

A black magnifying glass with a circular lens is positioned over the word "THE". The handle of the magnifying glass extends towards the top left corner of the page.

# THE MOUSETRAP

**STUDY GUIDE**

## **CONTENT WARNING**

*The Mousetrap* mentions murder, blackmail, assault, and the death of a child, and someone being strangled.



# KEY VOCABULARY

## VOCABULARY FOR CRIME MYSTERIES

**ALIBI** - A story that verifies that someone did not do something (like commit a crime).

**RED HERRING** - A clue or piece of information that is intended to mislead or distract.

**SLEUTH** - Someone investigating and trying to solve a crime.

**WHODUNIT** - A complex story where the murderer's identity is not revealed until the end. Short for "Who has done it?" or "Who did it?"

## KEY VOCABULARY FROM THE SCRIPT

**COKE** - A material used for heating coal that they use to try to keep Monkswell Manor warm. It is predominantly carbon, making it a good fuel source.

*GILES: We'll have to keep the central heating well stoked up. (He feels the radiator.) H'm, not too good. I wish they'd send the coke along. We've not got any too much.*

**INTERROGATE** - To formally question.

*CHRISTOPHER: I always thought the police weren't allowed to give people the third degree.*

*TROTTER: I have merely been **interrogating** Miss Casewell.*

*CHRISTOPHER: You seem to have upset her. (To Miss Casewell) What did he do?*

**MACABRE** - Having to do with death.

*CHRISTOPHER: But just wait, Mrs Boyle. Till I creep up behind you, and you feel my hands on your throat.*

*MRS BOYLE: Stop ...*

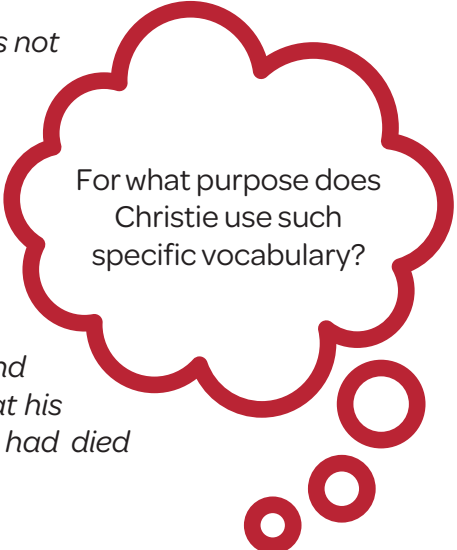
*MAJOR METCALF: That'll do, Christopher. It's a poor joke, anyway. In fact, it's not a joke at all.*

*CHRISTOPHER: Oh, but it is! That's just what it is. A madman's joke. That's just what makes it so deliciously **macabre**.*

**SURMISE** - An idea or thought of something being possible, but not having evidence to prove it.

*MOLLIE: If he came home, after being a prisoner with the Japs, perhaps, and having suffered terribly—if he came home and found his wife dead and that his children had gone through some terrible experience, and one of them had died through it, he might go off his head a bit and want—revenge!*

*TROTTER: That's only **surmise**.*



For what purpose does Christie use such specific vocabulary?



# CHARACTER LIST

**MOLLIE RALSTON**- A young woman who is the new owner/host of Monkswell Manor alongside her husband Giles. She's nervous about hosting the inn's first guests.

**GILES RALSTON**- Mollie's husband who helps run Monkswell Manor, somewhat suspicious of his guests.

**CHRISTOPHER WREN**- Manor Guest. An eccentric young man with an artistic flair and messy hair. He tells the others that his parents wanted him to be a brilliant architect like the famous architect Christopher Wren, so they gave him the same name.

**MRS. BOYLE**- Manor Guest. Old school, critical, snobby, and nitpicky about her living arrangements. She wishes she had stayed at a guesthouse that was more experienced and staffed. People's lineage is important to her, so she knows where they stand in society, or where she deems they stand.

**MAJOR METCALF**- Manor Guest. Retired army officer who is quiet, courteous, and authoritative.

**MISS CASEWELL**- Manor Guest. Aloof and mysterious with a dress style that leans toward more masculine than was standard for the time.

**MR. PARAVICINI**- A surprise guest who shows up unexpectedly, claiming his car was stuck in a snowdrift. Wears makeup and seems to be trying to look older than he actually is. We don't really know who he is.

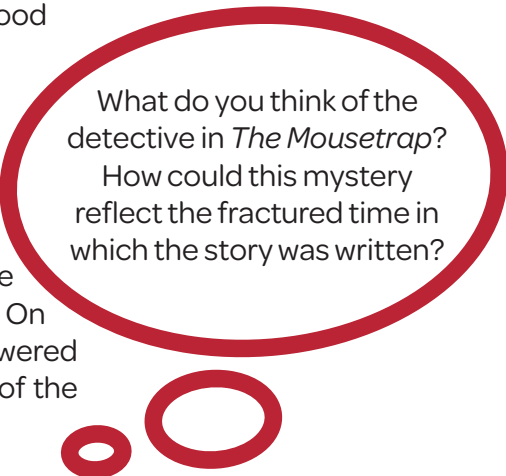
**DETECTIVE SERGEANT TROTTER**- Younger police sergeant (who sure doesn't look like a usual one) who shows up at Monkswell Manor on skis to investigate a murder that took place the day before in London. According to evidence found, a murderer might be on their way to the Manor and he has come to investigate.

# HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The year *The Mousetrap* is set in is 1952, in a time of post World War II meagerness, as put by Lighting Director Shannon McKinney. Resources are slim, the furniture is a little used and shabby, and all of this is used to comic effect with the hosts of the manor turning lights off to conserve energy and guests turning them back on.

While post World War II was a prosperous time for America, so many European countries were broken, and so much had been destroyed. With this was the crumbling of typical societal norms. Your lineage didn't matter as much anymore, and more and more people were faking and choosing to be whoever they wanted to be. Characters like Mrs. Boyle and Miss Casewell in particular show a good contrast of the new and the old styles.

Like many kinds of fiction, murder mysteries can be a reflection of the context and anxieties of the times they're written in. Fictional detectives can restore balance to a disrupted world, bring justice, and help victims find closure... or fail to do those things, upending the rules we think we can trust. Classic mysteries provide stories where chaos - like an unexplained murder - is calmed by the detective's intellect and logic. On the flip side, darker mysteries delve into stories of corrupt cops, unanswered questions, and cynical, beaten-down crime-solvers operating outside of the law.



What do you think of the detective in *The Mousetrap*?  
How could this mystery reflect the fractured time in which the story was written?



# PLAY SYNOPSIS

No spoilers! There is a long tradition patrons of *The Mousetrap* have of not spoiling the ending for those that haven't seen the play. We are keeping that ending to ourselves, and we hope you do as well! So don't worry, this play synopsis won't give away the identity of the killer.

## Pre-show question:

Why do you think Christie chose this as the title? What might it symbolize or suggest about the story to come?

## ACT I

Our location is Monkswell Manor Guest House, a recently opened guesthouse in a not-new house in the remote English countryside. An old radio plays an announcement that a woman has been murdered in London. Mollie and Giles Ralston are nervously preparing for their first group of guests as a snowstorm rages outside. Their visitors start to arrive, each quite the character and more than a little eccentric.

## Pre-show question:

How do you think the setting will impact the storyline?

Christopher Wren, named after the famous architect Christopher Wren, is an artistic and neurotic young man with messy hair. His parents wanted him to be a great architect, but it takes more than just a name. Mrs. Boyle, is a critical and grumpy older woman who questions the professionalism of this guesthouse she is staying in. There is also a retired military officer, Major Metcalf. Another guest, Miss Casewell, is a little mysterious, dresses in a more androgynous, nontraditional style, and doesn't say much.

They have an unexpected guest in Mr. Paravicini, a mysterious foreigner who looks like he is wearing make-up (and may even be in disguise) who claims his car overturned in a snowdrift nearby. Mollie receives a phone call from the police letting her know that an investigator is on his way to Monkswell Manor, which unnerves the guests. Not long after, Detective Sergeant Trotter arrives on skis, and warns the guest that evidence found suggests that the murderer may be heading from London to Monkswell Manor next.

Trotter tells the story of how the victim was connected to a previous child abuse case where three siblings in foster care were tragically mistreated. One of the children died, and now it seems that someone may be seeking revenge. As secrets emerge, and suspicions build, Trotter realizes the phone line has been cut, Mrs. Boyle is found murdered, and panic erupts - one of them must be the killer!

## ACT II

The interrogations begin, and Trotter begins drawing secrets out of people, because everyone seems to be hiding something. Christopher Wren escaped an institution, Miss Casewell hints about a traumatic childhood, Paravicini acts elusive and vague, and Mollie reveals that she once taught at the school where the abused children went.

Red herrings swirl, clues seem to pile up, and suspicions shift from person to person. Trotter believes the killer is reenacting a kind of revenge fantasy tied to the dead child. A dramatic final twist shows that some people are not who they say they are, and with the truth revealed and the killer apprehended, the case is closed.



# AGATHA CHRISTIE



Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie is known throughout the world as the Queen of Crime. Her books have sold over one billion copies in English, with another billion translated into foreign languages. She is the most widely published author of all time and, in many languages, is outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. She is the author of 66 crime novels, 150 short stories, over 20 plays, and six novels written under the name Mary Westmacott.

Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was written toward the end of the First World War. During that time she worked in a volunteer nursing position, and the novel was published in 1920. From this novel came her most famous detective character, Hercule Poirot, the little Belgian detective who became the most popular detective in crime fiction since Sherlock Holmes.

In 1926, after averaging a book a year, Agatha Christie wrote her first masterpiece. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was the first of her books to be published by Collins, an author-publisher relationship that lasted for 50 years and well over 70 books. Ackroyd was also the first of Agatha Christie's books to be dramatized in London's West End, under the title *Alibi*.

By 1930, Agatha had introduced a new character to act as detective - Miss Marple. She did not expect her to become Poirot's rival, but with *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Miss Marple's first full-length outing, it appeared she had produced another popular and enduring character.

*The Mousetrap*, her most successful play of all, opened in 1952 and is the longest-running play in history.

Agatha Christie was made a dame in 1971. She died in 1976.

## OTHER NAMES FOR AGATHA CHRISTIE

**DAME AGATHA MARY CLARISSA CHRISTIE** - Her full name.

**AGATHA MILLER** - Her maiden name.

**QUEEN OF CRIME** - A nickname that is now trademarked by her estate.

**QUEEN OF MYSTERY** - A nickname due to her being the best-selling author of all time.

**MARY WESTMACOTT** - A pseudonym Christie wrote under to escape her mystery detective fame so she could write novels that explored psychology deeper.



Young Agatha Christie



# EVOLUTION OF THE WHODUNIT

**10TH C - 17TH C:** In Imperial China, gong'an tales, dating back to the 10th century, form the earliest known body of crime-solving literature. These semi-mythic legal stories featured magistrates who used logic, interrogation, and corpse examination to resolve baffling cases and restore social order. Popular across dynasties, they were performed as plays, printed in woodblock books, and passed down through oral tradition.

Meanwhile, in Arabic literature, compilations like *1001 Nights* feature problem-solving narratives— such as “The Three Apples,” a murder-mystery involving an innocent man almost executed for a crime he didn’t commit, and a slave’s casual remark ultimately revealing the true killer.

These narratives laid important groundwork for the modern detective genre by centering moral justice over vengeance, and the puzzle-like unraveling of the truth.

**1840S - 1870S:** Edgar Allan Poe published “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” in 1841. This short story is widely recognized as the first modern detective story. The story introduces C. Auguste Dupin, an eccentric amateur detective who operates outside the official justice system, possessing extraordinary analytical abilities and solving the crime with deductive logic rather than brute force.

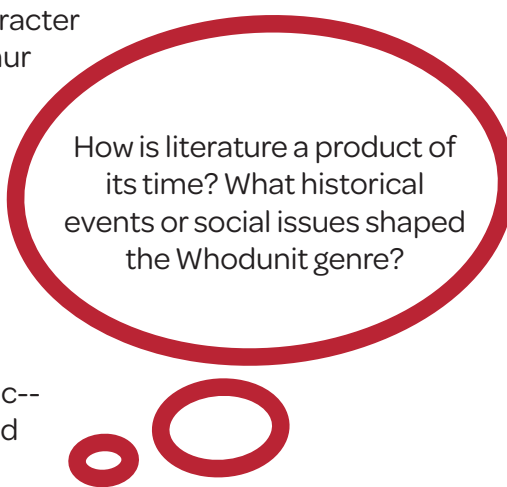
Published in 1868, Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone* is widely regarded as the first full-length detective novel. It combines many features that have come to define the genre: a baffling crime, a trail of clues, step-by-step reasoning, and a final reveal-- setting the template for future whodunits and detective archetypes.

**1880S - 1920S:** The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw detective fiction leap from literary innovation to cultural phenomenon. Central to this transformation was the character Sherlock Holmes—debuting in the novel *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) by Arthur Conan Doyle-- and gaining immense popularity through serialized short stories.

With sharp logic, eccentric habits, and a loyal companion, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle solidified many genre hallmarks over the course of Sherlock’s 40-year-run: disguise, forensic analysis, red herrings, and climactic reveals.

Other pioneers—such as Anna Katharine Green and Maurice Leblanc-- expanded the genre's global reach and by the 1920s, detective fiction had become a mass-market staple.

**1920S - 1950S:** In Britain, authors like Agatha Christie, refined the whodunit into an elegant, rule-bound, closed-circle puzzle. Her stories typically feature a limited set of suspects, an isolated setting, and a sleuth whose job it is to deduce the truth and restore social order. Christie innovated many of the plot twists now considered standard including: the unreliable narrator and the killer as the narrator.



How is literature a product of its time? What historical events or social issues shaped the Whodunit genre?



Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, American writers embraced a more gritty realism mixed with a little moral ambiguity. The result, the “hardboiled detective”—less eccentric, more cynical, navigating a corrupt world. A great example of this is Raymond Chandler’s novel *The Big Sleep* (1939), with a film version released in 1946. This shift was mirrored in Hollywood, as film noir brought the aesthetic of the whodunit to life with shadowy cinematography and fatalistic tone.

**1950S - 1970S:** In the mid-20th century, mystery fiction became more introspective, delving into the motives and mental states of both criminals AND investigators. Writers like Patricia Highsmith and filmmakers like Alfred Hitchcock explored guilt, identity, obsession, and moral ambiguity.

The genre shifted from solving what happened to asking why it happened—probing not only the crime but the complex characters behind it.

This era laid the groundwork for the psychological thrillers and morally-blurred narratives that continue to dominate modern crime-based storytelling today.

**1980S - TODAY:** Mystery storytelling found mass appeal in television. Procedural and episodic dramas like *Murder, She Wrote* and *Law & Order* offered self-contained cases with lovable detectives who restore justice by the end of each episode. Once literary and niche, mystery became widely accessible and formulaic—yet enduringly beloved.

Contemporary mysteries are often self-aware—embracing the tropes of the genre while playfully subverting them, and remixing classic whodunit formulas. The detective genre continues to evolve with changing tastes and new technology as society develops. Murder mystery dinner theatre and at-home party games offer diverse perspectives and opportunities for anyone to dive deeper into playing detective.

True crime has become increasingly popular, with podcasts and message boards devoted to cases, as is self-referential satire like *Knives Out*, which builds on and subverts all these classic crime tropes. The TV show *Dexter* flipped the whole idea by blurring the line between investigator and murderer.

How has the idea of justice in the genre changed over time?

Its core question “Who did it?” goes a step further in modern mysteries, focusing not just on the killer, but also the aftermath of the crime and the impact it had on the characters and community.



*Dexter*, TV Show



# "THE MOUSETRAP" IMPORTANT MILESTONES



*The Mousetrap* at St. Martin's Theatre in London

How can awareness of theatre history affect the understanding of a production? How can we better understand the background of the work?

**1945-** The 1945 case of Dennis O'Neil causes national scandal, making news headlines across Great Britain and inspiring Agatha Christie's writing of *Three Blind Mice*.

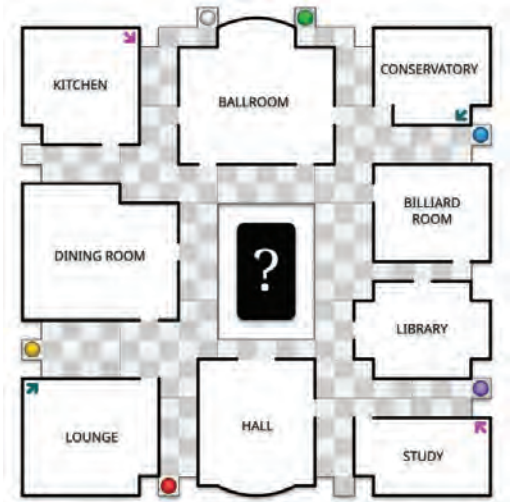
**1947-** Agatha Christie writes a 30-minute radio drama titled *Three Blind Mice* as a birthday gift for Queen Mary. This short mystery forms the foundation of what would become *The Mousetrap*.

**1949-** The board game Clue (originally "Cluedo"), inspired by Christie's mystery, is released. The object of the game is to determine who murdered the game's victim, where the crime took place, and which weapon was used. Each player attempts to deduce the correct answer by strategically moving around the game board-- representing the rooms of a mansion-- and collecting clues about the circumstances of the murder from the other players.

**1952-** *The Mousetrap* premieres on stage at the Theatre Royal in England on October 6. Since there was now a play out that was already named *Three Blind Mice*, the name was changed to *The Mousetrap*.

**1974-** *The Mousetrap* becomes the longest continuously running play in British theatre history.

**2012-** *The Mousetrap* reaches a record-breaking 25,000 performances, cementing its status as the longest-running play in the world.



Clue Board game Layout

## Post-show:

Compare & contrast the show with the original short story text of *Three Blind Mice*. Why do you think the title was changed?



# "THE MOUSETRAP" DESIGN

## SET DESIGNS BY BRIAN MALLGRAVE

Brian Mallgrave: *The Mousetrap* takes place in the 1950s - and we chose to ground it in an English manor constructed in the 1920s. This show is unique in that a lot of important stage directions dictate where the entrances have to be based on the action in the plot. We followed this format, but made the space our own with inspiration from 1920s architecture, and also a little inspiration from the hotel lobby in the movie *The Shining*. While the film's exterior shots were filmed at Oregon's Timberline Lodge (built 1909), our inspiration was focused on the interior shots, which were filmed at the Ahwahnee Hotel in California that was built in the 1920s.



Brian Mallgrave's Scenic Design Render

One of our biggest challenges was to stay true to blocking and locations in the script - yet make the design our own and unique from any other production of the show. The interior is very European-inspired, mysterious, and encompasses the idea of being confined in this location during a heavy snow storm.

## COSTUME DESIGNS FROM LINDA MORKEN



Linda Morken: *Mousetrap* takes place in the English countryside outside of London, a few years after WWII, so I set my costumes in that world. It's winter and cold, and the manor is drafty, so I tried to reflect that in the costumes by using layers. I added some colors and patterns to make it visually interesting. I enjoy this period in fashion, so it was a lot of fun to work on.

### Post-show question:

Which elements of the production most effectively transported you into the world of the story? How did the show's design, performance, and direction contribute?

Linda Morken's sketch for Molly Ralston's Costume