution, solid and credible but far from obvious. *Christie often planted clues early in the story but played them down amid a host of red herrings and other clues.*

- **Red Herrings:** "That could be it!" but it's not. Red herrings are essential so the reader doesn't figure out the ending before the end, if then. We need those other possibilities to stay on the hunt. Christie might mislead with information about another event or lesser crime

- **Suspects:** Some characters seem more suspicious than others, and in a mystery the murderer must be virtually invisible. Alibis figure in this ploy, for sometimes a sound alibi can prove untrue. *The least likely suspect often proved to be the perpetrator in Christy mysteries.*

Disguise also affects the portrayal of suspects, as some suspects change their appearance or entire identity. In what role could someone be beyond suspicion? Long lost family members? Servants? *Christy plays with identity with and without disguises in her tales.*

- **Witnesses/Testimony:** Gathering information depends on witness testimony and the observations of others present, especially the "unseen" ones such as servants. Naming a murderer too soon can suggest the real one is still on the loose, and servants see and hear far more than one might suspect. *Christy rarely uses a real servant as a murderer, but witness testimony should be kept in mind.*

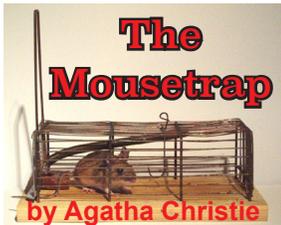
- **The Revelation:** *Christy likes to save the solution for the very end, completing the puzzle with the explanation and often based on the sleuth's intuition as well as reasoning.*



"Well, if one of you gets murdered, you'll have yourself to blame."

"EVERYONE IS UNDER SUSPICION."





The Mousetrap depends on:

- isolation
- strangers
- secrets
- a big house with many rooms
- questions being asked

How you do a Whodunit in *The Mousetrap*

Writers of murder mysteries credit Agatha Christie with creating or perfecting several motifs of the classic murder mystery.

The classic murder tale involves:

- a **murder** being committed
- a number of **suspects**, all of whom have **secrets**
- a **detective** who **uncovers** the secrets and the murderer
- amid **shocking turns** at the finale.

At the end of many Christie mysteries, the detective **gathers the suspects in one room, explains the deductive process of coming to a conclusion, and identifies the murderer.**

In *The Mousetrap*

The play opens with a murder occurring in the blackout, a murder we hear reported on the radio, but which seems irrelevant to the arrival of four guests and a stranded motorist at the newly opened Monkswell Manor Guest House during a snow storm. That is, until a policeman arrives to say evidence at the first murder scene suggests someone in the guest house may be the next victim—then there is a second murder, now in the guest house drawing room.

Thus **Act One** gratifies us with two murders, some seven suspects, and a policeman asking questions. We are well into the suspense and mystery.

In **Act Two** we learn many more secrets as the action twists the suspicion from one suspect to another. Everyone feels others are lying or are not what they seem. In one case they are right, and in a shocking turn the policeman's experiment does indeed reveal the culprit.

Suspense + plot twists + perpetrator identified = one Agatha Christie whodunit.

The Past Is Prologue

The murders in *The Mousetrap* occur in the present, but the motives stem from another crime, or set of crimes, in the past—the Longridge Farm case, which all those present recall. Early in the war three children, the policeman says, were "brought before the court as in need of care and protection. A home was found for them with Mr. and Mrs. Stanning at Longridge Farm. One of the children subsequently died as a result of criminal neglect and persistent ill-treatment."

One child died, but two survived, and no one now knows where either is. Mrs. Stanning, one of the perpetrators of the abuse, was the first murder victim, strangled in her apartment. Near the crime scene was found a notebook containing two addresses, the site of the first murder in London and Monkswell Manor—and the words *three blind mice*. So we are awaiting the deaths of two more "mice," and the tune of the nursery rhyme echoes through the play.

Longridge Farm is in the vicinity of Monkswell Manor. Several of those present were more intimately involved than at first appears, hence the suspense. Christie crafts a tightly plotted tale, full of suggestive statements and red herrings, clues and conundrums.

Moreover, as sometimes happened in her work, the initial radio audience in 1947 might have realized that the past crime was inspired by an actual incident in England. In 1945 young Dennis O'Neill had died from abuse as a foster child in Shropshire. Such events are the stuff of real life, not just of detective fiction—and so are the scars they leave.

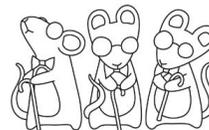


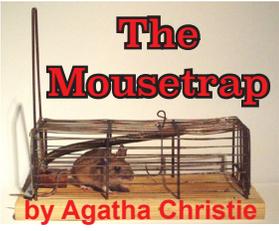
An English country house in the snow, though not as much snow as at Monkswell Manor in *The Mousetrap*



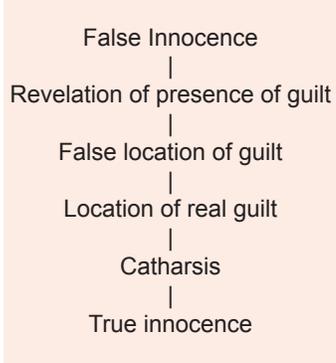
"Good Lord, he's not suggesting that somebody is going to be killed here?"

"EVERYONE IS UNDER SUSPICION."





Auden's Double Reversal



Debating the Value of Detective Stories

In literature, many popular forms of fiction can be categorized as **escape literature**—fantasy, science fiction, the romance (with Fabio on the cover), thrillers or spy stories, and crime or detective/murder mystery tales. In all these forms, a resolution or eventual order is always possible that may not seem possible in the reality or apparent disorder of everyday life—in the stories, the good guys can triumph; true love can overcome the odds; the violent, greedy plots of the evil can be thwarted; innocence and guilt can be established. Escape literature is the media version of comfort food; it may have comparatively empty calories to a nutritionist but it tastes so good.

Edmund Wilson vs. W. H. Auden

One American literary critic, Edmund Wilson, in 1944 asked why people read detective fiction, a form he did not care for. He proceeded to explore several contemporary examples, including Agatha Christie. His conclusion was dismissive.

Agatha Christie, he had heard, offered "ingenuity," and that he admits, not having discerned the killer, but he finds that "Mrs. Christie, in proportion as she is more expert and concentrates more narrowly on the puzzle, has to eliminate human interest completely ... it is all sleight-of-hand trickery."

In explaining the inter-war popularity of the form, he opines its unreality: the world during those years was ridden by an all-pervasive feeling of guilt and by a fear of impending disaster which it seemed hopeless to try to avert because it never seemed conclusively possible to pin down the responsibility. Who has

committed the original crime and who was going to commit the next one? ... [in the novels] Nobody seems guiltless, nobody seems safe, and then, suddenly, the murderer ... has been caught by an infallible Power ... who knows exactly where to fix the guilt.

Several mystery-loving essayists answered Wilson's charges, including W. H. Auden, a self-proclaimed mystery addict. He puts Wilson's final comment in personal, spiritual terms and claimed that guilt and the solution are the form's appeal: "the interest of the detective story is the dialectic of innocence and guilt." The detective form has Aristotelian Concealment and Manifestation, and also "a double reversal from apparent guilt to innocence and from apparent innocence to guilt."

Murder, he argues, is an offense against God and society because there can be no restitution, so society must act in place of the victim and "demand atonement or grant forgiveness." The more Eden-like the milieu, the starker the contrast of the murder, "by which innocence is lost, and the individual and the law become opposed to each other." Thus, "the job of the detective is to restore the state of grace."

For Auden, detective tales appeal to an awareness of guilt and sin: "the magic formula is an innocence which is discovered to contain guilt; then a suspicion of being the guilty one; and finally a real innocence from which the guilty other has been expelled ... by the miraculous intervention of a genius from outside who removes guilt by giving knowledge of guilt." Eden is restored.

So is there value in "escape"?

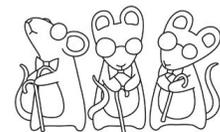


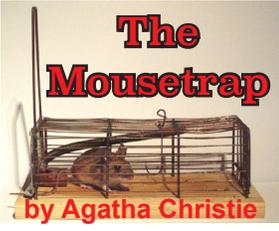
Abney Hall near Manchester (home of Christie's brother-in-law and sister), which she used as the model for her fictive manor houses; she planned many of her stories walking in the privacy of its landscape



"It's a trap. I know it is."

"EVERYONE IS UNDER SUSPICION."





Fear

• The radio show broadcast we hear briefly near the end of Act 1 says, "to understand ... the mechanics of fear, you have to study the precise effect produced on the human mind." [Perhaps you'd have to listen to a lot of BBC Radio to appreciate how common such a comment on air might be. As a listener I've gone from peas to poetry in the space of 5 minutes on BBC 4.]

Why do we hear this particular snippet? Is it a metadramatic comment about the mystery we are watching? Their fear and/or our fear?

What are the mechanics of fear?

Are there other metadramatic comments in the play?



Nursery Rhymes

- What is the relevance of "Three Blind Mice" to the play? How many threes are there?
- What is the relevance of the other nursery rhymes mentioned?

Activities for *The Mousetrap*

Post-Production Discussion

- Now knowing "whodunit," what were the clues that led to the culprit's discovery? How could you have known the culprit along the way?
- What were the red herrings that led you away from suspecting the actual culprit? How did they work?
- How did the detective do his work?
- How did Agatha Christie do her work in setting up the mystery?
- Were all the characters two-dimensional (as Edmund Wilson claims) or did some or all have development?

Spoiler Alert

• Agatha Christie and for over 60 years the play's producers have made an anti-spoiler request: "Now that you have seen *The Mousetrap* you are our partners in crime, and we ask you to preserve the tradition by keeping the secret of whodunit locked in your hearts."

How much of the appeal and fun of a murder mystery is figuring out or discovering whodunit? If you knew at the start, would the experience be the same?

Compare it to knowing the result of an important sports event before you watch it—do you watch the same way? Do you watch at all? Should we respect the no-spoiler request? Is it part of the art? Is that fair?

Forms of Escape

• Escapist literature is all the rage in young adult stories—glittery vampires, a female archer confronting the dystopian overlords, an everyday teen getting immersed in Greek legends,

that school-age wizard who must confront the Dark Lord, a young hobbit who must walk into Mordor.

What is the value of escape literature—which extends beyond fantasy and sci fi into romances, thrillers, and crime fiction/murder mysteries? Why are these so popular in video or print? What do they say about the world we live in and our place in it? About the power or place of the individual? About what we want to escape (and perhaps really can't) and how we would like the world to be (if only it could be)?

- Justify your favorite form of escape—sports, action flicks, sci fi novels, computer games, Jane Austen stories, whatever. What makes them tick and why do you like them? What do they offer? Are they all "games" we play for a time and then re-enter "reality"?

Do It Yourself—That Is, Write Your Own Mystery

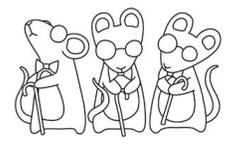
- Write your own school detective story—without actually killing someone. Whodunit can involve who "killed" the computer in the lab, who "killed" the chance for everyone to have a promised treat, who "killed" school spirit, who "killed" the pizza in the cafeteria and left only the liver, who "killed" the mascot's costume.

A school or classroom can be the closed society essential to a mystery. Everyone asserts individual innocence but everyone is suspect. How do you determine the culprit? What are the clues? What are the red herrings? Who discovers the culprit and how?



"The killer's enjoying this."

"EVERYONE IS UNDER SUSPICION."



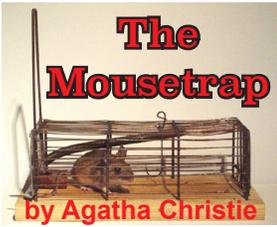


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