77-2440

LaBORDE, Charles Bernard, Jr., 1949-
FORM AND FORMULA IN DETECTIVE DRAMA: A
STRUCTURAL STUDY OF SELECTED TWENTIETH-
CENTURY MYSTERY PLAYS.

The Ohio State University, Ph.D., 1976
Theater

Xerox University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106

© 1976

CHARLES BERNARD LaBORDE, JR.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
FORM AND FORMULA IN DETECTIVE DRAMA: A STRUCTURAL STUDY
OF SELECTED TWENTIETH-CENTURY MYSTERY PLAYS

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
Charles Bernard LaBorde, Jr., B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1976

Reading Committee:
Donald Glancy
Roy Bowen
Charles Ritter

Approved By
Donald Glancy
Adviser
Department of Theatre
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Professor Donald Glancy for his guidance in the writing of this dissertation and to the other members of my committee, Dr. Roy Bowen and Dr. Charles Ritter, for their criticism. I am also indebted to Dr. Clifford Ashby for suggesting to me that the topic of detective drama was suitable for exploration in a dissertation.
VITA

October 6, 1949 . . . . Born - Beaumont, Texas

1971 . . . . . . . . . B.A., Lamar State College of Technology, Beaumont, Texas

1971-1973 . . . . . Teaching Assistant, Department of Speech and Theatre Arts, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas

1973 . . . . . . . . . M.A., Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas

1973-1975 . . . . . Teaching Associate, Department of Theatre, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1975-1976 . . . . . University Fellow, Graduate School, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

PUBLICATIONS


"Sherlock Holmes on the Stage: William Gillette," Accepted for publication by Baker Street Journal.

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Theatre

Studies in Criticism and Literature. Professors Donald Glancy and John Morrow

Studies in History. Professor Clifford Ashby

Studies in Production. Professors Roy Bowen, Donald Glancy, Clifford Ashby, and Ronald Schulz
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODERN MYSTERY</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. MURDER-HOUSE MYSTERIES</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. POLICE PROCEDURALS</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. LESS RESTRICTIVE FORMULAS</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. VARIATIONS</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. COMIC MYSTERIES</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLOSSARY</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This study deals with a type of play, the modern detective drama (or, simply, the "mystery"), that derives much of its popularity from man's fascination with crime, specifically with the solution of particularly puzzling crimes. Such an interest in criminal activities has manifested itself in countless literary works over the centuries; however, in the mid-nineteenth century the mystery form itself appeared when its essential element, the prolonged concealment of the solution to a crime, was integrated with a standard adventure story depicting criminal activity. The success of the early efforts written in short-story form soon led to stage mysteries, which enjoyed a similar popularity. In the twentieth century, mystery plays have occupied a particularly significant place in the theatre and, thus, are worthy of scholarly study, just as mystery fiction demands attention in any comprehensive examination of modern literature. A critic who ignores the mystery field is neglecting a body of twentieth-century writing that is extensive in terms of both the number of works written and the popularity of the individual books or dramas. In the realm of narrative fiction, mystery writers rank among the most prolific and widely read of novelists. Few classic authors could claim readerships approaching those of Erle Stanley Gardner or Agatha Christie, both of whom sold hundreds of millions of copies of
their mystery novels. Mystery plays have enjoyed similar successes. The number of mysteries that have been produced on Broadway and in the West End ranks in the hundreds. In the years before the mammoth runs of post-Oklohamal musical comedy, mystery dramas enjoyed some of the longest runs on the professional stage. Mystery, along with comedy and the musical, is one of the staples of the twentieth-century English-speaking stage. Occasionally a mystery rivals the other leading genres in popular appeal, as is attested by the successes of such disparate works as Arsenic and Old Lace and Sleuth. Furthermore, the longest running play in the history of world theatre is the current (1976) London production of Agatha Christie's The Mousetrap, now in its twenty-third year. If popularity with the public is a measure of significance (and it certainly should be in an era in which the arts are struggling for survival and acceptance), then the mystery play is among the most worthy of forms for study in the twentieth century.

Both mystery dramas and narrative mystery fiction have suffered from unduly negative critical biases, most of them arising because of the popular appeal of the mystery format. Mystery literature in general has been viewed as a subgenre, a diversion with which the not-too-intelligent masses occupy themselves. In recent years that view has begun to change insofar as non-dramatic fiction is concerned.¹ The first step in the transition of the mystery novel from a popular oddity to a respectable form of literature that was

¹For example, see "Women in Detective Fiction," Journal of Communication, 25 (Spring 1975), 98-119. That scholarly publication devoted three articles in a single issue to detectives in novels and short stories. Nothing was noted on detective drama.
deserving of scholarly critical attention was the appearance of theoretical writings by authors and readers of mystery fiction. Such analyses drew attention to some of the better writers. Eventually modern scholarship embraced the works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Ross Macdonald as being worthy of study and comparison with the likes of Hemingway and Steinbeck.

No such transformation has occurred with the mystery play. It remains a major twentieth-century theatre form without detailed scholarly analyses of either its history, development, or structure. The only scholarly incursions into the realm of mystery dramas have been minor studies of individual writers, and none of those analyses have explored solely the mystery dramas of the writer being studied. Some scholars have looked at mystery novelists like Agatha Christie and Edgar Wallace, who have also written plays. Usually their studies have devoted minimal space to the dramatic contributions of the writers; critics have tended to focus upon the more acceptable criticism of narrative fiction. Other scholars have examined the total output of playwrights who included mystery plays among their dramatic

2 The only attempts at a scholarly approach have been in the area of history and even those efforts are minimal. A single thesis has dealt somewhat tangentially with the history of detective plays: G. R. Jordan, "A Study of the Popularity of Detective Drama Produced on the New York Stage from 1899 to 1936," thesis, Minnesota, 1938. In M. Willson Disher's Melodrama: Plots That Thrilled (New York: Macmillan, 1954), two brief chapters are devoted to nineteenth-century thrillers. The only other historical scholarship is a single chapter on the mystery play in Frank Rahill's The World of Melodrama (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967). In the Rahill book only thirteen pages are devoted to the mystery, while fifty-eight pages are spent on a single author of late eighteenth-century melodrama (Pixérecourt).
compositions. Studies of Elmer Rice, Philip Barry, Owen Davis, and J. B. Priestley, for example, have been undertaken, but seldom if ever have those investigations included examinations of the writers' mystery plays qua mysteries. Exploration of the large field of mystery drama has hardly begun.

Since virtually the entirety of the body of mystery dramas is open for exploration and, thus, far transcends the practical magnitude of this initial study, several limitations have been placed upon the area of examination. Although there is a vast amount of mystery writing in most countries of the world, only published plays from England and the United States have been included. Moreover, the study is limited only to plays that have had substantially successful runs in New York or London (70 or more performances before 1940 and 200 or more performances since 1940).

Even with such restrictions the body of plays for study would remain unmanageable. Therefore, only a single kind of mystery play has been examined. The type explored is the confined mystery, a drama in which a group of characters is detained primarily in a single locale until a crime is solved. Confinement of the characters is achieved in several ways, such as by weather, geography, or a human force (police, for example). The application of such a restrictive guideline must of necessity be somewhat flexible in order to allow for variety in the body of plays. Nevertheless, even a loosely applied criterion such as confinement considerably limits the area of study. Excluded are the many mystery dramas that cover years of time.
or numerous locales and for which confinement is a near impossibility. Also excluded is the equally unexplored area of courtroom mystery plays. With the stated limitations in force, what remains is a more wieldy body of approximately three-dozen dramas.

The only additional limitation is concerned not with the subject of the study, but its methodology. This dissertation does not apply a historical approach, although a need exists for such a work. Since the field is largely untouched, it seemed most appropriate that an initial exploration stay close to the plays themselves and leave the historical ramifications of the mystery form's development on the stage for later investigators; therefore, the approach employed is that of a structural critical analysis of the prescribed body of plays.

Even a cursory reading of this limited group of plays reveals obvious patterns. The ease with which detective plays by several different writers can be placed into a few restrictive categories suggests that the dramas follow clearly prescribed formulas. Most of the plays belong to one of the major formulas—murder-house mysteries, police procedurals, and psychological thrillers. Other dramas are treated as works following less restrictive minor formulas such as inverted mysteries or "Had I But Knowns." Still other detective plays are dealt with as sub-formulas or radical variations on the five standard formulas: such categories are ghost mysteries.

3Although this study does not emphasize history, a brief survey of the development of confined-mystery plays has been included in order to introduce the dramas. See Chapter One, pp. 7-42.
collective-detective dramas, environmental mysteries, propagandistic
detective plays, and comic mysteries or parodies.

This dissertation attempts to decipher the details of those formulas for each group of the plays that are analyzed. The study is a preliminary step toward the scholarly analysis of modern mystery plays. It is to be hoped that such a beginning will lead to further interest and study of this still unresearched area, just as early explorations of mystery novels helped to legitimize criticism of them.
Man's interest in crime is an ancient one. While much of that concern derives from a defensive posture (that is, man's not wanting to be the victim of crime), mankind has also vicariously subjected itself to countless dangers and horrors through the literature that it has produced. Accounts of crimes were included in the oldest works of literature. The Abydos Passion Play recounted murder and dismemberment. The Book of Genesis contained the story of the murder of Abel by his brother, Cain. That Judeo-Christian version of the inaugural act of cruelty of man toward man was the first of many atrocities described in the Bible. Similar criminal acts and even their solutions by processes of deduction were written of in the Jewish Apocrypha, Herodotus's history, and the Aeneid.¹

The ancient accounts of crime were not confined, however, to rituals, narratives, and epics. Dramatic literature also contained numerous examples of crimes. The classical Greek theatre was particularly fertile ground for criminal activity. Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound described the tortures of those guilty in the eyes of

the Olympian gods, while the same playwright's trilogy, *The Oresteia*, presented a multi-generational view of crime and its eventual control through civil law. The *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles was a brilliant early example of crime and its detection through deduction, with the added twist that the detective was also the unwitting murderer. The third of the great Greek tragic playwrights, Euripides, was not outdone by his predecessors. He included such acts of evil as infanticide and poisoning in *Medea* and dismemberment in *The Bacchae*.

Later generations of playwrights continued to portray crime and death as freely as had the Greeks. The Roman theatre contributed the sensational closet dramas of Seneca. The theatrical activity of the Middle Ages had its share of portraits of crime and punishment, as well as a wealth of portrayals of the atrocities visited upon the various martyrs for the cause of Christianity. Renaissance dramas marked a resurgence in the use of explicit and gory details that rivaled even the bloodiest of Senecan tragedies. The Italian neoclassicists offered such horrors as those found in Giraldi Cinthio's *Orbecche*: the murder of children by their grandfather and the beheading of an evil ruler by his daughter.

In England crime and murder reigned supreme in the dramas of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton's *Corboduc* helped establish the trend toward Senecan tragedy in Britain. Christopher Marlowe continued the parade of evil in his portraits of superhuman villains such as *Doctor Faustus* and *Tamburlaine the Great*. Revenge tragedy also came into vogue at
that time, largely because of the success of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Shakespeare, too, dealt easily and skillfully with murder and evil. He not only wrote a Senecan tragedy (*Titus Andronicus*), but he also refined revenge tragedy into the ultimate example of a good man destroyed by a crime-infested world in *Hamlet*. The Bard also created Machiavellian villains to match, if not surpass, those of Marlowe in such masterpieces as *Richard III*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*. After Shakespeare came the blood-filled dramas of the late Jacobean period by such playwrights as John Webster (*The Duchess of Malfi*) and Cyril Tourneur (*The Revenger's Tragedy*).

Crime both on the stage and in literature in general continued to be popular throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was not until the nineteenth century, however, that the modern mystery story was invented. The reason is a simple one: the mystery as it is known today is invariably linked with the modern police force; since a public police force did not exist before the nineteenth century, the writing of fiction dealing with such activities was an impossibility. After the creation of the Sûreté in Paris and Sir Robert Peel's organization of Scotland Yard in London early in the nineteenth century, the way was prepared for literary recountsings of the exploits of both real and fictional opponents of crime and criminals. The development of the new police-inspired crime literature also benefited from a rapidly increasing reading

---

audience that included the lower classes as well as the more traditional reading public of the middle and upper classes. Those newly literate members of the lower strata of society found the sensational stories of crime quite compelling.\(^3\) Even before the detective mystery proper came into being, the public was offered supposedly true accounts taken from police experiences. The most celebrated of such writings were the volumes of memoirs of a French criminal turned thief-taker and private detective, François Eugène Vidocq. A British stage adaptation called Vidocq: The French Police Spy appeared in 1829 soon after the publication of the memoirs. With the success of that play and others such as Presumptive Evidence; or, Murder Will Out, a new vogue in stage policemen was begun.\(^4\) The trend continued throughout the century with the most notable success in the field going to Tom Taylor, who created the police detective, Hawkshaw, in his 1863 melodrama, The Ticket-of-Leave Man.\(^5\)

While those early police-adventure stories and plays were definitely thrillers, filled with scenes of crime, bloodshed, and rescue, they were not technically mysteries. They did not withhold the solution of the problem from the reader or audience member; thus,

\(^3\)The increase in circulation of popular magazines is evidence of the definite boom in literature in general and sensational stories in particular. The world's first mass-circulation magazine, Graham's, enlarged its circulation from 5,000 to an unprecedented 40,000 copies in a few months time under the editorship of Edgar Allan Poe. See Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure, p. 4.

\(^4\)This conclusion is reached by M. Willson Disher in Melodrama: Plots That Thrilled (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 44.

\(^5\)Disher, Melodrama, p. 47.
they did not allow the audience to attempt to solve the puzzle along
with the fictional or stage detective. Instead the audience could
enjoy only the vicarious thrills of the dangers of life as a big-city
fighter of crime. Credit for the major step in transforming adven-
ture into a mysterious puzzle that retained the attendant thrills
and excitement of the action story went to the American poet and
short-story writer Edgar Allan Poe.

Early in his career Poe had shown an interest in puzzles in
the form of cryptograms and had also established himself as the mas-
ter of the fictional crime story in offerings such as "The Tell-Tale
Heart." In 1841 he combined crime and puzzle in his tale, "The
Murders of the Rue Morgue," and invented a new type of short story,
the mystery. In that seminal story two women are found brutally
murdered in their apartment. The murderer is unknown. An amateur
detective, C. Auguste Dupin, proceeds to solve the case through a
brilliant series of deductions based upon clues presented to the
reader. Only at the conclusion of the story is the mystery ex-
plained. Although Poe wrote only two other mysteries about Dupin,
he had firmly established the mystery conventions of concealment and
solution through clues in the minds of both readers and writers alike.

Following Poe's example, other writers turned to mystery
fiction in the short-story form. Soon the mystery technique was

---

6 So credited by Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure, p. 4.

7 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders of the Rue Morgue," in The
Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (Garden City, New York:
used in novels as well, the most celebrated of which were the works of Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), and Charles Dickens's unfinished tale, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), which aroused intense interest because Dickens died before writing its solution. Eventually the mystery formula was perfected in both short-story and novel forms by Conan Doyle in his sixty accounts of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, the first of which appeared in 1887. Although the mystery continued to be popular after Doyle's death and underwent numerous variations in detail, its formula was firmly established by the early years of the twentieth century. The basic pattern created by the early masters has become so standardized that rules for writing the stories have been compiled by numerous authorities.  

While the mystery story developed rapidly in fiction, its transformation to the stage was quite slow. Most nineteenth-century writers and producers were thoroughly convinced that the mystery puzzle could not retain audience interest in the theatre. The argument ran that the audience wanted to see adventurous activity and not tax itself trying to recall clues in order to solve a mental problem, no matter how exotic or gory the details might be. Nevertheless, the popularity of mystery stories led to their appearance on the stage, at first in the form of adaptations of successful short stories or novels. The prejudice toward the puzzle aspect of
the stories prevailed, however, and the adapted mysteries had the mystery element expunged from them on the stage. The resultant plays were not mystery dramas, but simple thrillers like those written during the first half of the century. When Wilkie Collins adapted his novel, *The Moonstone*, for the stage in 1877, he informed his audiences of the identity of the thief at the earliest possible moment, whereas in the novel he had kept his readers guessing. Even late in the century such adaptations as William Gillette's highly successful *Sherlock Holmes* (1899) contained little if any element of mystery. Although some plays such as Charles Edmond and Adolphe Dennery's *L'Aieule* (1863) and Paul Meritt's *The Golden Plough* (1877) enjoyed a modicum of success while keeping the audience guessing "who done it," the majority of hits involving crime and police avoided concealing the identity of the villain from the audience beyond the first act.

Not until the second decade of the twentieth century did the mystery format gain widespread acceptance on the stage. Among the earliest contributors to the growth of the stage mystery was a popular drama called *The Argyle Case*, which was produced in 1912. The authors, Harvey J. O'Higgins and Harriet Ford, received technical assistance from William J. Burns, the head of an early twentieth-century detective agency. The first act of the play kept the identity of the murderer a secret, thus giving the drama the same quality of mystification that readers of narrative detective fiction found in the stories and novels of the day. Despite the fact
that the murderer was obvious to all after the first few minutes of the second act, *The Argyle Case* established the pattern for concealment in the stage crime drama. The thriller was on the verge of becoming the stage mystery.\(^9\)

Before a complete transition could be made, however, a few more ingredients were necessary. The legalistic and police plays like *Mrs. Dane's Defense* made their contributions to the evolution of the stage mystery by demonstrating how the cross-examination method of questioning could be effectively used to solve a perplexing problem.\(^10\) The element of comedy, a chief ingredient of stage mysteries during their first two decades of existence, originated in farces that revolved around police activities. The most influential such comic piece was Augustin McHugh's *Officer 666*, which was produced in the same year as *The Argyle Case*. That farce actually resulted from the collaborative efforts of several masters of turn-of-the-century Broadway comedy. McHugh's original play, *The Gladwin Collection*, was reworked by a play-doctor, Winchell Smith. It was then given further changes by its producer, George M. Cohan, who reportedly had little faith in the drama's possibility for success.\(^11\) Nevertheless, the crime farce did well at the box office and


prepared the way for another crime-related farce from the Cohan production group during the following season.

The vehicle that launched the mystery-play boom was Cohan's own *Seven Keys to Baldpate*, which opened a 320-performance run on Broadway at the Astor Theatre in 1913. The author was well-versed in all the rules, methods, and tricks of the theatre of his day. In addition to being a composer, lyricist, producer, director, and performer, he was an experienced playwright, having written the first of his fifty plays in 1901. Basing his play upon a first novel by unsuccessful playwright and former drama critic Earl Derr Biggers, Cohan proceeded to revolutionize the writing of the stage thriller. In his own words, he fearlessly engaged in "tearing down traditions" and "breaking all rules and regulations of play construction."

The reaction to that drama, which Cohan dashed off in only ten days, was varied. The public flocked to the play in such numbers that it broke all previous box-office records for farce, in Cohan's

---


13 Biggers was later to achieve a degree of fame himself as the creator of Oriental sleuth Charlie Chan. See Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure*, p. 178.


The author himself saw the play as a minor work. He termed it "pure entertainment and a sort of comedy kidding of the technique of melodramatic thrillers." One Cohan biographer noted that the showman often admitted that Baldpate was "merely a trick—a trick that got over." The critics, however, did not agree as to the inconsequential nature of the Cohan comedy. Reviewers used such terms as "bold departure" and "modern improvement" to describe the play. One enraptured aisle-sitter mused, "Think of being able to create something new in the theatre!" Most perceptive of all the early evaluators of the play was a New York Times reviewer who noted quite correctly, "No one can guess how it will turn out."

Writing twenty years after the play's premiere, George Middleton, a founder of The Dramatists Guild, observed that Seven Keys to Baldpate had been a landmark in twentieth-century theatre:

Baldpate, besides being a popular mystery melodrama, marked a contribution to the technique of playmaking. It was, I

---

16 Cohan, Twenty Years, p. 221.
17 George M. Cohan, quoted in Richards, 10 Classic, p. 799.
18 Morehouse, Cohan, p. 114.
believe, the first substantial stage success to apply throughout the same technique which a novelist gives to a mystery story. The audience was constantly being fooled, tricked, mocked, abused, rolled up, and finally thrown, exhausted by melodramatic thrills, into a corner, where it recovered its sanity by convulsions of laughter at the solution. Moods and tenses were mixed in as potent a cocktail as any dramatist ever shook, with added irregularities of dramatic forms and fancies. In other words, there had been nothing quite like it before. I am confident that no other play so influenced the manner of writing a mystery play—so difficult because it is all visual and can make no prose comments en route, as the novelist can, to trick the suspense or bedevil the observer.23

Cohan certainly had created something original. His combination of the interrogations of *Mrs. Dane's Defense*, the crime and comedy mixture of *Officer 666*, and the suspenseful delay in the revelation of the solution of *The Argyle Case* gave birth to a new type of melodrama, the mystery play. 

*Baldpate* did not long remain Cohan's only venture into his newly created field of mystery drama. Soon after that initial success he rewrote a serious play, *The Choice of a Super Man* by Cora Dick Gantt, transforming it into a *Baldpate*-like mystery farce called *The Tavern*. It opened in 1919 at the George M. Cohan Theatre and ran for more than 250 performances despite particularly adverse reactions from the New York reviewers and a period of forced closing during a strike by Actors' Equity, a union that Cohan vigorously opposed throughout his career. Cohan remarked that the play's monetary rewards resulted from the "sheer curiosity that brought the crowds to see for themselves whether or not any play could possibly be as

23George Middleton, quoted in Richards, *10 Classic*, pp. 799-800.
bad as the New York critics had declared this one," While he tried yet another time to write a satisfactory mystery farce, Cohan surrendered leadership in the development of the stage mystery to his disciples.

The fledgling mystery playwrights learned quickly from Cohan's example and refined the techniques of the mystery story for the stage during the second and third decades of the century. Following Baldpate's opening, only a year elapsed before the courtroom mystery play matured in On Trial, written by a one-time law clerk, Elmer Rice. Then, in 1916 the play that was to establish the dominant mystery pattern of the 1920's premiered at the 48th Street Theatre in New York. It was Bayard Veiller's The Thirteenth Chair. The author had considerable experience, having written eight previous dramas, including a popular crime play in 1912. In The Thirteenth Chair the stage-wise Veiller popularized such features as the turning off of lights to hide a murder, the suggestion of the supernatural, and the inclusion of befuddled and even stupid police

---

24 Cohan, Twenty Years, p. 257.

25 Cohan revived the central character of The Tavern in a 1940 failure, The Return of the Vagabond. It marked his final effort as author and actor before his death in 1942, according to Morehouse, Cohan, p. 223.

26 Since trial plays are outside the concerns of this study, their evolution will not be treated in this chapter. Some of the more important such mystery dramas are Bayard Veiller's The Trial of Mary Dugan, Agatha Christie's Witness for the Prosecution, and Jack Roffey's Hostile Witness.

27 Within the Law.
detectives. Almost singlehandedly he ushered in an era of increasing demands on stage electricians and properties men with his elaborate special effects. The tricks employed in Veiller's drama soon became hackneyed, but in 1916 they were novel and "absorbing" to audiences. In addition to the elaborate technical wizardry, Veiller introduced the basic pattern of the mystery novel to the stage: the murder is committed at the outset of the story, and the remainder is devoted to the search for the killer. The Veiller approach to the stage mystery as exemplified in The Thirteenth Chair so quickly became that of virtually all other practitioners of the melodrama that the simple formula was well known to audiences within three years of its adaptation to the theatre.

By the end of the second decade of the century, Cohan had transformed the techniques of the mystery for stage use in his farces, while Veiller had adapted the simple murder-mystery-novel formula to more serious dramas. The final development of the decade


29 This observation was made at the time of the play's premiere in "A Detective Play by Bayard Veiller," New York Times, 21 Nov. 1916, p. 9.

30 For example, the reviewer for the New York Times was able to give the following perceptive recipe in 1919:

"The essential ingredients of the successful mystery play are an assortment of persons possessed of full and adequate motives for committing the dread deed, but no one of whom committed it. Add thereto a fair technical skill in the unraveling, a plausible denouement, and the result is a play which must inevitably find an audience."

was the refinement of the police-mystery formula for the stage. While Veiller had employed a police investigation in *The Thirteenth Chair*, he had subordinated the details of the police work to trickery and supernatural qualities. A few years after the opening of the Veiller play, however, dramas that emphasized the details of police procedures during a criminal investigation appeared with great frequency. The man chiefly responsible for popularizing those so-called "police procedurals" with their repeated grilling of suspects was the prolific American dramatist Owen Davis.

Purportedly the author of as many as 300 plays, Davis had begun his career in 1898. The chief products of his early years of playwriting had been old-style melodramas. Then, in 1918 Davis realized that the "sensational melodrama was dead and its place was [being] taken by the mystery plays." Always the opportunist, Davis not only abandoned his old standby but helped destroy it by contributing to the deluge of new mystery dramas. His first major mystery, *At 9:14½*, opened at the Playhouse in 1919 and ran for a promising 139 performances until it fell victim to the Actors' Equity strike. He followed that play with many others, including a parody of the mystery genre, *The Haunted House*, in 1924. When that comedy failed to be as big a bonanza at the box office as Davis felt

---

31 In Barry Bates Witham, "The Dramaturgy of Owen Davis," Diss. Ohio State 1968, the titles of 186 Davis plays are verified.


33 Davis, *My First Fifty Years*, p. 79.
it should have been, he concluded that audiences wanted their murders "served up hot"; therefore, he returned to blood-filled police plays such as *The Donovan Affair* (1926) and *The Ninth Guest* (1930). He dashed off so many plays so quickly that his name became synonymous with pedestrian mystery. Not only did he readily admit writing by a formula, he frankly published his version of it in his memoirs.  

While Owen Davis steadily produced his procedurals, other authors were enjoying phenomenal triumphs with plays that combined the Cohan humor with Veiller's emphasis on mechanically achieved thrills. The prototype of all such plays was *The Bat*, which opened a record-breaking Broadway run of 860 performances at the Morosco Theatre in 1920. The drama was the collaborative work of a popular mystery novelist, Mary Roberts Rinehart, and a successful playwright, Avery Hopwood. Mrs. Rinehart had begun her writing career in 1908 with the publication of her novel, *The Circular Staircase*, a work

34 Davis, *My First Fifty Years*, p. 94.

35 The following version of the Davis mystery formula appears in his autobiography, *I'd Like to Do It Again* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1931), pp. 163-64:

"The formula is a very exact and very exacting one, and in addition to its mechanical difficulties the author must not only create an interest in who committed the crime, but, if he hopes for success, he must make them fear that some one character dear to them is guilty. In other words, the mystery play in which one hasn't gone deep enough into the emotions to make the audience care who committed the murder is never successful, no matter how mysterious it may be."

36 In 1920 Hopwood had four plays on Broadway, according to "Avery Hopwood Dies at Sea," *New York Times*, 2 July 1928, p. 19.
that one admirer claimed possessed the "sharp essence of drama." She had also developed an interest in the stage and had written two plays with Hopwood. Finally, during the First World War, Mrs. Rinehart decided to adapt her first novel for the stage. After several years of war-interrupted work, she and Hopwood completed the play, having taken great care in the precise timing of exits and entrances in an effort to play fair with audiences as to the identity of the killer. After a tryout in Washington under the title of A Thief in the Night, the play opened as The Bat in New York and later in London to enthusiastically responsive audiences. Despite the tremendous monetary rewards from The Bat, Rinehart had some regrets: she lamented the fact that the popularity of her play inspired dozens of dramas that lacked consistency and intelligence and instead offered only sensational and horrifying stage effects.

Although Mrs. Rinehart nobly accepted blame for the rash of what George Jean Nathan termed "fright-wig melodramas," a drama that was equally responsible was John Willard's 1922 hit, The Cat and the Canary. The 349-performance run of that play at the National Theatre soon made its unique features the targets of Broadway plot thieves. Among actor-singer-playwright Willard's once fresh additions

39 Rinehart, My Story, p. 92.
40 Rahill, World of Melodrama, p. 294.
to the mystery genre in the 1920's were sliding secret panels, dis­
appearing corpses, clutching claw-and-hair-covered forearms, and a
mysterious woman versed in the black arts of voodoo. Devices that
combined in 1922 to make such an astute observer as Alexander Wooll­
cott remark that the play was "a creepy young thriller nicely calcu­
lated to make every hair on your head rise," quickly became the
stock-in-trade of hack mystery dramatists.

By the early 1920's the patterns were set. The basic formu­
las were known by all would-be playwrights, and lessons had been
learned from the successes of The Thirteenth Chair, The Bat, and The
Cat and the Canary. Since Owen Davis had the procedural school of
mystery plays in his formidable control, the imitators turned to the
"fright-wig" approach of Veiller, Hopwood, Rinehart, and Willard or
even to the older farce-parody method outlined by Cohan in Seven
Keys to Baldpate and The Tavern. Since there was so much similar
work of a highly derivative nature being produced in the 1920's,
only plays that featured a novel device enjoyed appreciable success.

Ralph Spence, a former writer of comic subtitles for silent
motion pictures, achieved some popularity with such a mixture of
all-too-familiar and innovative devices. He borrowed freely from
Seven Keys to Baldpate and The Cat and the Canary in his comedy, The
Gorilla, which played 251 performances at the Selwyn Theatre in
1925. The play's mystery solution was identical to that used in
Baldpate, although the author removed the numerous reversals that

41 Alexander Woollcott, "Gooseflesh at the National," New
baffled audiences of the Cohan comedy. Presumably working from the premise that there cannot be too much of a good thing, Spence also replaced the hairy claw from the Willard play with an entire man in a gorilla suit. The play's novelty came from the use of then-unexploited audience involvement when the gorilla was allowed to run amuck in the auditorium.

People who enjoyed an ape in their laps received the ultimate in environmental mystery when an audience member was murdered in *The Spider*, a 1927 offering at the 46th Street Theatre. The play, which owed its considerable success to the transformation of the Broadway theatre into a vaudeville house in which a murder was committed, was the product of the imaginations of a novelist and amateur magician, Fulton Oursler, and a member of a bookselling firm, Lowell Brentano. Through their ingenious incorporation of the audience into the play, they managed, in *Times* critic Brooks Atkinson's estimation, to change a "moderately interesting mystery story into an absorbing theatrical entertainment." Audiences apparently agreed with Atkinson; the play ran for almost a year.

Unfortunately, most of the stage-mystery writers of the 1920's lacked the inventiveness of Oursler and Brentano. Consequently, most of the plays became, as one critic noted, not so much

---


vehicles for thrills as simply "nightmares in themselves." The plays bogged down in so much repetitive formula writing that critics devised formulas of their own to guide the viewing of the plays. In a 1926 review of Owen Davis's The Donovan Affair, critic Robert Benchley developed what has become the classic approach to be used by the weary mystery-watcher forced yet another time to attempt to decipher "who done it":

But we are getting to the point now where, after fifteen or twenty guests have been grilled and suspected of murder in turn, we not only don't know who did it, but don't care. We have a system now whereby we automatically suspect the butler right at the start and then pay no more attention. It may turn out that the butler didn't do it, but it's a safe bet that none of the suspected guests did either.

A single production near the end of the decade ably demonstrated the degree to which a mystery play could be written according to current popular formulas and yet achieve a modicum of success. Elmer Rice and Philip Barry, two authors who were held in favor by the theatre reviewers of the 1920's, became bored while on an ocean liner bound for Europe. Because of recent failures at the box office, they decided that it would be a good idea to spend their time on the ship in producing a potentially popular play that would enrich them both. The obvious choice for a quickly written but marketable play was a mystery. Before the ship reached the continent, the two writers had completed a scenario, which they believed to be most of

the work on such a project. Rice then wrote each act of the play and mailed it to Barry, who was vacationing in another part of Europe. Barry revised drastically, usually in an attempt to add humor to the play. The drama, Cock Robin, eventually was completed in that unusual way and opened in New York at the 48th Street Theatre in 1928. While critics writing in later years labeled the play "undeniably a minor effort" that lacked much of Barry's characteristic wit, reviewers in the 1920's found it "delightful," "novel," "attractive," and "more than mildly amusing." Although the play fell short of Barry and Rice's financial expectations and gave Rice "no great pride of authorship," it survived for 100 performances and earned a profit.

In the first years of the 1920's, when Broadway was enjoying the monetary rewards of the early detective plays, British mystery drama had scarcely begun. The reason for the belated development was that the British stage mystery was born not on Baker Street but on Broadway. Only with the importation of hits from New York did

50 Rice, Minority Report, p. 239.
51 Roppolo, Barry, p. 54.
the British interest in stage detectives begin to prosper. Soon after the London successes of *The Bat* and *The Cat and the Canary* in 1922, a craze for mystery dramas began in Britain. Critic J. C. Trewin observed of the phenomenon that theatregoers "met nightly at the cauldron." Most of the dramas comprising the craze were American imports of the "fright-wig" variety, which were called "pistol and panel plays" in Britain. The American mysteries seen in London during that period included *The Gorilla*, *At 9:45* (retitled *9:45*), *The Donovan Affair*, and *The Spider*. It was only a matter of time before a thriving native mystery-drama business developed.

The greatest success by British dramatists in the mystery field came in the writing of police plays. Owen Davis's American importations never fared extremely well; apparently the "hard-boiled" American police methods were too strong for a people schooled in the more gentlemanly tactics of Scotland Yard. Nevertheless, the chief reason that native British police dramas dominated even in the early years in London lay in the fact that Britain had its own prolific writer of mysteries, novelist Edgar Wallace. When Wallace turned his considerable talents to the stage, he easily established himself as master of the police-crime story in the theatre. Critic Trewin readily acknowledged that Wallace was by far the best practitioner of the British mystery drama in the 1920's.

---


United States the less favorable American critics admitted that "he had a way with the development of gruesome drama." 54

Wallace's success prepared the way for other British mystery dramatists, some of whom soon rivaled the master at the box office. Such a playwright was Arnold Ridley, a sometime actor who wrote twenty-two plays.55 His most successful work, The Ghost Train, pleased audiences at the St. Martin's Theatre for 655 performances, beginning in 1925. Critics were not so enthusiastic about Ridley's talents, however. One of them was moved to remark that Ridley's writing proved that theatre best succeeded commercially when written for people with the mentality of ten-year-old children.56 Another young British actor-playwright, Frank Vosper, made a career of writing starring roles for himself in mystery thrillers. One of his early hits, Murder on the Second Floor (1929), borrowed freely from Seven Keys to Baldpate and The Gorilla in its burlesquing of the mystery formula. In addition to Ridley and Vosper, several other British imitators of Wallace and the American imports tried their hands at playwriting. Most of the resultant dramas abounded in novelties, stunts, and unexplained, unexpected plot twists that audiences tired of rather quickly. According to Allardyce Nicoll, British mystery sank to its nadir during the 1920's in plays exploiting mysterious


Orientals and Egyptians, who were invariably representatives of strange cults searching for sacred scarabs.\(^{57}\) If those plays, in fact, represented a nadir, it was in literary quality only. Business was excellent at the box office for such a yellow-peril drama as Allene Tupper Wilkes's *The Creaking Chair*, which ran for 235 performances at the Comedy Theatre in 1924-25.

By the end of the decade British mystery drama had reached a period of stagnation like that in America at the same time. While the Americans did little in the way of rejuvenating their ailing mystery-theatre offerings, a handful of British writers helped England revolutionize the stage mystery and made that country the dominant force in producing new mysteries for the theatre, a position which it has retained ever since.

While audiences and critics alike began to tire of the stage "whodunit," the field of mystery novels and short stories continued to grow, with the names of Dashiell Hammett, Ellery Queen, and Agatha Christie becoming familiar to mystery fans. The reason for the increase in popularity of the narrative fiction lay in the fact that the novels themselves had matured. Crime-fiction historian Howard Haycraft has cited three major changes that had occurred in the novels by 1930: first, the quality of the writing or literacy of the authors had improved substantially; second, plausibility and fidelity to life had replaced the "old school of melodrama and hokum"; and

finally, emphasis had been placed increasingly upon character with a proportional wane in the complicated mechanics of the story. 58

Toward the end of the decade stage mysteries in Britain began to change in the directions being taken in the novels when a few young authors of narrative fiction turned their attentions to playwriting. The first such new mystery playwright was A. A. Milne, who had begun his career as an essayist for the British humor magazine, Punch. Although he had written plays as early as 1917, Milne occupied himself during the 1920's with the writing of the narrative fiction that gave him an international reputation. His first novel, The Red House Mystery (1921), brought him acclaim from detective fiction aficionados. Then between 1924 and 1928 he produced his children's favorites about Christopher Robin and Winnie-the-Pooh. In the year that he abandoned the Pooh bear to posterity, Milne wrote his only mystery play, The Fourth Wall, which played in America under the title The Perfect Alibi. 59 The drama, which ran for nearly 200 performances at the Haymarket in London, became a minor landmark in the evolution of stage mysteries. It introduced the "inverted" form of the detective story to the stage, the inverted story being one in which the murderer is shown committing the crime and in which the chief concern is the method by which he will be apprehended

58 Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure, p. 158.

by an alert detective. Although the play does not fare well with present-day critics of Milne, in 1928 it was viewed as being "crisp and sensible" and "literate" at a time when literate stage mysteries were most infrequent. Milne had given the audiences of Britain a respite from hokum, sinister Orientals, sliding panels, and strangling hands.

Milne restored literate writing to the mystery play. To that quality Patrick Hamilton added an emphasis on detailed psychological characterization in his 1929 drama, Rope (Rope's End in America). Hamilton, like Milne, was a popular novelist on both sides of the Atlantic during the 1920's. When he turned his attention to the stage in Rope, he intended simply to fashion "a thriller, a thriller all the time, and nothing but a thriller." Since the play abandoned the prevailing stage viewpoint that murder was all in good fun, many audience members regarded it as being overly macabre. Nevertheless, critical perception defeated revulsion when Brooks

---

60 Actually Milne simply reintroduced the type of thriller that had dominated the crime-drama field before Seven Keys to Baldpate. The best recent example of an inverted story is the current (1976) television series, Columbo, which invariably uses that format.

61 One unsympathetic critic of Milne was moved to remark of The Fourth Wall that it was "as unexciting as a Perry Mason story without a scene in court." See Swann, Milne, p. 52.

62 Trewin, Theatre Since 1900, p. 160.


Atkinson deemed the drama a "novel diversion . . . for those who can stand it." Hamilton's application of the new developments of mystery novels to the stage resulted in a mystery play that excelled most others of its day both in literary quality and intellectual content. In an Introduction to a volume of mystery dramas, Stanley Richards aptly described Rope's lofty position in the evolution of stage thrillers:

The signal for the demise of "the creaking-door drama" came in 1929 with the arrival of Patrick Hamilton's thriller Rope, which brought to the theatre "another sort of shudder, based on real psychology," Hamilton showed us "the unhinged creak in a human mind and the clutching hand of fear destroying a human soul." This triumph of realism over meretricious theatricalism was so revolutionary that Rope became the pattern for all modern suspense plays.

In 1932 yet another major British novelist, J. B. Priestley, became intrigued with the theatre. After working on a stage version of one of his novels, he wrote his first solo effort for the stage, Dangerous Corner. Priestley added a previously nonexistent subtlety to the stage mystery formula. Instead of using concrete facts as clues, he juggled such intangibles as mood and hidden feelings as the keys to the solution of his mystery. The critics in the daily newspapers were befuddled by what appeared to be a mixed breed of play, half mystery and half drawing-room drama. Nevertheless, some of the periodical reviewers such as James Agate, Ivor Brown,

---


66 Richards, 10 Classic, p. x. Mr. Richards incorporates the words of Reginald Denham into his assessment of Rope. Denham was one of the followers of Hamilton's psychological approach to thrillers.
and A. V. Cookman praised the play as being "brilliant" and "ingenious." The favorable notices from the latter reviewers enabled the play to enjoy a respectable run of 151 performances at the Lyric Theatre, which proved to be only the beginning of the play's success. It played even longer in New York and went on to become, in Priestley's estimation, the most widely performed play written in the twentieth century.

With the proven success of subtlety and psychology on the stage, even some of the older mystery writers added touches of the new ingredients to their plays. For example, Edgar Wallace included a psychologically realistic psychopath in his highly successful 1931 procedural, The Case of the Frightened Lady (Criminal at Large in America). Aided in performance by Emlyn Williams's energetic and life-like portrayal of the murderer, the play showed the direction mystery drama was taking in the post-Rope era. Even an old standby,...


69 Richard Findlater gives the following description of Williams's performance in the biography, Emlyn Williams (London: Rockliff, 1956), p. 34:

"His nervous fingers playfully handle a revolver, his whole being trembles in fidgety movements... Around his lips hovers a gentle, seemingly inoffensive smile. Suddenly he starts staring, his vacant eyes begin to shed a mystical lustre; now it flares up--now it vanishes--that is madness as we may have witnessed it in asylums."
the ghost story, did not remain unchanged in that period of iconoclasm. In *A Murder Has Been Arranged* (1930) actor-playwright Emlyn Williams intentionally set out to break the rules of the mystery.\(^{70}\) The resultant play was an inverted ghost drama, complete with the most blatant *deus ex machina* since Euripides. Critics praised the drama highly for its avoidance of trickery and excessive bloodiness.\(^{71}\) While its run at the St. James's was disappointingly brief (85 performances) to Williams, the play marked the initial appearance of a major mystery playwriting talent.

After the flurry of new psychological mysteries in the late 1920's and early 1930's, the genre declined in importance on the stage. While some of the writers of earlier years such as Vosper, Priestley, Hamilton, and Williams\(^{72}\) had successes, few new authors replaced those who departed the mystery field. Several factors contributed to the decline, not the least of which was the appearance of talking motion pictures. Mysteries adapted well to the medium and soon many writers turned to the movies, producing a plethora of mystery and gangster films. What had become passe on Broadway and in the West End was new, exciting, and, above all, saleable in Hollywood. Especially hard-hit in the 1930's were stage procedurals,

---


\(^{71}\)For example, see "Strand Theatre," *The Times* (London), 10 Nov. 1930, p. 10; and a summary of reviews in Findlater, Williams, p. 35.

\(^{72}\)Love from a Stranger (1936), Mystery at Greenfingers (1937), *Gaslight* (1938), and *Night Must Fall* (1936) respectively.
which virtually disappeared with the death of Edgar Wallace six
months after the run of The Case of the Frightened Lady\textsuperscript{73} and the
withdrawal of Owen Davis from the mystery field. However, those
few representatives of procedurals that reached the stage, such as
Alec Coppel's I Killed the Count (1937), did moderately well at the
box office (184 performances for Count in London) and even managed
to excite an occasional reviewer.\textsuperscript{74}

The only new force in the development of stage mysteries
came toward the end of the decade from an unusual source, Nazi Ger­
man. With the attention of the world being focused on Hitler's
anti-Semitism and aggression, it was only a matter of time before
the subject appeared on stage, even in mystery dramas. Two months
after Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939, editor-actress-playwright-
millionaireess Clare Boothe (Luce) introduced the first hit Broadway
play dealing with Nazlism, Margin for Error.\textsuperscript{75} The drama became an
immediate cause célèbre when the German Chargé d'Affaires complained
about the piece to Secretary of State Cordell Hull.\textsuperscript{76} Boothe inno­
cently replied that she did not intend for her mystery comedy to

\textsuperscript{73}Wallace's death is described by Margaret Lane in Edgar
Wallace: The Biography of a Phenomenon (New York: Doubleday, Do­

\textsuperscript{74}See a review of I Killed the Count: "The Playhouses,"

\textsuperscript{75}Miss Boothe was credited with the honor by her husband,
publisher Henry R. Luce, in his Introduction to Margin for Error

mold public opinion or deliver a serious message. The result of the publicity was predictable; as one Boothe biographer recounted, "People flocked in droves to see a Nazi get his comeuppance at the Plymouth." Critics also jumped on the anti-Nazi bandwagon. After a 234-performance run in New York, a production opened in London, where it closed after less than a month in the West End. Apparently the British found Nazis far less comical than did Americans in 1940. While a few other plays applied a propaganda approach to mystery, again the mixture found a more comfortable place in Hollywood, which produced a spate of propaganda films, often of a mystery nature, during the war years.

The mystery play received new life in the early 1940's from an isolated theatrical phenomenon, Arsenic and Old Lace. The author, Joseph Kesselring, (or possibly his able producers Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse) ignored the tendency of mystery plays in the 1930's toward greater seriousness. While comedy was barely tolerated in mysteries since the sobering days of Edgar Wallace and Patrick Hamilton, farce was as passé as George M. Cohan and The Gorilla. Nevertheless, the production in 1941 of Arsenic and Old Lace at the Fulton Theatre in New York blended hilarity and horror with abandonment. Kesselring, a three-time-loser as a playwright

---


79 Such as N. Richard Nusbaum's Incognito (1941).
before Arsenic, had a hit: it ran for 1,444 performances in New York, had four American touring companies, and became the then-longest running American import to the London stage with 1,337 performances. Altogether it earned in excess of four million dollars at the box office.\(^{80}\) Surprisingly the play did not spark a host of successful imitations. The attempts paled by comparison, although some made money for their backers. For example, George Batson's Ramshackle Inn (1944) was unanimously denounced by the New York reviewers, but still managed a run of over 200 performances and a highly profitable tour across the country; nevertheless, Arsenic and Old Lace remained a largely isolated case of success and did not spark a major revival of interest in other mystery plays.

Mysteries had been briefly rescued from doldrums in the late 1920's by novelists such as Milne, Hamilton, and Priestley. In the mid-1940's similar aid to the dwindling popularity of stage mysteries came from the field of narrative fiction, where sales were at an unprecedentedly high level.\(^{81}\) The revival, however, centered around only a single individual, Agatha Christie. While her greatest years of productivity for the stage began in the 1940's, she was not then unknown to either theatregoers or to the mystery-reading public in general. She had published her first novel in 1920, but her name had not become a household word until 1926. In that year she

\(^{80}\) These figures are noted in Richards, *Best Mystery*, p. 411.

\(^{81}\) Haycraft, in *Murder*, p. viii, claimed that one-fourth of all books published in the English language in 1941 were mysteries.
published her controversial novel, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, in which she was accused of not playing fair with her readers because she had made her narrator the murderer. Also in that same year she mysteriously disappeared, apparently the victim of a kidnapping. After the case became celebrated enough to implant her name in the memories of potential readers, she suddenly reappeared, having purportedly been suffering from a curious form of amnesia that caused her to register at a health resort under the name of her husband's girl friend. Such attention-getters increased her popularity with mystery readers extensively by 1928, when the first stage adaptation of one of her novels debuted. Throughout the 1930's she was represented on stage in adaptations of her stories written by men such as Frank Vosper or in plays done in collaboration with more experienced playwrights than she. By the 1940's she had developed her abilities as a dramatist and was undertaking occasional solo efforts. In 1943 she scored a major success in London with *Ten Little Niggers*, which ran for 260 performances in London and played almost twice as long in New York under the new title, *Ten Little Indians*. After 1943 she continued to devote herself to the theatre as well as to novels. Included among her stage successes were *The Hollow* (1951), *Spider's Web* (1954), *Towards Zero* (1956), and *The Unexpected Guest* (1958). Her record-breaking *The Mousetrap* premiered in London at the Ambassador's Theatre in 1952; the drama, which was still playing in 1976, became the longest-running play in world theatre history. In

---

82 For a brief account of Christie's rise to fame, see Haycraft, *Murder*, p. 131.
1955 she became the first author of a mystery melodrama to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for *Witness for the Prosecution*. The reason for her unprecedented success has never been satisfactorily explained; however, a chief feature of her attractiveness to mystery watchers involved her playing fair on stage. The writer who had been condemned for "too great reliance on, and not always scrupulous use of, the least-likely-person motif" in her novels and who had "never played completely fair with the reader in her life!" altered her methods somewhat in the theatre. Even in such an intricately patterned play as *Ten Little Indians*, she avoided the concealment of vital facts. Her theatrical critics dubbed her as the most honest of mystery practitioners.84

Aside from the Christie triumphs, which were primarily confined to Britain, the mystery play in general continued its steady decline from the heyday of the 1920's and 1930's. During the decades of the 1950's and 1960's successes appeared infrequently. No patterns such as the vogue for farces, procedurals, and psychological melodramas in earlier years were readily discernible. Consequently, the few successful plays during those years possessed remarkable variety. Even the all-but-forgotten ghost story was revived in 1950 in William Archibald's *The Innocents*, a dramatization of the Henry James novel, *The Turn of the Screw*. Criticism of the play was mixed, with most of the dissenters objecting to Archibald's making the


84 This view is expressed in Richards, *10 Classic*, p. 3.
ghosts too obvious. Those reviewers who favored the play agreed with Brooks Atkinson that "At last we have a horror play that adults can admire and enjoy." The play had only a minimal success at the box office in America and Britain.

After a few more occasional hits in the 1950's, the next decade brought the appearance of a type of mystery that had been popularized during the early decades of the century in the novels of Mary Roberts Rinehart. Her books often featured a woman who let herself be duped by a murderer whose villainy was immediately apparent to everyone but the foolish female. Humorist Ogden Nash dubbed such tales "Had I But Knowns" or simply HIBK's. In 1962 the old formula was altered slightly and ushered onto the London stage in Monte Doyle's Signpost to Murder. Doyle relied heavily upon the audience's knowledge of the HIBK in order to set up an unconventional, surprise ending. The Times's reviewer noted that, despite the many improbabilities, the audience found in the "old-fashioned melodrama . . . [a] suggestion of novelty." Because of the absence of mysteries on the stage, a story that would have seemed ordinary in the extreme in 1932 had become novel enough in 1962 to run to full houses in London for more than a year. As if in answer to the argument that Signpost succeeded because of its non-formulistic

---


86 The most noteworthy success was Frederick Knott's Dial "M" for Murder (1952).

ending or its mild sex scenes, Frederick Knott produced an almost perfect formula play of the HIBK school in *Wait Until Dark*. Virtually the only alterations he made in the HIBK formula were to make his heroine blind and intelligent rather than sighted and stupid. Knott, who had established himself as one of the few accomplished masters of stage mystery in the years after World War II with *Dial “M” for Murder*, repeated his earlier success in the new play, which opened in 1966 in New York for a run of 373 performances and also played in Knott's native Britain for 683 performances.

For the remainder of the decade *Signpost to Murder* and *Wait Until Dark* stayed in the memories of a few producers who tried to make profits from similar mystery plays. Few were successful. Then in 1970 a new success that was to equal any ever enjoyed by a mystery play (except The Mousetrap) appeared in British author Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth*. That drama contained a skillful blend of mystery, suspense, and wit, while at the same time it parodied the old formulas. Shaffer's combination of features from old plays and a few new twists of plot, along with detailed characterizations not seen in mysteries since the early years of J. B. Priestley's productivity, met with an enthusiastic reception. Reviewer Michael Billington of *Plays and Players* frankly admitted that on opening night he had wanted to "chew his homburg with ecstasy." Audiences demonstrated

---

88 Michael Billington, quoted in Richards, *Best Mystery*, p. 197.
their approval as well; the play ran in London and New York for a total of 3,580 performances.

Sleuth appeared at precisely the right moment. Just when the demise of the stage mystery seemed imminent, Shaffer demonstrated that success could still be achieved in the venerable genre. Although it did not spark a wholesale revival of interest in mysteries, Sleuth played until 1975, after new mystery successes had appeared to replace it. Among those were a revival of William Gillette's Sherlock Holmes, which the Royal Shakespeare Company performed for more than two years in London and New York, and Equus by Peter Shaffer (Anthony's twin brother), a psychiatric melodrama that became the most prize-honored mystery play of all time. Such triumphs in the 1970's, along with Agatha Christie's everpresent The Mousetrap, offered strong evidence that the mystery drama was far from dead. It had merely slowed down a little from its youthful years in the 1920's.
CHAPTER TWO
MURDER-HOUSE MYSTERIES

One of the first types of mystery play to enjoy success involved an ongoing series of murders among a group of people who were confined in a secluded house or apartment. In addition to being among the earliest of mystery plays, such dramas, which can best be described as "murder-house" plays, have remained some of the more popular in the mystery field. The popularity of murder-house plays was established in 1920 with Mary Roberts Rinehart and Avery Hopwood's *The Bat*, which soon inspired imitations such as John Willard's *The Cat and the Canary* (1922). While the heyday for such mysteries was the 1920's, the tradition continued in the next three decades with such plays as Owen Davis's *The Ninth Guest* (1930) and two Agatha Christie efforts, *Ten Little Indians* (1943) and *The Mousetrap* (1952).

All such plays share the common characteristics of the murder-house mystery. The action is restricted to a single locale from which there is virtually no ingress or egress. The confinement results from a physical barrier; the characters, who are usually about ten or twelve in number, are kept in the locale because of inclement
weather,\(^1\) geographical isolation,\(^2\) or a locked door.\(^3\) The plays may contain a hint of the supernatural, as do The Bat and The Cat and the Canary,\(^4\) but the apparently unearthly happenings eventually receive logical explanations. The most important characteristic of murder-house plays is the maintenance of constant danger to all of the large number of characters. That single essential quality results from the fact that the killer is also confined in the murder house and is engaging in his favorite pastime, murder. While such perpetuation of danger appears in all murder-house mysteries, the structures of the five previously mentioned plays provide a more detailed set of qualities from which a concrete formula can be determined.

Plot is the most important structural element of any play. Aristotle first made that observation in the Poetics, noting that "the first essential, the life and soul"\(^5\) of a play is the plot. Observing that plays were primarily imitations of actions, Aristotle saw the plot as containing all the other elements—character, thought,

\(^1\) In The Bat a thunderstorm retards escape from the house, while in The Mousetrap a blizzard provides the natural isolating force.

\(^2\) The Cat and the Canary simply takes place in an isolated area, while Ten Little Indians is placed on an island.

\(^3\) In The Ninth Guest the characters are trapped on the top floor of a New Orleans skyscraper because the villain has locked and electrified the outside door.

\(^4\) The Bat contains much talk of ghosts and the repeated appearance of a glowing eye. The Cat and the Canary features a voodoo woman who warns of the dangers of the spirit world.

diction, music, and spectacle. In fact, the latter five elements were seen to be imitated by the poet or playwright for the sake of the action. Always, in Aristotle's view, it is the action of the play, its fable or plot, that is both the "end and purpose" of the drama. In the post-Freudian, post-Strindbergian world of the twentieth century, playwrights and critics have occasionally deemed the ancient Greek outmoded in his proclivity toward plot. Character is the essential, say such modern iconoclasts in direct contradiction to Aristotle's dictum that "it is mainly for the sake of the action that it imitates the personal agents." In a study of mystery dramas it is unnecessary to digress in an attempt to defend Aristotle's putative denigration of character, because modern mystery plays present no such problems to the critic. The "life and soul" of the mystery drama is indisputably the plot or fable. Just as surely in the mystery, as in the tragedies Aristotle studied two thousand years ago, "the Characters come second." Since plot is the all-encompassing element in a mystery drama, the fable of such a play serves as the best point of origination for a detailed analysis of its structure.

The completeness of the action is one of the simplest but most important criteria for plot. Aristotle's pronouncement that each drama should have a beginning, middle, and end seems to be a

---

6 *Poetics*, p. 231.
7 *Poetics*, p. 232.
8 *Poetics*, p. 232.
simple but logical concept; nevertheless, much of modern theatre disregards that adjuration. Such is not the case with the mystery play, which judiciously preserves the Aristotelian completeness of beginning, middle, and end. The opening of all mysteries includes a commission or discovery of a crime and that is followed by an investigation, which occupies the middle. The ending concerns the explanation of all material uncovered during the investigation and presents the solution to the initial crime. That careful delineation, development, and solution of the crime problem in a mystery play possesses what novelist and essayist Dorothy L. Sayers termed "an Aristotelian perfection."

The beginning of a mystery play in general and of murder-house mysteries in particular contains not only the exposition found in all plays, but also some expositonal features peculiar to this

9It has become a favorite device in the modern theatre, especially in the theatre of the absurd, to avoid giving a play an ending. Eugene Ionesco's The Bald Soprano concludes with a repetition of the beginning, while Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot has precious little in the way of beginning or ending. Instead, the author opts for two almost identical acts of middle. Theatre is, of course, not the only culprit. Modern popular music has shown a similar bent. Songs no longer conclude; they simply fade away as a sound engineer lowers the decibel level while the singers repeat the final verse ad nauseam. Literature in general has inclined to pursue this neglect of completeness as well. In "Aristotle on Detective Fiction," English, 1 (1936), p. 26, Dorothy L. Sayers complained about the typical modern novel, which "beginning at the end rambles backwards and forwards without particular direction and ends on an indeterminate note, and for no ascertainable reason. . . ."

kind of melodrama. Typically the general exposition includes an identification of locale, introduction of major characters, and establishment of the situation at the opening of the play. In a mystery play the exposition centers on the introduction of a crime. The unlawful act, which is usually a murder, may have been committed prior to the beginning of the play and is to be discovered or described in the opening moments. On the other hand, no criminal activity needs to have taken place before the rise of the first curtain. In that case the beginning becomes a slow lead-in to the crime. Whichever approach is employed, the beginning of a mystery play must clearly establish its central mystery question, which in the case of a murder-house play is "Who is the killer?" or, less grammatically but more traditionally, "Who done it?" Once that problem is defined, a mystery play can proceed to the search for an answer to its mystery question.

Playwrights treat general exposition in a mystery rather perfunctorily. The amount of exposition is determined in large part by the author's point of attack, that is, whether he chooses to begin the play before or after the commission of the crime. In general an early point of attack requires less exposition. Since mystery writers ordinarily prefer to place the activity-filled events before the audience, the point of attack is typically early and exposition of the few pertinent prior events is relatively brief. Nevertheless, exposition in murder-house mysteries can become rather tedious because of the array of characters who must be introduced. The procedures used to make the introduction are traditional and even pedestrian.
In the usual method the play begins immediately prior to the arrival of most of the characters. After a brief scene between a servant and a major character, in which essential information is presented, the remaining people are quickly ushered onto the stage. *The Cat and the Canary* illustrates the technique quite well. It begins with a conversation between the housekeeper and a lawyer, which establishes the situation of a will-reading in an isolated house at midnight. That scene is followed by the arrival of each of the hopeful heirs, with the author devoting just enough time to each character to introduce vital data such as name and general disposition.  

Owen Davis uses virtually the same technique in *The Ninth Guest*, the only alteration being that he postpones the servant-guest conversation until several guests have been introduced. Agatha Christie changes the pattern in the opposite direction in *The Mousetrap* by extending the servant conversation and delaying the appearance of the guests, a feature necessitated by the fact that the servants are the central characters in the drama. The Christie approach to exposition is so similar to those of her predecessors that the entire first scene of

---

11 John Willard, *The Cat and the Canary* (New York: Samuel French, 1927), I.5-16. Further references to this play will be noted in the text by citing act, scene, and page in the edition used in this study. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 247-49.

12 Owen Davis, *The Ninth Guest* (New York: Samuel French, 1930), I.6-16. Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 250-52.

13 Agatha Christie, *The Mousetrap* (London: Samuel French, 1954), I.1.2-5. Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 249-50.
the play becomes a parody of the methodic, mechanical method of introducing the many characters of murder-house mysteries. Christie carefully points her parodistic approach by providing a summary of the important details of character upon the arrival of the final guest, a gentleman who himself views the entire situation as a trite beginning to a mystery play (I.1.14).

The exception to the overworked method of exposition can be found, not too surprisingly, in another Christie play, Ten Little Indians. The standard procedure of providing all pertinent details as each guest arrives forces the playwright into dull repetition; however, the technique of Ten Little Indians, which employs numerous ways of introducing the details of characterization, offers a refreshing variety. While the exposition in that play is longer than in the others, the multifariousness of the approach conveys an impression of speed in laying out the information. The play opens with the standard servant scene followed by the arrivals, but the character information conveyed is brief. The details are then added in a series of scenes involving talk about people who are not in the room, a mysterious but informative recorded message, and self-confessions treated as courtroom-like defense speeches. Despite the creation of a semblance of developing action, the beginning of Christie's play actually accomplishes no more than do the exposition

14 Agatha Christie, Ten Little Indians, in 10 Classic Mystery and Suspense Plays, ed. Stanley Richards (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1973), 1.12-40. Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 252-53.
scenes of the other dramas: a significant portion, if not the entirety, of the first scene introduces only a few details of the situation and the identities of the characters. The difference lies in Christie's making her treatment of the same obligatory material more theatrically engrossing.

In a murder-house play, the rapid exposition of details surrounding the crime is in direct contrast to the slow introduction of a minimal amount of character information. Since the chief concern is the solution of the mystery question, the playwright moves as quickly as possible into that phase of the play. The necessity to introduce all of the numerous characters delays the start. Consequently, the dramatists appear to be trying to make up for lost time by being terse in presenting the problem to be solved.

In The Bat Rinehart and Hopwood introduce many details concerning the villain by having the central character read a newspaper story about the murders the villain has committed. Davis shows a similar bent toward economy by first describing the murder plan in The Ninth Guest over a radio (I.27). In The Cat and the Canary the devices are the reading of the will (I.16-21) and a monologue by an asylum guard (I.29-31), while Ten Little Indians uses a voice on a phonograph (I.1.27-28). Again Christie parodies the rapid, mechanical exposition of the crime in The Mousetrap, when she employs a radio announcement that precedes all other exposition (I.1.1-2). With

15Mary Roberts Rinehart and Avery Hopwood, The Bat (New York: Samuel French, 1932), I.9. Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 245-47.
the bothersome necessity of introducing a murder into a murder mystery out of the way, she can then proceed to the slower general exposition.

Ordinarily the playwright devotes the entirety of the first act of a murder-house mystery to exposition. Despite the rapid insertion of the murder theme, the act moves rather slowly before it culminates in an initial on-stage murder. All five plays follow that pattern invariably: characters are either shot (Bat, I,48), poisoned (Ninth, I,32; Ten, I,41), strangled (Mousetrap, I,11.33), or pulled away through sliding panels (Cat, I,37) shortly before the fall of the first-act curtain. Thus the end of the act prepares the way for the investigation that occupies most of the remainder of the play. By that point in a murder-house mystery and before a search for a solution to the murder can begin, the mystery question must be clearly stated, either implicitly or explicitly. In some of the plays a short exchange of dialogue following the murder defines the major problem.

For example, the following lines appear after the murder in The Bat:

DETECTIVE. He's dead. Who is he?
DALE. Richard Fleming--Somebody shot him!
DETECTIVE. What do you mean somebody?
DALE. Oh, I don't know. Somebody on the staircase.
DETECTIVE. Did you see anybody?
DALE. No--(I,49).

Other authors have not always allowed themselves the luxury of a dialogue summation. In The Mousetrap Christie simply has her heroine enter a darkened room and switch on the lights only to discover a strangled corpse. The frightened woman's scream as the curtain falls
(I,ii.33) implicitly asks the same question as the words do in *The Bat*.

Once the potential murderers and victims have been introduced, the murder committed, and the murder question stated, the play moves into its middle section, the investigation, which begins in the second act of the murder-house mystery. That portion of the play obviously revolves around the search for the killer. The most characteristic form of the progression of that search is the discovery and interpretation of clues.

As noted earlier, the mystery play has developed numerous rules and formulas. A single rule, however, has risen to a place of supremacy: mysteries must always play fair. The primary way in which a mystery, or more precisely an author, plays fair concerns the all-important handling of clues. Basically, playing fair means giving the reader or audience member the same opportunity to solve the mystery that the detective has. To achieve that equality of opportunity in the theatre, all facts that the detective learns must be revealed on the stage. Conversely, the audience should not be privy to information that is unknown to the detective. Thus, the author at least creates the impression that audience and detective have the same chance of solving the problem at hand. Another facet of playing fair

---

16 The act break serves a dual purpose in such plays. It not only clearly marks the division between the first crime and its investigation, but it also allows the author to dispose of the body, another practice that is followed invariably.

It should be noted that, if a play contains other crimes in addition to the on-stage murder, they may have been investigated at least in part during the first act. Such is the case in *The Bat* and *The Mousetrap*.
calls for the avoidance of false clues or red herrings. In the theatre the problem with using the red herring becomes two-fold: first, it must be explained in the solution so that it is shown to have some relation to the events, though not the one put on it by the puzzled audience member; and, second, too abundant use of red herrings confuses and disappoints the viewer, making it impossible for him to understand or accept the final solution. Purists insist that red herrings are strictly taboo, while in practice they are used frequently. Also outlawed in the quest to play fair with audiences are dependence on coincidence, lack of causality, and overuse of factors that artificially delay the solution, such as stupidity or forgetfulness by the detective.¹⁷

Most self-respecting playwrights of the murder-house school attempt to play fair in the treatment of clues when they are used as the basis of the middle solution-searching section of the play. The nature of the stage, however, makes total fairness virtually impossible. To be completely fair the author would have to make the detective ever-present. The result would be a repetitive parade of clues or witnesses before the stage-bound detective. In avoiding such a static situation, the playwright often must resort to minor violations. In *The Bat*, for example, Cornelia, the character who

functions as the detective, \textsuperscript{18} draws conclusions based on information gathered off stage, as when she learns the true identity of her incompetent gardener by seeing his picture in an upstairs bedroom (II.73). The opposite situation is also often true. While the detective is off stage finding clues, the author reveals pertinent facts of which the detective is unaware. Sometimes the playwright tries to continue playing fair by revealing on stage the same information that the detective is learning in the wings from another source. In \textit{The Bat} the gardener's true identity is disclosed in an on-stage conversation (I.31), while Cornelia is forced to resort to her bedroom snooping. The more fair-minded mystery dramatists may also include aids that are seldom utilized in narrative mystery fiction. Realizing that there can be no flipping back to the first pages of the act to review clues, some authors provide clue summaries at regular intervals. Agatha Christie is particularly fond of giving the impression that she is being enormously helpful. In \textit{Ten Little Indians} she uses the device of a nursery rhyme to foreshadow the method in which each person will die. Shortly before another death is to occur, she has one of the characters repeat the verse in order

\textsuperscript{18}The term "detective" refers to a character's function in a play as the solver of the mystery question and not to an occupation. While many of these plays contain a character whose occupation is that of detective, seldom is that character the functional detective as far as the play and the solution of its mystery question are concerned. In fact, the occupational detective often is revealed to be the murderer, as is the case in \textit{The Bat} and \textit{The Mousetrap}. 
to provide a clue before the fact (1.27).\footnote{Such helpfulness is, however, merely sleight of hand, for while she is apparently aiding the audience member to see how the death will come, she is doing nothing to aid in uncovering the identity of the murderer. In fact, she uses this ruse of fair play to cover the monumental red herring she employs to hide the identity of the murderer.} Despite such seeming help, detection is virtually impossible.

That all such supposed help is merely illusory can be seen when one realizes the rule that accompanies that of fair play: suspicion should be cast on everyone. The reason for making all characters suspicious is the obvious one; the author is seeking to conceal the identity of the murderer from the audience until he chooses to reveal it. Therefore, the concealing author who also gives the impression of fair play is doing only that—creating an impression. The trick becomes a rather difficult one; the author must present enough clues to make the problem appear soluble; however, he must cast suspicion on enough characters to maintain perplexity until the detective reveals the solution. Consequently, red herrings become operational necessities for mystery playwrights, although they usually employ them with discretion. The question of playing fair on stage thus ultimately reduces to how well an author can cast suspicion wholesale upon his characters without an over-dependency on red herrings. Each of the five plays under consideration demonstrates a different approach to the problem.

Suspicion is cast in The Bat along the lines of gender. The females never appear to be perpetrators of the evil happenings, Cornelia is the inquisitive searcher who obviously wants to uncover
the secret of the curious events. The maid, Lizzie, seems too genu­
inely frightened to be part of the group creating the problems. The
ingenue, Dale, appears to be too sweet and charming to be involved
with murderers. On the other hand, each of the males seems sus­
picious at one time or another. Billy, the butler, while never com­
mitting outwardly suspicious acts, is a potential villain because of
his race. He is a typically inscrutable "Jap" and, therefore, is
eminently suspicious by definition, since the typed character of the
Oriental is supposed to be a dangerous, unknowable subhuman. Brooks,
a man who claims to be a gardener, proves to be a liar when question­
ed about the finer details of botany. The kindly Doctor Wells acts
suspiciously by secretly unlocking doors and by telling lies. The
list of male candidates for the role of "The Bat" continues with Dick
Fleming, the owner of the house, who needs money and seems willing
to do anything to get some; Reginald, a gun-toting youth who is caught
sneaking around outside; and the Unknown, who emits suspicion with
his every action, including a feigned case of amnesia. The male who
acts least suspicious is Detective Anderson, who receives the usual
benefit of the doubt because of his occupation. Despite the casting
of suspicion on all male characters, the authors avoid the overuse of
red herrings. Their solution to the quandary is a simple one: they
create not a single criminal act, murder, but several, including
theft, harrassment, fleeing from the police, and unlawful

20 It should be noted that the police detective, Anderson,
claims to be suspicious of Lizzie and Dale; however, he is only
bluffing when he accuses them. His unwarranted suspicion of them
casts a slight suspicion on him.
impersonation. The reason that each male acts suspicious is that he is guilty of one or more of those acts; however, only one, The Bat, is a murderer. Thus the authors create an assortment of justifiably suspicious men and avoid red herrings. 21

In The Cat and the Canary suspicion is cast only haphazardly and red herrings abound. Some characters do curious things that are never explained. For example, the kindly lawyer, Crosby, suddenly searches a room the moment he is left alone (I,7). The author kills him off early in the play, thus dispensing with the necessity of having to explain exactly what Crosby was searching for. Other characters are suspicious because of the qualities associated with their type. The outstanding example is Mammy Pleasant, who is both black and a believer in voodoo; both counts mark her as potentially villainous. Compared with The Bat, this play uses the suspicion motif unevenly and embraces rather than avoids the indiscriminate use of the red herring.

The all-inclusive approach to suspicion occurs in both The Ninth Guest and Ten Little Indians. Once the characters realize that the murderer must be one of the potential victims, all of them become equally suspicious. In The Ninth Guest each character has a reason to wish at least one of the others dead, while in Ten Little Indians none appears to have reasons for killing any of the others.

21The exception is, of course, Billy the Jap, whose suspiciousness is based entirely on a racial stereotype.
Since suspicion is evenly balanced in both plays, it becomes a relatively insignificant factor in the solution of the mysteries.

The artful creation of suspects reaches its zenith in *The Mousetrap*. Early in the investigation, the police detective states an old adage, "In a murder case, everyone is under suspicion" (II,38). The play is a testimonial to the fact that such a statement applies with equal strength to murder-house mysteries. A radio broadcast at the outset of the play establishes that the murderer is wearing "a dark overcoat, light scarf, and a soft felt hat" (I,1,2). Promptly a character enters in such attire. Moments later another man appears in similar garb, and he is immediately followed by a woman wearing the same outfit. Christie's broad lampooning of the creation of suspicion through the use of costume does not long remain her only weapon. She adds an unexpected guest and an apparently mentally unbalanced youth, both particularly suspicious types. Characters recite nursery rhymes and hum "Three Blind Mice," the murderer's theme song. Even the heroine is caught in a lie to her husband. When the police are mentioned, people gasp and nervously drop the objects they are holding. While some of the devices used by Christie to create her intricate web of suspicion are based on coincidence (such as the similar costumes), most of the lies and nervousness are eventually explained in a skillful conclusion that removes them from the realm of red herrings.

In addition to the placing of clues before the audience and the casting of suspicion, the middle of any mystery play must occupy
itself with the creation of inherently exciting or interesting incidents. The mystery play must work on more levels of appeal than the purely intellectual one of the mystery puzzle that is often the sole attraction of the mystery short story. As Willard Huntington Wright (S. S. Van Dine), a successful writer of narrative mystery fiction, noted, "there is neither drama nor adventure, in the conventional sense, in a good detective novel." The play cannot totally copy the story in the parading of concrete clues such as fragments of glass, watches stopped at the time of the murder, and fingerprints on the murder weapon. Instead, mystery dramas need to include the scenes of drama and adventure that Wright said were not indigenous to the pure mystery story. The best method to introduce the activity necessary to the stage is to employ what novelist Erle Stanley Gardner termed "clues of action," in which deductions are drawn from what the detective sees people do rather than from objects gathered at the scene of the murder. When such clues of action are not numerous enough to fill the middle section of a play or when concrete clues are used, authors are often forced to include episodic scenes of suspenseful activity that simply serve the purpose of relieving the static nature of concrete clue presentation or merely of filling space.

---

22 Some of the unity problems encountered as a result of the use of such episodic incidents are noted later on pp. 68-71.


Murder-house plays display variety in their use of those three methods of development—concrete clues, depiction of action clues, and suspenseful activity. *The Bat* relies heavily on action clues, which occupy most of the middle of the play. The solution to the mystery is actually decipherable from an action clue involving the locking of people in a room. The clue provided by that activity-filled scene (II.93-94) concerns the fact that only two characters are not locked in the room by *The Bat*. Obviously one of the two must be the villain. When one is found dead early in the next scene, simple deduction reveals the identity of the murderer. *The Cat* and *the Canary* uses chiefly the third variety of development; it focuses on scenes of suspense while providing little in the way of evidence that leads to the solution. In *The Ninth Guest* and *Ten Little Indians* the scenes of development can only loosely be considered action clues. The scenes of action that occupy almost all of the last two acts of both plays depict the murders of the people trapped in the houses. The murders serve to aid in reaching a solution by the slow but inexorable process of eliminating the suspects. In neither case, however, does the elimination of suspects reach the limit (that is, one suspect left alive). The solution must be reached in another way, and the murders or action clues prove only marginally important. Instead, they function more effectively as pure action devices. The most clue-centered of murder-house plays is *The Mousetrap*, which eschews the use of intricate on-stage activity. Clues are generally of the concrete variety and are uncovered by the plodding questioning of
the police detective, Trotter. Nevertheless, the single major action clue in which Trotter recreates the murder serves as the only means of solving the mystery.

Once an author has developed the middle of his play through the casting of suspicion, planting of clues, and depiction of suspenseful activity, he must supply answers to all the questions he has raised. The end of a mystery play presents that solution. Not only must the main mystery question be answered, but also all suspicious acts and concrete clues should be explained. The better an author answers all such major and minor questions, the less susceptible he is to denunciation for foul play and red herrings. Most important among factors in the solution are the answer to "Who done it?" and the method by which that identity is revealed.

The favorite choice for the identity of the murderer is the least likely person. It was mystery writers' fondness for this approach that prompted Robert Benchley's "The butler did it," since that often unassuming, colorless type is as least likely as anyone. The reason for the attractiveness of the least likely suspect lies in the author's previously mentioned quest to baffle his audience until he is ready to solve the mystery. By casting suspicion on all other characters, he is relying on the audience member's preoccupation with false leads to hinder his ability to uncover the real culprit. The easiest way to create a least likely murderer is merely to select the police detective, a character who has a built-in
innocence in a mystery play. Plays using this approach to the identity of the villain include The Bat and The Mousetrap. Occasionally authors will go to great lengths, however, in the creation of the least likely person. One ingenious version occurs in Ten Little Indians. All of the evidence points to a single character, the judge. The voice of the murderer "indicts" the people in the house for crimes and claims to be seeking to punish them for those crimes (I.27). Furthermore, the judge understands what is happening more clearly than do the others and constantly leads the way in doing what the killer wants (I.36, 37). The judge is obviously the most likely character to be the murderer, a fact that is noted by one of his potential victims (III.1.73). Then the most likely person becomes the least likely by the simple device of his being killed. His murder is a red herring, however, a false action clue presented as a true one. When the judge later reappears very much alive and proves to be the killer, the audience realizes it has been fooled by a new twist that has been given to the old least likely motif. In the other two

25 The audience can be lulled into unawareness by the use of the police detective as the murderer. An audience member rightly assumes that one of the basic ground rules in a mystery is that the person doing the searching is not the person being sought. (This rule is similar to that in narrative fiction whereby the narrator cannot be the killer, a rule broken by Agatha Christie in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd.) However, in plays employing the police detective as murderer, the nominal detective does not fulfill the structural function of detective (the one who seeks the solution). That role is assumed by an amateur like Cornelia in The Bat. Thus the author does not betray his trust; the nominal detective and not the functional one is the villain. Authors often go one step further and reveal at the last moment that the murderous detective is not actually a policeman, but a thief or avenger masquerading as a detective.
plays, the identity of the murderer is standard. *The Cat and the Canary* uses one of several least likely candidates as the killer, while in *The Ninth Guest* the author apparently arbitrarily selects one of his nine equally suspicious characters as the villain.

Even more important than the simple revelation of the murderer's identity is the method by which it is done. If the author is indeed playing fair with his audience, the revelation of the murderer will result from deductions that are based on clues, both concrete and action, that have been revealed to the audience and the detective alike. The more clue-oriented the middle part of a play becomes, the more likely the drama will be to possess a deducible solution; however, that is not always the case in murder-house mysteries. For example, *The Bat* with its many action-clue scenes has a solution that is entirely decipherable from the information provided. The same is true of *Ten Little Indians*, at least before the red-herring murder. Even the solution to a play like *The Ninth Guest* that has a minimal number of clues can be reached if the audience member can sort the pertinent facts from the more interesting but superfluous details, such as the mound of bodies provided by Davis in his drama. Conversely, the clue-abundant *Mousetrap* offers the audience no chance of positive identification of the killer. While much information is gathered, little of it is significant, and many important pieces of the puzzle are withheld until after the revelation of the killer.

---

26 The murderer is the only character who receives direct answers from a recorded voice over the radio. Since he knows what the answers will be, he knows which questions to ask (III.73).
The more common method of revealing the killer is that of \textit{The Mousetrap} and not the deductive approach of \textit{The Bat}. In \textit{The Cat and the Canary} and \textit{Ten Little Indians} (after the red-herring disposal of the deduced killer) as well as \textit{The Mousetrap}, the murderer is not uncovered by the detective; instead, he simply reveals himself. That type of solution has numerous shortcomings. First, it is arbitrary. At some point in the script, the author decides to have the murderer reveal himself, although the villain has gone to great lengths until then to conceal his identity. Two thousand years ago Aristotle labeled such a method of disclosing new information "in-artistic." He called such revelations "discoveries made directly by the poet" and described them as occurring when the characters are made to say what "the poet rather than the story demands." Second, that approach to the solution violates the trust the audience places in an author who it assumes is playing fair. The audience is led to believe that it can solve the problem just as the detective will. Suddenly the murderer, not the detective, reveals the solution. The audience then realizes that it has preoccupied itself with attempting to solve what is, in fact, an unsolvable mystery. Another problem with such solutions is that they necessitate a theatrically ineffective final scene.

\footnote{In most plays not employing a solution based on deduction, the character serving as functional detective is never clearly identified. In \textit{The Mousetrap} no character serves that function.}

\footnote{\textit{Poetics}, p. 244.}
That last weakness of the "discovery by the author" solution is closely tied to the general problem of the conclusion of a mystery play. An explanation must accompany all solutions, since most audience members will not have identified the murderer even in plays that make that possible. The rule that applies to the last chapter of the mystery novel holds true for the final scenes in a mystery play: a protracted explanation should be avoided. An audience that has been thrilled and puzzled by a rapid succession of action clues will have little patience with an encyclopedic speech in the denouement. While the ideal conclusion, according to celebrated mystery novelist Raymond Chandler, makes "everything ... clear in a brief flash of action," many plays use another theatrically effective ending in which the explanation emerges in several brief scenes that make motives apparent and lead gradually but quickly to a single conclusion. The Bat ends in that way; it resolves many of the minor mysteries that have bothered the detective, Cornelia, throughout the first two acts before the revelation of the identity of The Bat. In a series of rapid entrances and exits that occupy most of the final act, the authors disclose where a secret treasure is hidden, reveal identities of mysterious characters, and explain why the strange events have been taking place. Although brief narrative explanations are used, they are dominated and separated by the numerous scenes of activity. Eventually all mystery questions except the identity of

---

The Bat have been answered. Then in a final flurry of excitement involving a burning barn and some gunplay, the villain is captured and his identity revealed. Final explanations are minimal. Mysteries that employ the murderer's revealing of himself, however, must resort to a lengthy explanation. Since the detective does not deduce the killer's identity, he cannot explain what has happened and then reveal the killer. After disclosing his identity himself, the murderer must explain all in an anticlimactic speech, the length of which is often monumental\(^\text{30}\) and the theatrical effect of which is stifling. While there is usually a final brief scene in which the villain is captured, it scarcely has a chance of overcoming the pall left by the monologue. If the beginning and middle of the play create even a modicum of interest, such a solution provides a disappointing and inferior conclusion. Aristotle's advice on the completeness of the action implies that a play not merely have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but that those three parts should be of roughly equal quality so that they seem to be part of a whole. An ending utilizing discovery by the author does not fulfill that criterion.

Unity is an important feature of plot that is closely related to wholeness; however, the fact that a play has a definite beginning, middle, and end does not guarantee a unified rather than episodic plot. The key factor in the determination of unity is the degree to which the separate incidents are causally linked. Each

\(^{30}\)The villain's speech in Ten Little Indians is 373 words long (III,11,85-86). In The Mousetrap it is broken by brief interjections from the intended victim but still runs to 483 words (II,61-62).
succeeding incident should be related by causality and not by mere
accident or coincidence to the previous incident. Thus, a tightly
structured, well-unified play will contain no incidents that can be
either removed or interchanged with other incidents. Such altera-
tions would upset the causal chain. Furthermore, in a unified play
a scheme of probability should be established. In the beginning of
such a drama all events that occur should appear possible within the
stage reality that the author has created. If the play has unity,
the succeeding events will continue to evolve along lines that have
been shown to be possible in the earlier causally linked scenes.
Eventually, the unified play will develop so that a given outcome is
not only possible, but probable and necessary.31

Unity is an essential in what Aristotle termed an artisti-
cally beautiful plot. Unity plays a special part in the beauty or
effectiveness of the mystery drama because of the expectation of fair
play. If the author is sincerely to present all clues on stage so
that an observer has at least a remote chance of solving the mystery
question, accidentals, coincidentals, and improbabilities must be
outlawed. Any mystery play that depends on such factors violates
the rules of fair play. This observation is one of the commonest
principles of mystery writing and has been noted by virtually all who
have set down guidelines for the mystery game. In "How to Write the
Mystery Story," Stewart Beach warned "Never, never in a 'whodunit'

31For Aristotle's discussion of unity, the probable, and the
necessary, see Poetics, pp. 235-36.
... permit coincidence to play any part in the development of the narrative. There may seem to be coincidence ... but before you have gone much further, you will have had to show [that the apparent coincidence] was directly connected with the events of the story.32 Mystery historian Howard Haycraft echoed Beach's view, noting the "necessity of avoiding the use of coincidence, of making certain that every major episode subsequent to the opening crime proceeds directly and causatively...."33 Novelist Willard Huntington Wright, under his pen name of S. S. Van Dine, forbade the use of "accident or coincidence or unmotivated confession" to determine the solution,34 Still more condemnation of the illogical came from Ronald A. Knox, who stated that "No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right."35

Unity, causality, and probability are essentials to the mystery, according to those theorists. Since those same ingredients are necessary in any drama, they would seem to be particularly important to mystery plays.

For a characteristic that is so vital to a mystery that strives to play fair, unity is surprisingly lacking in murder-house plays.

32 Stewart Beach, "How to Write the Mystery and Suspense Story," in Writing Detective and Mystery Fiction, ed. Burack, p. 118.
33 Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure, p. 236.
Part of the problem with unity in those dramas arises from their use of many brief action clues and activity-filled scenes. Such an array of short scenes is much more difficult to arrange in a causal pattern than is a succession of concrete clues found on the site of a crime or a series of longer, less complicated scenes. Another problem arises from the large number of characters, each of whom must have a scene in which he dominates in order to establish him as a potential murderer or victim. It becomes difficult to link one such scene to others, and often the order in which such obligatory scenes occur is arbitrary. While each is necessary and its omission would confuse matters, those scenes could easily be rearranged without detrimental effect. Still other obstacles to unity and logicality arise when the murderer is an insane man, as he often is. While a number of illogical, haphazard acts may eventually be explained by using an insane perpetrator, unity will of necessity suffer. With such blocks to unity seemingly built into the murder-house formula, that type of play proves exceedingly difficult to construct in anything but episodic fashion. Seldom have the authors successfully met the challenge.

Of the plays discussed in this chapter, The Bat is the most unified. By the end of the last act most of the strange occurrences that have been frightening the characters are explained through a series of observations drawn from the action clues presented on stage.

\[36\] The reason for using such a motif as the insane villain will be noted later in this chapter in the discussion of character. See pp. 94-96.
By the time The Bat is apprehended, his identity and capture have been made both probable and necessary by the clues and incidents depicted. Nevertheless, the generally logical explanations and careful use of the probable and necessary aside, The Bat succumbs in part to the inherent murder-house problems: it includes scenes unrelated to the plot development, which are used merely for excitement; many of its two- and three-character scenes could be interchanged. Other murder-house plays have considerably less unity. The Cat and the Canary opts for thrills and surprise rather than probability and causality. In The Ninth Guest and Ten Little Indians most of the action is composed of a series of murders, the order of which seems arbitrary. Those three plays and The Mousetrap employ insane agents of destruction, thus disposing of any pretense of logicality being at work. One feature in Ten Little Indians, however, gives it a semblance of unity that is unattained in the other plays. The unifying device used in that play is a nursery rhyme about ten little Indians who dwindle in number until none remain. Each of the murders in the play is patterned after a verse of the poem, the pertinent

For example, the probability that the police detective is The Bat is established at the end of the second act, when only he and another character are not imprisoned by the killer. When in the final act the other character is found dead, it is necessary that the only living person not locked in the room, the detective, be The Bat.

For example, several of the characters are attacked by a real bat on one occasion (III,111).

The Mousetrap also has unity problems similar to those found in police procedurals because the second act of the play closely adheres to the procedural format. For a further discussion of unity in procedurals, see pp. 127-28.
parts of which are read aloud shortly before or after each murder. Without the murders being committed according to the plan described cryptically in the rhyme, the play would be, like *The Ninth Guest*, simply a succession of deaths perpetrated haphazardly by an insane killer. Instead, the rhyme supplies the logicality of the progression and also functions to enhance not only the probability of the murders but also the probability of the manner in which they will occur.

Often a mystery play that is causally developed and that eschews the use of accidentals may give another impression during its beginning and middle. The reason for the illusion lies in the nature of the mystery drama, the object of which is to present the information to the audience while at the same time keeping that audience constantly baffled so that the solution is not easily perceived. Incidents that are eventually shown to be causally linked in the solution may appear to be unrelated when they occur in the early acts. Consequently, even a play as unified as *The Bat* may seem to rely on coincidence and accident. Although that deceptive appearance need not be viewed as a defect if it serves the purpose of preventing a too early solution by the audience, it does pose problems for unity. In the case of a murder-house mystery, with its other inherent unity troubles, such illusory disunity compounds an already difficult situation.

An unduly episodic play has the worst kind of plot, according to Aristotle, and is the product of either a bad poet or a good poet
with material he is stretching beyond its capabilities.\textsuperscript{40} That stretching of materials often results from the playwright's efforts to create complexity, a desirable quality of plot; however, in such instances the poet actually substitutes confusion and complication for complexity.

Complexity and complication are not synonymous. Complication is, in part, a product of an episodic plot. Complexity on the other hand can be more readily achieved in a unified play. A drama becomes complex when the action involves major discoveries and peripeties. Discovery is defined as "a change from ignorance to knowledge,"\textsuperscript{41} while peripety is "the change of the kind described from one state of things within the play to its opposite"\textsuperscript{42} or, more simply, a reversal. The discoveries and peripeties that lend a drama complexity are of a special order. Although all plays contain pieces of knowledge that can be termed minor discoveries and changes of fortune that are peripeties, those major discoveries and peripeties that create complexity should "each of them rise out of the structure of the Plot itself, so as to be the consequence, necessary or probable, of the antecedents."\textsuperscript{43} Thus, they are more easily achieved in a unified play. The finest form of complexity arises from a unified drama in which a major discovery precipitates a peripety that reverses the entire direction of

\textsuperscript{40}Poetics, p. 236.
\textsuperscript{41}Poetics, p. 237.
\textsuperscript{42}Poetics, p. 236.
\textsuperscript{43}Poetics, p. 236.
the action. Such complexity is an artistically difficult achievement; therefore, the quality of complexity has been placed in high esteem by most critics and playwrights.

Mystery plays in general are famous for their numerous minor discoveries or clues and their last-act reversals. Most clues, however, are not of the sort that create complexity. Even the more detailed action clues are of the major variety only when they are the probable and necessary result of antecedent activity. A last-minute reversal comes too late in the play to create anything but a lopsided and artificial complexity. Actually an eleventh-hour peripety is more a function of the concealment factor of the mystery formula, which necessitates a final discovery and reversal. As already noted, when it occurs in an episodic mystery play, the final revelation is seldom the probable and necessary result of earlier incidents. Furthermore, a peripety that occurs in the last act is usually a simple character reversal rather than a major plot peripety.\[4]\ The discovery and attendant reversal that result as the probable and necessary consequence of earlier plot developments and alter the direction of the plot are only infrequently found in mystery plays. They rarely occur in episodic murder-house mysteries.

Murder-house plays are far more complicated than they are complex. Seldom do they rise above the simple Aristotelian level of suffering, that is, merely being concerned with the thoughts and feelings of the characters. In The Bat the authors place a

\[4]\ This point is examined more fully in this chapter during the discussion of character. See pp. 93-96.
considerable emphasis upon suffering; the emotional excitation of the characters, especially of Lizzie, receives much of the focus. While there are many clues, most are simple. Although some arise as the probable and necessary result of earlier actions, they do not lead to peripeties. The plot contains no major reversals. Even the ending revelation of the killer's identity is a simple discovery without a reversal. While it may be a surprise (as it should be), no alteration in the direction of the plot accompanies that discovery. Most of the other murder-house plays display similarly simple plots. In *The Ninth Guest* suffering dominates, since the play emphasizes the rapid deterioration of each individual character as the probability of his own death increases. While the play contains the seed for a major discovery and reversal in the guests' realization that one of them is the murderer, the author handles the material in such a way that the opportunity for complexity founders. The possibility of the killer's presence is suggested throughout the second and third acts and is eventually accepted as true. Since the discovery is so gradual and is never pointed, its potential for lending complexity is lost. A similar fate befalls the potentially major reversal near the end of the play when the heroine, Jean, seems uncertain as to which of the two surviving men is the villain. *The Mousetrap* abounds in clues but contains no discovery-reversals except for the concluding scene when the murderer reveals himself. That situation, however, is not a result of the necessary direction of earlier events. Furthermore, that late discovery of the killer's identity precipitates
only a character reversal rather than a major plot reversal. The only change takes place in the villain, who transforms from a kind policeman into an avenging lunatic. The Cat and the Canary serves as an outstanding example of the simple play of suffering. Its appeal lies entirely in the emotional impact that its frightening scenes have upon the characters, especially the heroine-heiress whom the villain tries to drive insane through fear. Not only are there no plot reversals, there are scarcely any minor concrete clues. All four of these plays are simple and at least partially episodic. Although they convey an impression of complexity, they actually contain only superfluous complication.

Unlike most murder-house mysteries, Ten Little Indians possesses at least a modicum of plot complexity. The early discoveries in the play lead to a single conclusion, that the judge is the murderer; however, his death at the beginning of the third act causes a major reversal, since the killer must then be sought elsewhere. The resurrection of the judge in the closing moments is precipitated by the fact that only one victim, the young woman, remains. At that point in the play it becomes probable and necessary that the killer reveal himself. If the woman is the murderer, she need no longer maintain the facade. If the killer is someone else, he can step forward to kill his final prey. Just when it appears that the surviving lady must be the murderer, the judge makes his reappearance, which is itself a major discovery and leads simultaneously to the final reversal that he and not the girl is the murderer after all. By
comparison with the other plays of this type, the complexity of *Ten
Little Indians* seems monumental.

Just as the artistry necessary to achieve complexity makes it
a desirable ingredient of plot, the difficulty in developing appro-
priate magnitude makes that quality desirable as well. Part of the
Aristotelian concept of beauty in an art work holds that the greater
the task facing the artist, whether it be in handling length, com-
plexity, or unity, the more beautiful the work will be when that task
is successfully mastered.\(^4\) In regard to mystery plays, that concept
may be phrased as follows: "The greater the difficulty or magnitude
of the problem to be solved (the mystery question), the more artistic
the play will be when the solution is reached." Both the insuffi-
ciency of the magnitude of the problem and the lack of serious treat-
ment of it in most mystery plays are in large part responsible for
the low artistic reputation of that form of drama. Murder-house
plays are no exception to the typical weaknesses of seriousness and
magnitude found in mysteries in general.

Mysteries, whether in narrative or dramatic form, are seldom
serious examinations of crime. Since most mysteries dwell on the
game-like nature of the problem, they are only seemingly serious.
Although the novels and plays characteristically deal with the sober
subject of death, the death depicted in them seldom receives serious

\(^4\)Aristotle specifically states this concept in the *Poetics*,
p. 233, with regard to length: "the longer the story, consistently
with its being comprehensible as a whole, the finer it is by reason
of its magnitude,"
treatment. The victims are usually sketchily developed characters. They die quickly and their apparent pain or anguish is minimal. In general, an air of clinical detachment or one of "good fun" permeates the death-related elements of a mystery. The seriousness only seems to be present because of the subject matter.

Murder-house plays seldom vary from such seemingly serious treatment. In The Bat not only is the main action treated in a seemingly serious manner, but a heavy dose of extraneous broad humor is also included to enhance the feeling that none of the deaths and thrills should be taken too gravely. Lizzie, the easily frightened maid, represents such an obvious attempt by the authors at lightening the events involving theft and Jack-the-Ripper-like murders. Death in The Bat and the Canary is not violent; instead it is an act performed imperceptibly and inaudibly upon a person drawn into a secret passageway by a Halloween-like costumed figure. The appearance of deadly events fills the play; however, it is only a semblance created by a considerable amount of discussion about dying and only a single death. People talk about death from fright (I,11), clocks striking the hour are called "gongs of death" (I,17), and there is yet more discussion of evil presences (II,43), haunted houses (I,11, 23), and dismemberment (I,31). Seldom, however, does the seriousness go beyond mere talk. In The Ninth Guest the murders are more vivid and gruesome than in the other plays. Included in its repertory of homicides are an agonizing poisoning and a graphic on-stage electrocution. While such painful and violent death tends toward seriousness,
the hunt- or game-like nature that the murderer creates as he pits his wits against those of his victims reduces the tendency. The seemingly serious nature of murder-house mysteries is nowhere so apparent as in the dramas of Agatha Christie. Murder in Ten Little Indians is again treated as a game. The people die no more agonizingly than do the china Indians that are found broken when the bodies are discovered. The parodistic approach of The Mousetrap allows for little in the way of seriousness. In the end it is learned that no one (except the dead woman, who deserved her fate) has been in real danger. The identity of the murderer has even been known by a policeman, who has only been waiting for the villain to betray himself. Probably the best indicator of the seemingly serious approach of Christie's plays occurs in The Mousetrap, where the knowledge that a killer is loose in the house receives less attention from the heroine than does the preparation of meals (II.59).

Not only the seemingly serious approach to the materials, but also the relative simplicity of the problems to be solved in murder-house mysteries make them dramas of rather insignificant magnitude. Instead of accepting that fact and attempting to achieve the full potential of the limited magnitude, many mystery playwrights have sought to lend their plays an outward appearance of significance and seriousness. One of the preferred methods for creating an impression of greater magnitude involves the complication of the situation by using several minor mysteries to augment the major mystery question. That technique of obscuring makes the mystery seem more
perplexing. The Bat is a foremost example of such complication. In addition to the question of "Who done it?" other minor mystery questions must be answered. Among them are "Who is the embezzler?" "Who is the Unknown?" "Who is the gardener?" and "What is happening in the house?" Invariably with such a multi-leveled mystery, there will be the final question, "How do all these mysteries fit together?" The answer all too often is that they do not. In The Bat, however, the authors provide a satisfactory explanation for the baffling complication of events: not one, but two major crimes are being committed in the house; there is an ongoing attempt by two thieves to recover their embezzled bank money at the same time that another thief and murderer, The Bat, is trying to steal the loot from under the embezzlers' noses.

A second means of creating a sense of magnitude involves the use of extensive talk about either the seriousness of the characters' plight or about the mysteriousness of the events, when both danger and the perplexity of the problem are actually minimal. While The Bat makes some use of that approach in its talk of the supernatural, The Cat and the Canary serves as the best example of a murder-house drama using talk to enhance magnitude. As already observed, the play contains protracted discussions not only of the supernatural, but also of violence, death by fright, inherited insanity, and the general spookiness of the house. All of the speech-making increases the feeling or probability that many evils and assorted horrors are taking place, when, in fact, two villains are simply running a confidence game.
The great magnitude builder in all mysteries is the use of murder, the ultimate serious crime. Any play in which a murder occurs presumably takes on immediate import; therefore, authors include murder even when it is not an integral part of the major crime. The Bat contains two murders, both of which are never explained as being necessary to The Bat's successful thievery. The only reason given for the murders is that The Bat is a "blood-thirsty assassin" (I.9). The Cat and the Canary includes a single murder that is gratuitous at best. Owen Davis tries to enhance magnitude in The Ninth Guest by sheer quantity of bodies and variety in the means of dispatching the victims. In the course of the 72-page play, Davis provides one corpse in a closet, one beating, three druggings, three poisonings (not including one feigned poisoning), two shootings, one electrocution, and, for good measure, one near electrocution. In addition to the high body count, the author removes all humor and inserts extensive moralizing about death and theorizing about fear and will-power in his striving for magnitude. In one of his autobiographies Davis freely admitted that he had learned his lesson years before when audiences were filled with "bitter disappointment" at the absence of a human corpse in one of his mysteries. Taking that reaction as a warning against a lack of magnitude, he diligently provided corpses in bunches in his later plays. While Agatha Christie also offers a multi-body play in Ten Little Indians, her The Mousetrap stands as an exceptional murder-house mystery in that there is no attempt to

---

create a false sense of magnitude. As noted earlier, nothing in the play is portrayed as particularly serious or puzzling. The single murder receives the characteristic Christie unserious treatment by having it committed to the accompaniment of an overly melodramatic radio broadcast on the mechanics of fear (1.11.33). Unlike other practitioners of the murder-house mystery formula, Christie learned early in her career that, as Howard Haycraft has observed, the mystery is "a frankly non-serious entertainment form of literature which . . . has . . . its own merits." 47 She was cognizant of those merits and tried only to achieve their full potential instead of attempting to present a false, overblown semblance of greater magnitude.

Whether its magnitude is great or small, every play has an opportunity to reach its own inherent potential. The process of a play's achieving its potential begins with the introduction of certain emotions. Those emotions are then fully developed within the play and are finally relieved in a satisfactory ending. In Aristotelian terms the play that makes such complete use of its emotional materials has achieved a catharsis. 48 The emotions characteristically introduced in a mystery play are fear, hate, suspense, 49 and

47 Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure, p. xii.

48 The passage in the Poetics that describes catharsis is rather cryptic. In the definition of tragedy on page 230, Aristotle says that a tragedy contains "incidents arousing pity and fear, whereby to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions."

49 Suspense can be viewed simply as a special kind of fear found in mystery plays—a combination of ignorance, concern, apprehension, and anticipation. For the purposes of this study, however, a separate consideration of suspense will facilitate the understanding of this essential ingredient in most mystery dramas,
bafflement, with the occasional incidental inclusion of laughter. All melodramas, including mysteries, typically arouse fear and hate. Fear is created by placing the hero in threatening, imminently dangerous situations. Attendant hatred of the villain results from his having placed the hero (or another patient-character) in such a perilous position. Suspense and bafflement are more nearly the emotions that are peculiar to mystery than to melodrama in general. Suspense is a byproduct of fear. When the hero is placed in a fearful situation, suspense results from the delay of the anticipated dangerous outcome. The emotional tension is suspended indefinitely until either the feared outcome occurs or the fearful situation dissipates. Bafflement is simply that quality in a mystery that arises when the characters (chiefly the detective) are unable to explain logically the puzzling occurrences and clues. As has already been observed, such a state of perplexity is of paramount concern in a mystery and can be summarized in the form of a mystery question (usually "Who done it?"). In an effectively constructed mystery all four qualities—fear, hate, suspense, and bafflement—are relieved in the final solution. When the villain is revealed, bafflement disappears. When he has been dealt with, the fearful situation and its accompanying suspense are also removed. The hate, too, is vented with the capture of the villain, since the implied or stated outcome is that he will get his just deserts. Each mystery play should contain incidents arousing all of these qualities, but murder-house mysteries display
particular diversity in their individual emphases of one or another of them.

The Bat places great emphasis upon the creation of fearful situations. They play such an important part in the work that the authors begin establishing the probability of fear even before the presentation of any exposition. The opening lines of the play leave little doubt that dangerous situations will soon arise:

LIZZIE is at the city telephone up C. When Curtain is well up, LIZZIE sets down the phone, with angry snap; hangs up receiver.

LIZZIE. He says the reason they turned the lights off last night was because there was a storm threatening. He says it burns out their fuses. (Low rumble of THUNDER in the distance.) There! They'll be going off again tonight! (Step L., scared.)

CORNELIA. Humph! I hope it will be a dry summer. Ask Billy to bring some candles and have them ready.

LIZZIE. (Frightened, moves down to back of table C.) You're not going to ask me to go out into that hall alone? (I.6).

Fear receives further bolstering from the suggestion of the supernatural. For example, a glowing cat's eye seemingly floats across the stage at several points in the play. Fear is thus created by using an inexplicable incident. Hate for the villainous Bat is minimal, as is characteristic of many of the older, thrills-in-the-dark plays. Hate does not appear to figure so prominently in the play as

50 Precise handling of the emotional materials does not come about by accident. The type of ending sought actually determines the sort of emotions that need to be developed earlier in the play. Such a controlled ending must be consciously worked toward by the author, who should know where his mystery is leading from the moment he begins to write. Numerous scholars of the mystery form have noted the necessity for the author to plan with a definite ending in mind. For example, see Jack Iams, "Getting Away with Murder," in Writing Detective and Mystery Fiction, ed. Burack, pp. 187-89.
does fear. The fact that the complicated happenings are not clearly the work of a single villain dissipates the hatred. Although hate is subdued, suspense appears strongly in *The Bat*. The authors demonstrate their keen awareness of the mechanics of suspense when they employ the highly effective repetition technique. In the first act a man is shot to death on the staircase in the dark. While some suspense exists in that scene, the effect is greatly intensified in the second act when the murder is re-enacted. The repetition sets up a strong anticipation of another murder, which is sustained until the lights are turned on at the end of the scene. The fact that there is no second murder has no lessening effect on the suspense created. Actually the absence of a gunshot extends the suspense by keeping expectation at a peak until the fearful quality is removed by the switching on of the lights. Bafflement is, of course, the chief ingredient in a mystery. For its effective catharsis, perplexity must be sustained until the end. While the mystery in *The Bat* can be solved by simple deduction, it is unlikely that a viewer would be alert enough to do so. The method used by the authors to assure bafflement until the desired moment is a simple one: they introduce so much physical activity after the presentation of the final clue that there is no

---

51 In the strictest sense, hate actually is present in much of the play, since it is the primary material used by the author to create the fearful situations. Without any hate, no fear would exist. The hate created in the play, however, is undirected. Since the object of the hate, the villain, is unknown throughout most of the drama, the emotion is not directed at the specific individual but generally at whatever amorphous force is causing the fearful incidents. As will be seen later, the plays that best display hate are inverted mysteries, in which the identity of the murderer is known from the beginning. See pp. 179-80.
time to think about the clues and arrive at a solution. By thus maintaining bafflement, the authors can bring about an effective catharsis, with fear, hate, suspense, and bafflement all disappearing simultaneously upon the capture of The Bat.

The Cat and the Canary also emphasizes fear and suspense. All the talk about danger intensifies the fear. After a fearful situation is created by the disappearance of Crosby, the lawyer, through a secret panel, suspense takes full reign. The second act is essentially a single extended suspense scene in which the heroine locks herself alone in a darkened room in a house known to be riddled with sliding panels and secret passageways. Bafflement is maintained in an expedient manner: no clues leading to a solution are provided. While that approach serves well to create confusion, it violates the fair-play rule. The conclusion to the play spreads the solution and capture over several pages. First, a conversation between the two villains rids the play of its baffling quality. Eventually the heroine is rescued from them and they are captured. Only then are the fear, hate, and suspense relieved. Essentially The Cat and the Canary uses theatricality and an absence of fair play to evoke a maximum of fear and suspense from a minimally suspenseful premise.

In The Ninth Guest Owen Davis opts for bafflement at the expense of the other emotional qualities. He never sufficiently evokes fear and hate in the play. As Davis himself once noted, fear can be created only for characters who are sufficiently developed to the
point that their safety is desired by the audience. In *The Ninth Guest* the characters are uniformly dislikable and never fully developed. In fact, most seem deserving of elimination. Since there is no real desire created to keep them alive, their imminent deaths are never fearful and their murders are never hateful. Without fear, suspense also is lost. Only the puzzle aspect of the mystery remains, and Davis develops it in an almost clinical, disinterested, game-like fashion. The catharsis of the single emotion of bafflement is weak compared to those of either of the former plays.

Agatha Christie seems cognizant of the problems to be encountered in killing a host of people. In *Ten Little Indians* she spends almost the entire first act in personalizing and individualizing each of her characters. Therefore, the placing of those often likable, though guilty, people in danger of their lives without due process of law becomes a fearful and hateful proposition. A degree of suspense results from the anticipation of how the next murder will match the appropriate verse in the rhyme. Nevertheless, again the game-like quality of the murders dominates, and bafflement is the chief emotional ingredient. Its importance in the play is shown by the lengthy explanation given by the murderer to his last prey, Vera.

---


The writings of Aristotle give Davis support when fear is defined as being caused by that which has "great power of destroying us." See *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, in *Rhetoric and Poetics*, p. 104. Fear is related to oneself. Thus, characters must be shown to be like oneself in order to be worthy of one's fearing for them.
Despite the villain's loquacity, the speech works effectively because a clear, detailed explanation befits such a baffling puzzle. The full dramatic potential of the material is then achieved when the hero, Lombard, revives from apparent death and dispatches the villain posthaste. Bafflement is relieved with the villain's speech, while his death ends the hate, fear, and suspense that have continued to build as he stalked his final victim. The Mousetrap adheres to a similar pattern of character development and resultant fear, hate, and suspense; however, bafflement again dominates the play until the revelation scene in which all emotions reach fruition with the villain's capture.

Laughter also plays a part in many murder-house mysteries. In most, as in The Bat and The Cat and the Canary, laughter is mainly an incidental used for comic relief. A single character elicits most of the laughter because of his or her excessive fears. In the dramas of Agatha Christie, however, the comic ingredients become more integral. Each play has a thread of comedy that runs throughout, as if the author were trying to reiterate constantly that the events are only seemingly serious. In Ten Little Indians the comedy is rather grim, consisting largely of the pun-like nature of the verses in the nursery rhyme when they are compared to the murders. The Mousetrap utilizes laughable materials more fully in that it broadly parodies earlier murder-house mysteries. While comedy is not extensively

---

53 For example, the couplet, "Three little Indian boys walking in the zoo, A big bear hugged one, and then there were two," results in the victim's being crushed by a great bronze bear holding a clock (III.1.82).
developed in these kinds of mysteries, it sometimes functions as an emotional adjunct to the four more important ingredients of fear, hate, suspense, and bafflement.

Earlier in this chapter it was observed that plot is the most important element in any mystery. Character, like the four remaining Aristotelian elements, serves as material for the plot and is included "for the sake of the action"⁵⁴ and not vice versa. While character is such a material of the play as a whole, it can also be viewed as a separate and indispensable element that affects the ultimate form of the plot, as has been shown in its influence upon the shaping of the emotions of fear and hate. In the mystery drama, as in all plays, character performs such a necessary function; therefore, it, too, merits careful examination.

Since character is defined differently in the Poetics from its more common usage, the meaning of the term should be established. Ordinarily the word "character" refers to the agents themselves, the characters in a drama. Aristotle employed a stricter definition: "that which reveals the moral purpose of the agents, i. e. the sort of thing they seek or avoid when that is not obvious,"⁵⁵ or simply the fully formulated moral decisions of the agents, which serve to reveal the traits of their "characters."

The method of character-trait revelation in mysteries is as varied as are the plays. Ideally character should be revealed as

⁵⁴ Poetics, p. 231.
⁵⁵ Poetics, p. 232.
much as possible through on-stage activity of the agents. Those depicted activities thus help define the character of each of the agents in a way that gives the appearance of gradual development. Although the moral position of the agent may not actually change, such a technique creates an impression of an evolving character by slowly revealing the traits comprising that personage's moral makeup. A more expedient method of revelation involves a clearly expository scene in which one agent speaks to another about the character traits of the other personages in the play. The employment of a typed character, whose traits are clearly established as soon as the type is identified, offers the greatest rapidity of character revelation. Since murder-house mysteries so occupy themselves with the intricacies and complications of the action, it is not surprising that the predominant character techniques employed in them are the last two. Nevertheless, most of the plays contain a mixture of all three.

The basic outline of each character is established by the use of a type. In The Bat the types include the amateur detective, two young lovers, a comic servant, an ethnic type, a playboy, an older male character, and a "heavy," or villain. While the number of characters may change, the types vary only slightly in murder-house plays. The Cat and the Canary simply combines the maid-ethnic types in a single role and repeats the others, including the lovers, playboys, and heavies. The only obvious omission of a type is the amateur detective. The reason for that exclusion is a simple one: no significant clues are provided, and a detective who would follow such clues is superfluous. Davis continues the earlier patterns of
servants, lovers, and heavies, as does Christie in *Ten Little Indians*. Only in *The Mousetrap* are types used in atypical fashion. Christie provides the basic roles ordinarily filled by certain types, but in the details of her characterizations she severely alters the traditional patterns.

Such detailing of the characters is done in two ways. Narrative exposition fills in many superficial details, such as the male character role in *The Bat* being a doctor, while in *The Cat and the Canary* he is a lawyer. For the minor agents or those who die rather early, detail seldom goes beyond this level. In a play like *The Ninth Guest*, which contains many agents who are essentially minor in that they simply serve as a string of victims, the narrative introduction of details of character can become a tedious and lengthy process. Davis handles the problem by having the butler formally introduce each person upon arrival and by providing brief bits of gossip about guests by the early arrivals.

Only with major agents does the more complex method come into play extensively. That approach involves the slow supplying of detail by depicting the agent himself in action. The opening scene in *The Bat* provides such character revelation for Lizzie, the maid, and Cornelia, the amateur detective. While the scene also contains necessary plot exposition, it not only establishes Lizzie as a frightened woman but also includes reasons for her fear. On the other hand, Cornelia's more sober reactions to the same fearful situations go a long way toward delineating her as a tough, brave, and
inquisitive female. Even more careful revelation of character appears in the two Christie plays. In both dramas the author presents a slow first act in which most space is devoted to character delineation. *Ten Little Indians* exhibits the greater variety. It begins with the arrival of guests and the attendant introductions that establish surface details. Then each agent's character is filled in by the narrative device of an accusatory recording made by the killer. Finally, the reactions of each agent to the accusations provide details by showing each person functioning on a mental level. The moral makeup of each agent is apparent when he discusses his guilt or innocence for his putative crime. In *The Mousetrap* the details of characterization provided throughout the first act serve to contradict the expected types. The types at first appear to be present—the young lovers, the older men, the playboy, the aging spinster, and the matron. As detailed characterization develops, the types disintegrate. The young lovers perform the servant function. Furthermore, they are practical, down-to-earth, and businesslike, traits not usually associated with either lovers or servants. The playboy is not a man-about-town at all, but an eccentric architect (with the unfortunate but appropriate name of Christopher Wren) who sings nursery rhymes. The quarrelsome, matronly woman is not a typically bothersome but harmless old lady. Instead, she is at least partially responsible for the cruel death of a child. In a play with an ending involving three cases of false identity, such alteration of types is not accidental. Christie clearly reveals her intention to play with
type-induced first impressions when she introduces Mr. Paravicini, an unexpected guest. She observes that he is "a slightly taller edition of Hercule Poirot, which may give a wrong impression to the audience" (I.1.13). Ordinarily authors do not admit that their creations convey wrong impressions. In The Mousetrap that deception is an asset, a part of the author's overall plan to work against type.

Although the more developed characters such as those found in Christie's plays exceed the limitations of typed creations, benefits other than mere expediency result from the latter approach. The use of types makes it considerably easier for an author to create characters that are congruent with those suitable Aristotelian qualities of being good, appropriate, consistent, and like. The term "good" can mean having a moral purpose, but it may also refer to a character's having a dramatic function and fulfilling that function. The typed personages in murder-house mysteries all have fairly standardized functions. For example, the young leads serve as lovers, while the playboy types function as foils to the young male lovers. The servants add comic relief when it is desired. The second quality, appropriateness, refers to an agent's possessing traits associated with his station in life, his occupation, or simply his type. Appropriateness also encompasses the need for the details of character to be arranged in such a configuration that a homogeneous personage appears. In these mysteries the typed figures act according to the package of traits associated with the type (with the exception of The Mousetrap). As far as the third quality of character is concerned,
certainly the formula-based, stereotyped personages are suitably
"like the reality" of the similarly formula-based murder-house mys­
teries they populate. Finally, consistency refers to the need for a
character to be composed of a single package of traits throughout; it does not mean that characters must be static and unchanging.
Change in a character due to the circumstances of the plot is a wor­
thy and desirous quality in a play; however, to remain consistent the
character must alter only in ways that stem from the original make­
up of the character. As new traits appear, they must prove to be
consistent with those facts of the character that are already known.
This quality, like appropriateness, is a built-in feature of the
typed character and can be found in those used in murder-house mys­
teries.56

Both of the attributes of appropriateness and consistency and
the problem of maintaining them when characters undergo severe al­
terations throughout the course of a play are of particular interest
in the study of murder-house mysteries. Most characters in the plays
experience no such transformation. In The Bat Lizzie remains just as
frightened at the final curtain as she was during the first blackout.
Cornelia may seem satisfied to have solved the mystery, but she is no
less inquisitive. The same can be said of major characters in The
Cat and the Canary, Ten Little Indians, and The Mousetrap. Only in
The Ninth Guest does the author attempt to emphasize alteration in
character. The change of strong-willed people into insanely

56 For Aristotle's discussion of these four points and their relation to character, see Poetics, p. 242.
frightened hysterics is part of Davis's effort to make the play appear to have greater magnitude by virtue of its containing a study of the effects of fear. Actually the changes function more as the products of an external thought imposed upon the play than as the result of plot situations or decisions made by the characters themselves. Davis's accomplishment of magnitude-enhancement aside, murder-house mysteries do not emphasize the mutability of character. Instead, the plays stay within the type confines, which allow for the easy accomplishment of appropriateness and consistency.

As is the case with almost any general observation, an exception can be found. One character in each of the plays undergoes a major transformation; that character is the villain. Motifs employed in the solution of mysteries necessitate the change, which comes at the final revelation of the killer's identity. Part of the job of the mystery dramatist is the fair concealment of the murderer's identity. One of the most common means of doing so involves the least-likely-person motif. Therefore, until the end of the play, the murderer is never what he appears to be. Consequently, it is inherent in the mystery concealment that the major character alter at the moment of solution; the policeman, judge, artist, or would-be lover must suddenly become a bloodthirsty murderer. Such a situation precipitates obvious problems in appropriateness and consistency. It is not appropriate for a judge or a detective, both symbols of law and order, to kill people. The young lover or energetic artist does not characteristically choke, poison, and electrocute his cohorts. Consistency presents even greater problems. The kind, inquisitive,
even dead character suddenly becomes a murderous, self-confessed, and all-too-alive fiend. The creators of such mercurial individuals are well aware of the dramaturgical need for appropriateness and consistency. Ideally an author should begin to prepare for the late transformation when his character first appears on stage. After the villain's identity is made known, a pattern of appropriateness and consistency should be evident in the role-playing that preceded the revelation of true character. Unfortunately the writers of mysteries seldom devote much time to such artful creation of character. To aid themselves in making the earlier actions seem explicable in light of final revelations, the playwrights employ two basic devices that inartistically but facilely account for the transformations. One method has the villain assume a disguise at the beginning of the play that he sheds at the moment of revelation. That approach appears in *The Bat* and *The Mousetrap*, in both of which the murderers masquerade as police detectives. Although it is obviously atypical and inappropriate behavior for a policeman to rob and murder, no such problem arises when a police impersonator perpetrates the foul deeds. That ploy also answers the consistency problem. It is not inconsistent that at the moment his true identity is revealed the villain's behavior changes radically. He has stopped assuming a role and is, in effect, being his naturally evil self. The second expedient device blames everything on insanity. That motif appears in *The Cat and the Canary*, *The Ninth Guest*, *Ten Little Indians*, and *The Mousetrap*. At the moment the murderer's identity is revealed, the authors
carefully and quickly establish their villain's insanity: "Here Charlie suggests that he might be the one in the family who is really unbalanced" (Cat, III,95); "Mad? Ha! Ha! No—I am saner tonight than I've been for five years" (Ninth, III,75); "But you're not mad. (Very reasonably) I'm mad, but you're not" (Ten, III,11,87); and "He's mad, quite mad" (Mousetrap, II,63). The newly confirmed factor of insanity establishes both a new appropriateness and a new consistency related to the character's madness. Since what constitutes appropriate behavior for a madman is a hopelessly moot point, virtually any traits can be developed as being appropriate. Similarly, problems of inconsistency are alleviated as well. The apparent inconsistency in the character is only momentary. Once his insanity becomes obvious, his actions again seem consistent. Since it is itself part of the package of traits of a lunatic, inconsistency becomes consistent. Not even Aristotle could have argued with this method of handling the murder mystery's last-act problem. 57

A final important concern of character involves the moral choices made by the personages. Such choices play almost no part in murder-house mysteries, which seldom provide opportunities for the characters to make moral decisions. Instead, choices are expedient ones related to the crimes. The victims make choices aimed at protecting themselves, while the villains make expedient decisions based on how they can best avoid capture while committing their crimes.

57 Actually Aristotle might have agreed wholeheartedly. In the Poetics, p. 242, he observed, "even if inconsistency be part of the ... character, he should still be consistently inconsistent."
The detectives' decisions are similar; the only consideration is how to capture the criminal as quickly as possible. Morality seldom receives attention in reaching any of the choices of how to act in those situations.

While murder-house mysteries do not make their characters face moral crossroads, the formula posits a basic morality. Stated most tritely, but clearly, that moral viewpoint is "Crime doesn't pay." Within that simple moral stance, all acts of crime are readily apparent, and anyone who commits an act of crime must pay the consequences. The almost divine retribution manifests itself in many ways. Most obviously, the murderer must not escape to profit from his crimes. Usually he is captured to pay for his sins through prison or execution (The Bat, The Cat and the Canary). He may also be led away to the insane asylum (The Mousetrap) or killed on the spot (Ten Little Indians). A villain who is truly cognizant of the moral code obligingly does away with himself, as is the case in The Ninth Guest. The "crime-doesn't-pay" philosophy extends beyond the villains, however, to all characters in the plays. Almost all victims are guilty of crimes, immoralities, or indiscretions. Of the two people who die in The Bat, one is consumed by greed while the other is partner to a million-dollar embezzlement scheme. Davis's characters in The Ninth Guest are guilty of political chicanery, rudeness, and other high-society "crimes." Christie carefully details the villainy of her victims. In Ten Little Indians all those who die have been responsible either directly or indirectly for the deaths of others, while The Mousetrap's victims have brought about the
agonizing death of a child. Only in *The Cat and the Canary* does a blameless person die. The villain strangles the kindly old lawyer because he is about to tell the heroine who it is that is trying to harm her.

The corollary of the "crime-doesn't-pay" stance states that "Virtue is rewarded." In *The Bat* the amateur detective and her maid will enjoy peaceful nights. The young hero and heroine in all five plays will live happily ever after.\(^{58}\) When it has been indicated earlier in the play that the survivors have also been guilty of crimes, they must clear themselves before the final curtain in order to show their worthiness to live. In *Ten Little Indians* the surviving man is shown not to have left twenty-one of his men to die in battle; in fact, he had "played the hero" that day (III.11.85). The heroines in both that play and *The Mousetrap* prove not to be child murderesses, but loving, dedicated women who were helpless to save the dying children. Thus, the plays contain moralizing without moral decision making: the good win and the bad lose.

The clear-cut lesson provided in the plays forms a small part of their thought. That third Aristotelian element is concerned with the "mental procedure" of the characters in the strictest sense; however, it also broadly encompasses the thought that is expressed by a

---

\(^{58}\)The effect of the hero's rescuing the heroine from the clutches of the murderer often has a miraculous effect upon the love life of hero and heroine. In *Ten Little Indians* moments after being shot by the heroine, the hero kills the murderous judge. He then turns to his earlier assailant and says, "You know there's another ending to that Ten Little Indian rhyme: 'One little Indian boy, left all alone, /He got married--and then there were none!'" (III.11.87).
play as a whole, the thought that only the entirety of a work can display. In addition to the moral stance described in the previous paragraph, the more structured and overt theorizing and moralizing occasionally found in such a mystery as The Ninth Guest form a minor part of thought. Each mystery, however, more importantly concerns itself with a complex thought process—deduction. The murder-house mystery that plays fair spends considerable time in portraying the process of deducing the identity of the killer. Such development of thought is very much the sort that Aristotle wrote of when he included "every effort to prove or disprove" as one of the manifestations of thought in a play. No matter how seemingly important the moralizing in the murder-house mystery may get, the effort to solve the mystery question always dominates.

The deductive process actually belongs primarily to the thought of a single personage, the functional detective, rather than to the play as a whole. Only the detective correctly employs a reasoning process based upon logical proof. Nevertheless, even his reasoning should not be apparent until the end of the drama, when his thought process comes into prominence; the solution scene allows the

59 In some mystery plays there is no traceable deductive process. Nevertheless, such plays give the impression that substantive clues are being presented and that they will eventually lead to a solution.

60 Poetics, p. 248.

61 The type of reasoning used by the detective may not be strictly deductive. Logical thought in mystery plays often involves induction and many of the other lines of argument described by Aristotle in Rhetoric, pp. 142-55.
detective to explain the logical steps by which he has arrived at the correct answer to the mystery question. In The Bat, the most clue-centered of the murder-house plays, the authors include the expected explanation of logic by the amateur detective, Cornelia. She first tells how she has eliminated some suspects: "No—no, the Doctor is not a murderer... Doctor Wells was locked in the drawing room with us" (III,121-22). Soon afterward she rapidly proceeds to explain the reasoning that enabled her to deduce the killer's identity (III,125).

Since the clues or discoveries that lead the detective to the correct conclusion must be revealed throughout the play, the chance exists that an alert observer, either the detective or an audience member, could uncover the solution earlier than the author deems desirable. In one of the favored methods already noted, the author may rely upon amplification and diminution in the thought to avoid such a premature solution: those pieces of evidence and the conclusions drawn from them that lead toward an incorrect solution are amplified, while the clues pointing to the right answer are diminished in importance before the solution scene. The technique can again best be seen in The Bat. Clues incriminating the innocent suspect, Doctor Wells, receive focus. The authors are careful to ensure that his suspicious acts are perceived by the detective and the audience alike. The following exchange between the detective and

---

62 As has been already observed in the discussion of the ending of murder-house mysteries, those plays in which the villain reveals his own identity require that he note the clues that could have led to an uncovering of his identity.
the doctor soon follows the latter's earlier actions of a highly sus- picious nature:

CORNELIA. Doctor, why did you put out that candle?
DOCTOR. I didn't--I--
CORNELIA. You did--I saw you do it (III.102).

Conversely, the authors, amidst a flurry of activity, hide the es- sential clue that points to the real murderer so that no conclusion is drawn from the evidence when it is introduced. One personage men- tions that Anderson (The Bat) has not been seen for some time. That casual remark is immediately followed by Cornelia's discovery of a secret room that has been the object of an intensive search through- out most of the play. In the excitement of the moment, the reference to Anderson's absence is forgotten (III.97-98).

Although it is characteristically the detective's function to solve the mystery at the proper time through the use of logical proof, the other characters exhibit typically human curiosity in their at- tempts to decipher the mystery also. Again the author uses misdirec- tion to explain those agents' inability to uncover the solution. Un- like the detective, the other persons in the play rely upon types of proof other than the logical; they focus in their thought processes upon emotional and ethical proof. Their reliance upon either of those kinds of proof to the exclusion of logic proves unfortunate for the would-be detectives, whose suppositions always end in failure.

The use of unlogical proof to mislead can best be seen in the employment of ethical or personal proof. The only clues that should be accepted as fact are those actually perceived by the
detective. As soon as the testimony of anyone is offered as a clue, ethical proof comes into play. The perception of the validity of such testimony will depend upon the character of the person giving the information. The less suspicious the testifier, the more readily his comments will be taken to be truthful. In a mystery play, with its pervasive suspicion, no person's testimony should be accepted as factual. Nevertheless, the majority of the characters and the more gullible audience members do just that. An example of the use of ethical proof to mislead occurs in Ten Little Indians. The red-herring "death" of the judge is successfully perpetrated when the testimony of a respected witness is accepted as true. Each of the remaining victims-to-be neglects to inspect the judge's body himself; instead, each of them believes the doctor when he swears to the judge's death from a gunshot in the head. The doctor, who has unwittingly made a pact with the murderer, is lying. The other innocent characters' belief in the doctor's testimony almost results in the death of both of them. The killer himself best assesses his clever use of false ethical proof:

You thought I was dead. . . . The doctor said I was dead. That was the clever part of my plan. Said we'd trap the murderer. . . . He thought it an excellent plan. . . . He swallowed my red herring all right (III,11.86).

63 The doctor is himself guilty of relying upon ethical proof. He foolishly believes all that the judge tells him up until the moment the judge pushes him off a cliff into the sea (III,11.86).
The author, of course, seeks to get the audience to swallow the red herring as well. Most of the time she succeeds through such a use of nonlogical proof in the thought element of her mystery.

Thought in drama is affected by and shown through the fourth element, diction or language. Therefore, as the material of thought, diction holds an important place in the structure of all plays, including mysteries. In the mystery, however, diction is not used in any way peculiar to that type of play. Essentially, mystery dramatists handle diction realistically, as do most other modern playwrights. By "realistically" is meant that the language is written in prose and contains few of the "pleasurable accessories" that abound in the plays of more language-conscious eras. While mysteries occasionally use dialects, such diction is rendered stereotypically. Some characters may also speak in the jargon of their professions, as do the police detectives; however, diction is never employed

---

64 Poetics, p. 230.

65 The ethnic servant types are chiefly those whose diction is rendered in dialect. Examples in murder-house mysteries include Billy the Jap in The Bat and Mammy Pleasant, a West Indian voodoo woman, in The Cat and the Canary, both of whom speak a pidgin English.

66 The special police vocabulary is not as apparent in murder-house plays as it is in the American procedurals of the 1920's. The language in the latter plays is an outgrowth of that found in the so-called "hard-boiled" detective stories of the pulp magazines. Only after Dashiell Hammett and other narrative practitioners of the period introduced such terms as "gunsel," "op," and "knockover" into common literary usage did such diction begin to be heard on the stage.
104 uniquely enough in mystery plays for it to warrant special critical attention.

The final structural elements, music and spectacle, are very much concerned with the production aspect of plays and are decipherable in a study of the text primarily through the stage directions. In a modern mystery play, music translates simply as "that which can be heard" or the aural effects. Spectacle is the Aristotelian term for that which can be seen. In a theatre form that depends heavily upon exciting activity and the suggestion of violence, aural and visual effects play a substantial role. Furthermore, the less the plays depend upon concrete clues and the more they resort to action scenes, the sound and spectacle become increasingly vital. Also, the plays that emphasize fear and suspense rather than bafflement are more dependent upon visual and aural effects to help create the fearful setting and thus reinforce the expectation of fearful incidents.

The importance of these elements to murder-house mysteries can be seen in their use during major crises in the plays. The first murder scene in The Bat serves as an excellent example. Early in the scene, the ingenue, Dale, and the victim, Dick, argue somewhat heatedly. That situation in itself is not particularly frightening. As the moment of the murder approaches, however, sound and spectacle are brought in more strongly. The electrical storm outside the murder room builds in intensity. Lights flicker and then extinguish.

For this reason, diction will be mentioned only infrequently in subsequent chapters.
Spotlights from the wings flash on the victim. An off-stage shot is fired. Then the stage disappears in darkness as the body thumps to the floor (I.46-48). It is not so much what the actors are doing as what the electrician and sound engineer are suggesting through their combined efforts that makes the scene exciting and frightening.

Sound functions strongest on a suggestive level in mystery plays. In the third act of The Bat a crucial escape from a room is indicated not by sight, but instead by the sounds of pounding and the splintering of wood (III.96). At other points in the play the authors evoke a storm and a blazing garage primarily through the use of sound effects. The other murder-house plays contain similar instances of aural enhancement: gongs in The Ninth Guest, noise of struggle and strangulation during an unseen murder in The Mousetrap, sea birds and death-dealing crashes in Ten Little Indians, and assorted rain and snow storms, as well as ominous recorded voices in all three plays.

In The Cat and the Canary suggestion reaches a high point in mastery. While the setting, lighting, and persistent talk of fear enhance the mood, sound does most of the work in creating the many thrills in the play. Included in its repertory of sounds are the following fright-inducers: "a muffled, weird gong . . . unearthly gong . . . clock ticking . . . 3 slow knocks at door . . . door bangs . . . door knob rattles . . . Gong is heard tolling the half hour . . . there are heard three dull taps on door . . . a scratching is heard on door . . . banging of a shutter in the wind . . . two slams of door . . . noise like a body being dragged along floor . . . a curious shuffling
noise is heard—like dragging footsteps" (I,16, 17; II,43, 46, 53, 57, 62; III,72, 92). While later murder-house mysteries have seldom achieved the complexity of the aural effects found in The Cat and the Canary, that early play's utilization of suggestive sound ably demonstrates the potential of that which is only heard.

Despite sound's extensive use to suggest fearful ingredients, most murder-house plays rely more heavily upon spectacle. The authors begin the visual enhancement of their materials by providing a mysterious and sometimes frightening setting. It is, of course, inherent in the formula of murder-house plays that the locale be isolated, which in itself moves events in the direction of mysteriousness. Even beyond that inescapable factor, the authors indicate that gloomy, forbidding rooms are most desirable. Libraries (The Bat, The Cat and the Canary), garrets (The Bat), and living rooms (The Ninth Guest, Ten Little Indians, The Mousetrap) are the typical rooms utilized for the settings. While some of the sets, such as the attic room in The Bat, are in themselves mysterious, others receive further enhancement of their mysteriousness. The library in The Cat and the Canary is "full of dark corners and shadows" (I,5); another scene takes place in a similarly "gloomy room" (II,42). Owen Davis places his play of electrical gimmickry and death in a "futuristic . . . and irritating" black and silver penthouse (Ninth, I,5, 6). One of the favorite details in the scenery for these dramas is the secret passageway or hidden compartment, thus providing the nickname, "pistol-and-panel" plays. Such unseen recesses are more prevalent in the
earlier plays. In The Bat much of the drama is occupied with a search for a secret room, which is opened by "pushing aside a panel in a row of drawers" causing a false mantelpiece to swing open like a door (III.95). The Cat and the Canary goes considerably farther with secret springs opening secret compartments and secret sliding panels leading to secret passageways (I.7, 37; II.62). John Willard employs the hidden compartment-passage-panel device no less than seven times in that mystery. Since the modernity of Davis's setting precludes the inclusion of an old-fashioned secret recess, he offers futuristic substitutes in The Ninth Guest. On the unimaginative side Davis uses locked closets to conceal missing bodies. Somewhat more inventively, not to mention futuristically, he replaces the secret panel with a secret button, which operates elaborate sound and electrical equipment. Only Christie eschews mysterious elements in her use of settings for murder-house plays. She includes no stage directions for gloominess or dark corners. Instead, her sets belong to a style that can only be called "typically British." They can be either "luxuriously furnished" (Ten. I.11) or "decrepit [and] lived-in" (Mouse-tap, I.1.1). On one occasion Christie even draws attention to her avoidance of traditional mysterious scenery by having one of her characters note that her murder house contains "No sliding panels or secret doors" (Ten, II.1.53). Although it is true that she uses atypical mystery scenery, that is not to say she does not rely upon spectacle. The contrary is quite true; however, she achieves her results through control of lighting rather than scenery.
The utilization of stage lighting to enhance the fearful situation is common. Dousing the lights has become the obvious and clichéd method. In murder-house mysteries, it runs rampant. Darkness traditionally is fearful, because it conceals the unknown; on the mystery stage darkness possesses the added benefit of allowing a murderer to work unseen. The Bat makes, by far, the greatest use of the crime-in-the-dark technique. The authors of that play go to great lengths to explain logically the repeated moments of darkness. In her opening speech Lizzie remarks that the inclement weather may cause problems with the electricity. Her prediction soon proves true. Once the power goes, people carry candles. The tricks used by the authors to explain the extinguishing of the candles when necessary are remarkable for their variety. Wax sometimes burns the fingers of the person holding the candle, causing him to lose his grip and drop the candle. At other times candles are dropped purposefully by the villains or by the more easily frightened characters in moments of anxiety. The other mysteries all employ lower-light-level villainies to a lesser extent. The desired mysterious effects usually are achieved through low general lighting and a few special spotlights that illuminate the parts of the stage where attention should focus. Only infrequently do the authors resort to the blackouts that are so prevalent in The Bat. As might be expected, the least ordinary use of lighting is found in Christie's writings. In Ten Little Indians she works directly against the tradition. Characters are poisoned, stabbed, and injected on stage in full light; only once does Dame
Agatha resort to a darkened stage to cover chicanery. Lighting is occasionally used in other ways in murder-house plays. For example, Davis makes good use of an electrically charged room in The Ninth Guest. In addition to a near-miss electrocution, one character receives a six-second charge from a deadly door to the accompaniment of flickering room lighting (II.ii.60). The combination of such lighting effects with appropriate settings and aural effects offers considerable help to the other structural elements in creating the mandatory eeriness of murder-house mysteries.

This analysis of the structure of murder-house plays now makes it possible to summarize more precisely the details of the formula to which the dramas generally adhere. The basic premise of this type of play is that a group of people (who are either strangers or generally hostile acquaintances) are brought together in an isolated house and confined there while one of their number engages in murder. The action of each play as realized in the plot has a definite beginning, middle, and end. The beginning emphasizes the introduction of the characters, which is done summarily but slowly, and the commission or discovery of the crime, which is handled more rapidly. In that section the mystery question is stated; it is invariably "Who done it?" The middle of the drama deals with the presentation of clues that are primarily of the action variety, in which deductions are made from what the detective has seen people do rather

68 The single instance occurs when the killer fakes his own murder, necessitating the darkness to cover his rapid and complicated actions (III.1.76).
than from incriminating objects that were left on the murder site. Scenes not devoted to presenting clues usually depict additional crimes, predominantly murders. The solution is given in the final scene. While the answer to the mystery may be reached by deductions made by the detective, more often the killer reveals his identity himself. The least-likely-person motif for the killer's identity is the favorite, and usually the murderer proves to be insane. If the play is not episodic (which it usually is), it gives the impression of being so because of the concealment of the solution. Complexity is avoided, while complication and the impression of magnitude are actively cultivated. The approach to the subject is seemingly serious. Of the four emotions developed in mystery plays, bafflement is paramount. Some of the early works such as The Bat and The Cat and the Canary also place considerable emphasis upon suspense and fear, which are enhanced by a strong dependency upon sound and spectacle.

Typed characters are used extensively. There is little alteration in character with the exception of the murderer, who undergoes a last-act transformation. Thought is most apparent in the deductive (or seemingly deductive) process used to identify the killer. Also, each play espouses the viewpoint that "crime doesn't pay." The realistic diction makes occasional use of dialects and police jargon. Suggestive sound and low-level lighting play a major role in evoking the fearful situations. The setting in the early plays (usually a library or living room) is gloomy and is filled with secret panels, while in later plays the set has become more realistic.
Since all mystery plays derive from the basic mystery formula, which consists of searching for an answer to a problem involving crime, many of the characteristics of murder-house mysteries will appear in other types of confined-mystery dramas; however, the combination of characteristics, as detailed in this chapter, is peculiar to murder-house mysteries. Even in the earliest of police procedurals, which bear a close resemblance to these plays in many ways, the correspondence is never exact, as will become evident in the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE
POLICE PROCEDURALS

Police-procedural plays developed almost concurrently with murder-house mysteries. Furthermore, many of the same writers produced works of both kinds. Consequently, points of similarity exist between these two types of melodrama. The chief American author of both procedurals and murder-house mysteries was Owen Davis, who wrote such police plays as *At 9:45* and *The Donovan Affair*. He dominated the field in the United States from 1919 to the 1930's. In England no single figure outshone all others during the early years. Edgar Wallace reigned as the major author of British procedurals in the

---

1The classification "police procedural" or simply "procedural" is borrowed from the critical terminology of narrative detective fiction; however, the term is used in a broader sense in this study than is otherwise common. "Police procedural" is ordinarily applied only to those novels that emphasize with clinical exactitude the details of police investigation. Among the leading authors of such fiction are Ed McBain (Evan Hunter) and J. J. Marric (John Creasey). In this study the term has been expanded to include all police-centered plays. At the time many of these dramas were written, their narrative fiction counterparts were called *romans policiers*, but the present study uses the more familiar current terminology of "procedural."

2Owen Davis, *At 9:45* (New York: Samuel French, 1928). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 254-55.

3Owen Davis, *The Donovan Affair* (New York: Samuel French, 1930). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 259-60.
1920's and early 1930's with plays such as Criminal at Large (The Case of the Frightened Lady). He received strong competition, however, from other popular dramatists such as Allene Tupper Wilkes, whose The Creaking Chair ran for the better part of a year in London, and Frank Vosper, who wrote several hit mysteries, including Murder on the Second Floor. The deaths of early British proceduralists such as Wallace and Vosper left vacancies that were not easily filled. Only infrequent successes like Alec Coppel's I Killed the Count appeared during the 1930's. It was not until the following decade that proceduralists were to come into vogue again through the impact of the dramas of Agatha Christie. While her plays deviated considerably from the patterns of most early police dramas, she re-established the standard features of proceduralists in such popular works as The

---

4 Edgar Wallace, Criminal at Large (New York: Samuel French, 1934). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 257-58.

5 Allene Tupper Wilkes, The Creaking Chair, revised by Roland Fertwee (New York: Samuel French, 1926). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 255-57.

6 Frank Vosper, Murder on the Second Floor (New York: Samuel French, 1930). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 263-64.

7 Alec Coppel, I Killed the Count (New York: Samuel French, 1939). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 262-63.
Hollow,^ Spider's Web,^ Towards Zero (written in collaboration with Gerald Vemer), and The Unexpected Guest. Considerable variation exists among the police plays that were written between 1919 (At 9:45) and 1958 (The Unexpected Guest); however, all of them exhibit the common traits of procedurals. A police drama always revolves around the crime of murder, although other criminal activities may also enter into the picture. The official police force conducts an investigation of the murder. Although amateur sleuths often serve as functional detectives, police officers are in charge. The chief concern is the investigation itself, which the police conduct on or near the murder site. Interrogations of witnesses and suspects occupy a large portion of each play. As one policeman in a procedural notes, "We just go on asking people a lot of rather dull questions" (Hollow, II,ii.48). Confinement of the characters may not occur before the arrival of the police; nevertheless, with the commencement of the investigation, the police almost

---

^Agatha Christie, The Hollow (London: Samuel French, 1952). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 260-61.

^Agatha Christie, Spider's Web (London: Samuel French, 1956). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 265-66.

^Agatha Christie and Gerald Vemer, Towards Zero (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1957). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 266-68.

^Agatha Christie, The Unexpected Guest (London: Samuel French, 1958). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 268-69.
always detain the suspects and witnesses until the murderer is captured. 12

Chief among the aforementioned areas of variation in police procedurals is point of attack and its effect upon both the beginning and middle of a play. In mysteries utilizing an early point of attack, the action begins well before the commission of the murder. As a result, much of the first part of such dramas concerns non-police activities and contributes significantly to the similarities between some procedurals and murder-house mysteries. One of the first procedurals to utilize an early point of attack, The Creaking Chair, 12

12 In virtually all police procedurals there can be found what may be termed an obligatory confinement speech in which the police officers state, ask, or demand that no one leave the premises. The following examples are remarkable only for their lack of variety:

"We don't want any outside help on this. We'll attend to it ourselves... Put a man in front, keep everybody out" (At 9:45, I.1.14).

"One of you killed young Donovan. I am going to know all about it before anybody goes out that door—if we are here all night" (Donovan, I.10).

"I'm sorry, Mr. Latter, but I must ask every one to remain in the house until I give them leave to go out" (Creaking, II.67).

"Nobody is to leave the house under any circumstances whatsoever" (Second Floor, II.11.44).

"Well—I'd be much obliged if you would stay here until, say, lunchtime" (Count, I.16).

"I'm afraid I must ask you not to leave here today" (Hollow, III.69).

"There's no reason why you shouldn't go out if you wish, but it'll have to be later" (Zero, II.11.43).
begins like a murder-house play emphasizing the "mysterious East" motif. The first act of the drama contains such typical features of murder-house plays as an immediate establishment of the probability of fearful incidents through the use of spectacle (I.7-8) and a heavy reliance upon secret compartments and panels (I.6). Only with the arrival of the police in the second act and their announcement that a murder has been committed next door does the play clearly become a procedural. Even after the beginning of the investigation, many vestiges of murder-house plays remain, such as scenes of chicanery in the dark and the casting of suspicion upon the police investigator.

A similar pattern including a slow introduction of potential victims and suspects, an establishment of mystery and a delay in the discovery of a body and a subsequent arrival of the police can be found only in a few other police plays of the 1920's, such as Murder on the Second Floor. Mastery of an early point of attack and a slowly developed first act did not occur until the 1940's, when Agatha Christie used the pattern in almost all of her procedurals.

13The use of Middle and Far Eastern material in mysteries was popularized by Wilkie Collins in The Moonstone. Edgar Wallace and other playwrights, novelists, and pulp-fiction authors perpetuated the stories, which emphasized the horrors of scimitar-bearing Arabs and the dreaded "yellow peril" of the Orient.

14Toward the end of the play evidence against the policeman mounts rapidly. While suspicion of the officer later proves to be unwarranted, the policeman-as-villain motif used in The Bat and other murder-house mysteries appears in this play. Such suspicion of the police is not characteristic of procedurals. None of the other dramas under analysis suggest that the investigating officers may be other than what they claim to be—dedicated defenders of law and order.
Some of Christie's first acts display a similarity to those of *The Creaking Chair* and *Murder on the Second Floor*, which depict criminal activities while excluding murder. *Spider's Web* is the epitome of such construction; Christie delays the murder until moments before the first-act curtain, which allows for extensive exposition of situation and character before the arrival of the police. The author maintains a sense of rapidity in the act, however, by weaving several story lines together, which include criminal activities such as narcotics selling, smuggling, lying, and clandestine visits by mysterious foreigners (l.1-26). In other procedurals Christie seldom offers any hints that criminal acts and police investigations will soon take place. The first act of *The Hollow*, for example, occupies itself with a subtle development of character relationships and love entanglements worthy of any disciple of Chekhov. In *Towards Zero* she again emphasizes subtlety in character development, but at the same time she manages to evoke a state of tension that is absent from the first act of *The Hollow*. She creates a murder-pregnant atmosphere, a probability that death will occur, mainly through tensions expressed in her characters. Early in the drama one character remarks, "Yes, there is a suggestion of gunpowder in the air. One little spark might set off an explosion" (I.1.14). Soon after that comment, another character senses "something not quite right... something different" about the locale (I.1.16). Four days then elapse between scenes in the act, allowing tensions to increase to such an extent that people become frightened. Christie
delays the murder even longer, however. The second act opens on a sunny morning following the latest anxiety-filled evening. In a slow, suspenseful scene in which each likely victim comes onto the stage just as it appears to the audience that the character has, in fact, been murdered, Christie presents the latest and most protracted of body-discovery scenes in all of procedurals.

Early in *Towards Zero* the author clearly states her abhorrence of a sudden beginning that places all emphasis on the investigation. Her *raisonner* figure, Royde, mouths the Christie philosophy thus:

> I've been reading a detective story. Not very good. Always seems to me these yarns begin in the wrong place. Begin with the murder. But the murder's not really the beginning. . . . As I see it, the murder is the end of the story. I mean, the real story begins long before—years before, sometimes. Must do. All the causes and events that bring the people concerned to a certain place on a certain day at a certain time. And then, over the top—zero hour (I.1,23).

In any of the police plays utilizing an early point of attack, such a zero hour is reached well into the drama. By that time the major mystery question must have been clearly posed. Invariably procedurals ask the question, "Who is the killer?"

An early point of attack greatly affects the middle of a police drama, which commences when the police arrive to conduct their investigation. In a mystery with an early point of attack, the police search always follows a major discovery and reversal. The discovery is, of course, the finding of the body. Immediately, the direction of the play undergoes a radical shift. The drama no
longer concerns family quarrels, narcotics smuggling, or thievery; instead, it has become a murder mystery.

The arrival of the police and the alteration of the play into a procedural necessitates subsequent exposition of material directly related to the crime. Since such a procedural has developed slowly with much in the way of character-related clues having already been presented, the amount of new information can be held to a minimum. In order to avoid repetition of such previously revealed clues, authors go to great lengths to keep the early stages of their police investigations off the stage. Furthermore, in an attempt to compensate for the slow beginning, playwrights display a fondness for the rapid introduction of any new clues. In *The Creaking Chair* the murder occurs next door and the police gather many of their clues before they appear on stage. The officers merely tell their suspects (and the audience) the details of what they have uncovered. Christie employs a similar device in both *The Hollow* and *Towards Zero*. She does not show the arrival of the police; instead, she presents a summary by either the investigating officers or the suspects of the pertinent information covered since the discovery of the body. After the summary exposition of clues at the murder scene, the remainder of the middle of a procedural with an early attack consists of interrogation scenes and does not differ appreciably from the middle of a procedural utilizing a late attack.

Late-attack procedurals ordinarily begin with the discovery of a body and the subsequent presentation of clues on the murder
site, as the police begin their initial perusal of the crime. In Owen Davis's *At 9:45* that phase of the play is quite lengthy because the author dwells on the spectacle of the discovery of a bloody victim and the careful presentation of numerous concrete clues. Most other procedurals, however, differ from that early Davis drama. Often the discovery and preliminary presentation of clues are almost nonexistent. In Edgar Wallace's *Criminal at Large* the play begins several days after the murder, and the initial clues are presented as part of a lecture given to police trainees (I.29-33). To create the sense that the search has only just begun, Wallace adds a second murder, the investigation of which he then depicts firsthand in the middle section of the play. *The Donovan Affair* dispenses with the discovery and begins instead in the midst of the police investigation. Alec Coppel uses a brief prologue to depict the discovery in *I Killed the Count* and then jumps directly into the interrogations in the first act. Agatha Christie presents yet another variation on a late point of attack. In *The Unexpected Guest* the attack is late in relation to the murder but early as far as the arrival of the police is concerned, thereby enabling the author to add much detail after the establishment of the mystery question but before the beginning of an actual police search (I.1.1-19).

No matter which of those approaches to a late point of attack the dramatist uses, he offers almost no exposition of character or situation that does not directly relate to the murder under investigation. Since the murder question arises immediately, it becomes the all-pervasive concern. All past incidents are recounted
only insofar as they relate to victim or crime. Characters are developed only as suspects or investigators. Virtually all such murder-related exposition falls under the category of clues and is treated in the middle rather than the beginning of such procedurals.\(^{15}\)

In all procedurals the middle emphasizes the police investigation. While some plays with a late attack may include presentation of murder-site clues and creation of motives in the middle section, most procedurals abound in intensive interrogations conducted by the police. Often procedurals feature little else, as is the case in *I Killed the Count* and *At 9:45*; however, variations occur occasionally. In *Criminal at Large*, Edgar Wallace skillfully balances interrogation scenes with scenes presenting action clues. Furthermore, he does not keep his police detectives on stage at all times, which enables him to show much of the investigation from the suspects' points of view.

Wallace is not the only author who perceives a need to enhance the inherently static nature of a pure procedural format of extensive questioning and answering. Plays using an early point of attack help remedy the problem by reducing the length and overall importance of interrogations. In making the events leading toward the "zero hour" of the murder almost as dominant as the subsequent investigation, the authors of such dramas restrict the amount of space they must spend on the static ingredients of police routine.

\(^{15}\)An exception, as noted earlier, is *At 9:45*, which presents most clues at the beginning of the play.
Conversely, those plays beginning with a murder must devote virtually their entirety to the investigative process. Consequently, authors of such procedurals rely on several devices to add more interest. Often a second or third murder may be committed, as happens in both *Criminal at Large* and *The Donovan Affair*. That technique creates those murder-house-like qualities of fear and suspense that are attendant upon the killer continuing to murder people. An even more prevalent approach involves the use of an occasional false discovery in the form of a false confession, as occurs in *I Killed the Count*, *At 9:15*, and *The Unexpected Guest*. A surprise disclosure provides a momentary diversion by allowing the author to follow the detective as he examines a new set of clues and eventually disproves the false admission of guilt. Extra complication arises when the audience's perception of the confession differs from that of the detective. Ordinarily, the audience quickly realizes the falsity of the testimony because of information it learns while the detective is off the stage. As previously noted, the rule of fair play requires that discoveries by the audience and by the detective be identical; however, such is seldom the case in procedurals. The audience may discern the falseness of a confession because of discoveries it has made about the character of the confessor (*At 9:15*). Sometimes the author simply presents the true version of events directly to the audience (*I Killed the Count*). In either instance the detective, who is not privy to

---

16 The lack of suspense and fear in a standard police interrogation will be examined in the discussion of catharsis. See pp. 131-33.
the information, must gather his own evidence. The development then
becomes an exercise in showing the detective gradually come to realize
what the audience has long before perceived. Occasionally, as in
*I Killed the Count*, the police never discern the truth. Such false
leads, however, are usually discounted, and the play soon must return
to the essentially repetitive but inescapable interrogations.

After all concrete clues from the murder site, motives for
murder, and action clues have been presented, the author offers the
solution. The identity of the murderer varies little from that em­
ployed in murder-house plays. Authors of procedurals borrow the de­
vice of an insane killer with regularity; homicidal lunatics can be
found in *The Hollow* and *Criminal at Large*. The least-likely-person
motif dominates, however. The reason for employing it in procedurals
looms even larger than in the pistol-and-panel plays: a procedural
presents many more clues than do other mystery dramas. Consequently,
the solution tends to be more easily discernible to an alert observer.
The playwright who seeks to overcome that tendency and to conceal
his killer's identity until the final moments of his play finds the
use of a least-likely person a virtual necessity. For added assur­
ance, a procedural author seldom plays fair: he often uses as the
killer a character who has appeared only infrequently in the play.
The murderers in *At 9:15*, *The Creaking Chair*, and *I Killed the Count*
are introduced in the first act and then kept mostly in the wings
until shortly before their exposure as villains. Davis, Wilkes, and
Coppel all seem to be firm believers in the old adage, "Out of sight,
out of mind." In such instances the solution invariably proves unsatisfactory. The detailed clues needed to make it both probable and necessary that a minor character be the killer are never presented. Instead, the solution is merely the author's arbitrary choice of one of several equally possible suspects as the killer.

Only infrequently do procedural authors vary from the standard insane-killer or least-likely-person patterns. Christie, through her skill in planting misleading clues, succeeds in making the most likely person her killer in both The Hollow and Towards Zero, while she still baffles the audience until the desired moment. Sui generis among solutions in procedurals is the audience's growing awareness of the killer's identity in Criminal at Large. Wallace provides many fair but not immediately transparent clues at first. Obviousness of clues then increases in the later scenes. Similarly, the murderer's on-stage behavior gradually alters until his insanity becomes apparent. Thus, by the moment that the unwitting characters realize the solution to the mystery, it has been clear to the audience for some time. The author allows his audience the unique (for mystery plays) pleasure of discovering the identity of the villain for itself. 17

The most remarkable feature of the solutions of procedurals is that deduction by the police seldom provides the answer to the problem. As in murder-house mysteries, the authors prefer the method of self-revelation by the killer. That approach occurs in varying

17 This is not to say that audiences cannot figure out many other mysteries. Wallace simply assures that the identity is known by his careful development of Lord Lebanon's all-too-obvious insanity.
degrees in At 9:45, The Donovan Affair, Criminal at Large, and The Unexpected Guest. In the infrequent instances in which a solution can be deduced from clues presented on stage, an amateur usually solves the mystery, as is the case in Murder on the Second Floor, The Hollow, and Spider's Web. Most clues uncovered by the police fail to lead directly to the criminal. The clues merely help the police to decide who is not guilty or to establish who was at the murder scene near the time of the crime. More importantly, the clues convey an impression that a deductive solution is possible. All such use of clues violates the requirement of fair play, but stage procedurals are virtually devoid of such honesty with the audience. In fact, authors commit even graver infractions. Occasionally a new piece of evidence will be revealed during the solution. That new clue then becomes the key to the killer's identity. The authors of The Donovan Affair and Towards Zero utilize just such unfair clues. In The Creaking Chair the solution results solely from accident. When the killer enters in the final scene, he inadvertently has part of his villain's disguise protruding from a pocket. His indiscretion leads quickly to his capture.

Dependency upon such nonlogical methods of solution forces authors to include a theatrically ineffective final speech of explanation, the prolixity of which is magnified when it is utilized in a play that has relied predominantly upon questions and answers up to that point. Long speeches by the murderers appear in At 9:45, The Creaking Chair, The Donovan Affair, Criminal at Large, I Killed the Count, and The Unexpected Guest. Sometimes the playwrights attempt
to offset the effects of their use of protracted confessions. Alec Coppel, who must handle four different admissions of guilt in *I Killed the Count*, employs flashbacks that replace tedious narration with onstage violence and bloodletting. Less original is Owen Davis’s approach in *The Donovan Affair*. After the wearisome confession by the killer, Davis offers a rather implausible fight of seldom-equalled excessive violence:

Nelson throws the table over, the lamp falls and breaks, the top of the table also breaks; as the lamp goes out one half of the stage lights go down, Mary backs up stage, Nelson follows her slowly. . . . Jean comes from behind screen and runs to door of room L, and tries to open same. . . . [Nelson] springing forward and crushing her to him. Mary screams. When police whistle comes—Jean starts pounding on C. door. . . . Jean runs to Nelson and tries to break his hold on Mary. Nelson lets go of Mary, who falls to floor. Nelson turns and catches Jean. Mary crawls toward door, screaming; her hair is down, and while she was crushed in Nelson’s arms she has contrived to put blood on her face; she gets to her feet, holding herself by another table up at back. . . . Nelson springs at Mary, throwing the stand and the breakaway statue over with a crash. He drags her to large table and throws her back over it, knocking the second of the break-away lamps over—the stage is now lit by one remaining lamp—shouts and pounding on doors outside keeps up. Nelson bends Mary back over table, one hand on her throat, with the other hand he picks up the desk telephone and raises it by the small end, like a club—to brain her. Jean runs at him crying, "No! No!" She catches his upraised arm just as he tries to strike and clings to it. The large glass window at R. crashes in and [police] run in (III.75).

Even in plays using deduction, an explanation by the police or an amateur detective can prove to be excessively dull. To offset that effect authors may combine the explanation with a life-and-death struggle between detective and killer, as is done in *Spider’s Web*. 
Whatever the method followed to explain the evidence, however, police plays employ nothing that is peculiar to them alone.

In addition to an absence of originality in their conclusions, procedurals suffer from a serious unity problem. The characteristic parade of witnesses before the police officers, which makes up much of the activity in a procedural, is inherently episodic. Ordinarily, there is no logical reason for the order in which characters are called upon to give testimony. Quite often the police determine the order by talking to whoever seems most convenient or whoever happens to wander into the investigation room. Consequently, accident plays a greater role in formulating the order of the incidents in procedurals than does causality. Only in the later stages of the question-and-answer process does a link exist between one examinee and the next. In _I Killed the Count_, for example, the police randomly interview each of the major suspects at first. As evidence begins to point in specific directions and to certain suspects, the police then base the order of their reinterrogations upon earlier testimony. What the liftman says about the female entertainer causes suspicion to fall upon her. The subsequent testimony of the woman adds another piece to the puzzle, forcing the police to seek corroboration from another source. Thus, Coppel manages a clear causal linkage of the many short interrogation scenes toward the end of his mystery play. Unfortunately, most procedural authors are not as conscientious or possibly as skillful as Coppel is in creating at least a modicum of unity out of a hopelessly episodic format.
Generally, the more a procedural concerns itself with a police investigation, the more episodic it will be. Therefore, a play with an early attack, which reduces the length of the police work, possesses more unity, especially in its early stages leading to murder. The Christie plays, for example, display a strong causal link among the interrelationships of characters, their actions, and the eventual murder of one of them, while the episodic investigation portion in each of her plays is kept to a minimum. Thus, in addition to the reason of completeness given by the raisonneur in Towards Zero, her use of an early attack serves an even more important function: it leads more readily to a unified drama than does use of a late attack, which forces the police investigation to dominate the play inordinately.

An early point of attack possesses yet another advantage: it has an intrinsic complexity. All plays using such an attack contain the major discovery of a body and a concomitant plot reversal in which focus shifts from mundane events to a police investigation for a killer. A late point of attack offers no such built-in complexity. Consequently, authors seek to add it through the creation of discoveries and reversals during the long course of an investigation. Often the playwrights have found it difficult to stop when they begin to create complexity. As a result, plays with a late attack possess more complexity in the form of multiple reversals.

---

18See p. 118.
than do dramas with an early attack, which ordinarily possess only a single plot discovery-reversal. 19

The method of achieving complexity in late-attack procedurals remains constant in all such plays: several suspects confess to a single murder. The first confession does not usually precipitate a reversal; however, the second confession, a major discovery, does lead to a reversal. No longer does the first confessor appear to be the killer. Instead, the second character assumes that role. A third and fourth confession only add further discoveries and reversals.

When that technique is used, as in At 9:14, I Killed the Count, and The Unexpected Guest, seldom are there less than two reversals. The Coppel play contains three and Davis's drama has four. Christie outdoes both her predecessors with a phenomenal five reversals in The Unexpected Guest. For best effect such peripeties should be supported by evidence gathered during the police investigations. In her

19 It might be argued that those murder-house plays in which murder is committed late in the action possess a reversal like that found in procedurals with an early attack; however, that is not the case. Part of the murder-house formula calls for an early establishment of the probability of fearful incidents. Therefore, even in a play with as late a murder as The Mousetrap, no reversal transpires. In that play the opening scene establishes that an off-stage murder has occurred, and it soon becomes probable that the murderer is present. The late on-stage murder merely replaces the probability of the murderer's presence with certainty.

On the other hand, a Christie-style procedural with an early point of attack usually contains few hints of the coming violence, so that the murder radically transforms a peaceful party or weekend in the country into a search for a killer on the loose. In plays like Spider's Web and Towards Zero, in which the probability of fearful incidents is created in the early scenes, the reversal following the murder is weakened considerably,
quest for quantity, Christie displays weakness on that point. Some of her self-confessed killers, such as the mother, never really seem suspect to either detective or audience; instead, they are obviously covering for someone whom they believe to be the killer. Conversely, Coppel best manages to manipulate the clues so that all his killers appear equally likely to have murdered the Count.

A play with multiple reversals also requires clear identification of each radical shift in suspicion. The easiest method of doing so involves killing the leading suspect, thus forcing the police to search elsewhere for the killer. Frank Vosper uses just such a complexity-builder in Murder on the Second Floor and clearly marks the reversal by having his police inspector drag the chief suspect's body out of a hole in the wall and place it in a prominent downstage position in the setting (III.60). Owen Davis seems subtle only by comparison in his indication of reversal:

DIXON. Mack.
MACK. Yes, sir.
DIXON. Take these handcuffs off Mr. Everett (At 9:45, II.65). Subtlety notwithstanding, Davis effectively makes it apparent when the mantle of suspect shifts from one character to another.

Procedurals possess little in the way of either seriousness or magnitude. In the former area, the dramatists actually work to establish the lack of seriousness in their works by emphasizing the routineness of a murder investigation to the police. Most lightness in the dramas, therefore, emanates from the investigating officers, who are desensitized to blood and bodies. If more levity is needed
to emphasize the important game-like rather than real-life nature of a mystery, the writers supply it through an eccentric suspect, as is done in *I Killed the Count*, *Spider's Web*, and *The Hollow*. The authors of procedurals seem even less concerned with magnitude. Police plays only infrequently (*The Creaking Chair*, *The Donovan Affair*) contain gratuitous murders.\(^{20}\) In *At 9:45* the crime may not even be murder, since the fate of the victim is uncertain at the end of the play. Furthermore, even the seriousness of murder comes into question in many of the dramas when the victims are shown to be deserving of death. In *Murder on the Second Floor*, *I Killed the Count*, and *The Unexpected Guest*, the murderers even manage to escape capture, even though one or more innocent characters know the truth. In direct contrast to authors of murder-house mysteries, procedural playwrights disdain magnitude-enhancers and instead seek only to achieve the somewhat limited potential of their materials.

Such restricted potential in procedurals arises from their weakness in the arousal of emotions and a resultant insubstantiality in the catharsis when the limited emotional material expends itself. Since procedurals attempt to conceal the murderer's identity until the closing moments, bafflement should always be present; however, the nature of procedurals severely retards the other characteristic mystery qualities of fear, hate, and suspense. In most procedurals with an early point of attack, no hint of danger exists until the

\(^{20}\) Only in *The Donovan Affair* and *Criminal at Large* does the murder count exceed one; however, suicides and accidental deaths augment the murders in *Criminal at Large*, *Murder on the Second Floor*, *The Hollow*, and *The Unexpected Guest*. 
discovery of a murder. Consequently, fear is not aroused and attendant hate and suspense never materialize. The arrival of the police removes most of the danger resulting from the murder, since the officers of the law presumably have everything under control. Only in those plays in which the killer seems willing to murder again does the author manage to evoke some fear and suspense near the moment of capture, as in *The Hollow*, *Spider's Web*, *Towards Zero*, and *The Unexpected Guest*. In three of the plays, *At 9:15*, *Murder on the Second Floor*, and *I Killed the Count*, the killer avenges an injustice but does not try to kill others to protect his identity. Since such a situation places no one in danger, no fear, hate, or suspense arises. When an author depicts his victim as deserving to die, fear becomes exceedingly difficult to create and hate seems a near impossibility. Aristotle has pointed out that fear arises when someone "like ourselves" faces a fearful or threatening situation. The deserving victims in *At 9:15*, *Murder on the Second Floor*, *I Killed the Count*, and *The Unexpected Guest* are not such characters, but callous, villainous men. Aristotle specifically stated that there is nothing fear-inspiring when "an extremely bad man [is] seen falling from

21 If the murder is committed on stage, fear and suspense arise momentarily, as in *The Hollow*. Christie also evokes suspense in the body-discovery scene in *Towards Zero* by her excruciatingly slow revelation of the victim's identity. Suspense is made possible because of detailed characterizations that have already been presented, which depict the characters as people "like ourselves" who are all undeserving of death.

22 Because the prime suspect (who is not the killer) threatens to kill again in *The Unexpected Guest*, the scene of his struggle and death arouses fear and suspense.
happiness into misery." Actually the death of such an evildoer may create a degree of satisfaction rather than fear. Such is the case in these plays; therefore, fear is impossible, as are hate of the murderers and suspense.

Only in a handful of procedurals do fear, hate, and suspense play a major role in the emotional structure. The Creaking Chair, The Donovan Affair, and Criminal at Large all arouse fear; however, that arousal does not proceed from the police-interrogation scenes. All three dramas depict situations in which a murderer repeatedly attacks people, despite the presence of the often inept police. Fear derives from the obvious danger of the circumstances and may also be enhanced through devices of spectacle, such as secret panels or villainy in the dark. Suspense results from the arousal of fear and is maintained in each drama until the fear dissipates with the death or capture of the murderer. Fear and suspense develop most fully in Criminal at Large because of its relatively early revelation of the killer to the audience. Since the audience knows when the police detective is alone with the actual killer, the level of anxiety or fear runs high. Suspense grows out of the audience's well-founded expectation that the insane killer eventually will attack. Hate presents more of a problem, as it does in most mysteries, since the victims in such works are seldom well developed. In The Donovan Affair...

---

23 Tactics, p. 238.

24 Hate of the murderer is replaced in such plays with a feeling of sympathy toward him. If any suspense results from these dramas, it arises from the fact that the killers, who are "like ourselves," may be caught and punished for their just acts.
and *Criminal at Large*, the initial victims never even appear. Hate is further inhibited by uncertainty as to against whom it should be directed. Although hate, like fear and suspense, can be aroused and eventually can reach its full potential in some procedurals, it too achieves its fullest development in scenes employing features of murder-house plays and does not exist as an inherent quality of the purely procedural formula of mystery playwriting.

As has been noted, character in a play exists for the sake of the plot. The police procedural stands as one of the prime mystery examples of that Aristotelian concept. Police plays using a late point of attack contain the least detailed characterizations. Since the single concern throughout those dramas is discovery of the murderer, agents receive development only insofar as they relate to the solution. Details not bearing on motives or opportunity need not concern the author. His creations do not make moral choices; in fact, they seldom must face expedient ones. Instead, they function only as living, talking clues that lead to the solution of the mystery. Consequently, types are a necessity and are employed with abandon.

Plays with an early beginning in relation to the murder, especially those of Agatha Christie, contain more detail in characterization. Much of that detail exists for the same reason as it does in all mysteries—to establish the characters as candidates for the role of murderer. Nevertheless, characterization may occasionally go beyond that level. In both *The Hollow* and *Towards Zero*, Christie
makes a strong and successful effort to create fully developed characters so that the death of one of them will be perceived as a serious loss, rather than merely as the starting point of a literary puzzle. Similarly, the author creates a serious concern that certain characters "like ourselves" may have committed the crime. Through careful development of character, Christie evokes a degree of fear and possibly even pity for the murderers as well as the victims in those two plays.

No matter how shallow or detailed may be the development of victims and suspects, the police officers in procedurals seldom depart from rigid types. Only Edgar Wallace makes an effort to present his policemen as even remotely complex individuals, an effect that he achieves by depicting the police at headquarters before they are called to investigate a new murder. Even in Wallace's work, however, the typal patterns do not vary. No fewer than two policemen appear in any procedural. The chief investigating officer is a sober man with years of experience. He may be "drily sarcastic" (Unexpected, I.11.20), but ordinarily most humor in procedurals comes from the junior officer, who suffers from such defects as stupidity (The Creaking Chair), a fondness for joking about death (Criminal at Large), or loquaciousness (The Unexpected Guest). If a third officer is used, he either doubles as a foil with the other junior policeman

---

25 In British plays he almost always comes from Scotland Yard, even though the drama may be set far from London. In such instances, he happens to be in the area and decides to offer his assistance (Towards Zero).
(Criminal at Large) or merely ushers suspects on or off stage (At 9:45, I Killed the Count, Towards Zero).

In their employment of typed characters, procedurals correspond closely to murder-house mysteries. A difference in character development exists, however, in the revelation scene. Seldom does the villain in a procedural undergo a radical transformation like that found in murder-house plays. Sometimes the character merely keeps silent until captured and then tells the police what they want to hear. The best example of such a non-change in a killer when his identity becomes known occurs in At 9:45, when the maid confesses as soon as someone asks her (III.11.84-86). In those plays in which the murderer's acts are not portrayed as wrong, he need not transform into a bloodthirsty fiend. Instead, he can be shown to maintain his outward charm as he successfully avoids capture by the police. Even when the murderer is insane, as he is in Criminal at Large and The Hollow, a streak of weakness of will and a hint of insanity have been evident throughout the drama, thus obviating the need for the typical mystery-play schizophrenia in the final scene.

In the area of thought, most procedurals (like all mysteries) resemble their murder-house counterparts in the use of logical, emotional, and ethical proof. Furthermore, procedurals also follow the murder-house pattern of placing emphasis upon a deductive process. The later the point of attack used, the greater role deduction plays in a procedural. Those police dramas that deal almost

26 For a detailed examination of proof, misdirection, and thought in mysteries, see Chapter Two, pp. 99-103.
exclusively with presentation of clues and questioning of witnesses depend upon a deductive process to provide essential interest and to lend cohesion to the episodic interrogations. As noted earlier, something usually can be deduced from the evidence presented in a procedural, although the conclusion reached may not necessarily relate to the identity of the killer. In The Creaking Chair, for instance, the mental process of deduction, as practiced by the chief investigating officer, leads in several instances to the conclusion that one of several likely suspects could not possibly have committed the murder. When the actual moment of revelation comes, an accident traps the killer. Nevertheless, the author tries to maintain a semblance of deduction by having the police detective cite a clue and apparently draw a conclusion, when he is actually making an accusation based upon a discovery by accident. The playwright then further clouds the issue by having the villain, who is supposedly irrefutably trapped by the pseudo-deduction of the detective, freely admit his guilt to the all-too-clever policeman (III.111-12). Wilkes, like other procedural dramatists, seeks to make deductive thought appear to be at work even when it is absent.

Police procedurals offer a moral stance that is less clear-cut than the simple "crime doesn't pay" philosophy of murder-house mysteries. In police drama, the main interest of which lies in the bafflement of the mystery puzzle, the authors often attempt to moralize in the waning moments of their plays. The question of what constitutes justice is handled about more freely and shallowly than in any other mystery-play formula. In procedurals in which the
initial victim deserves to die, the murderer often escapes the clutches of the law. Usually in such plays, the police never unravel the complexities of the case. Occasionally even with the murderer in police custody, an author makes it clear that justice will be served only by rewarding the killer for a job well done. The spirit of vigilantism grows so strong in some procedurals that even an innocent but potentially dangerous character must die. In *The Unexpected Guest*, the mentally deficient young brother is shot in a struggle with the police. Although he has committed no crime, his obvious insanity makes his death "the best way out" for all concerned. When a victim is portrayed as the innocent prey of a crazed killer, the philosophical stance reverts to the more standard, albeit naive, viewpoint that "crime doesn't pay." Even in such instances, villains often argue about extenuating circumstances. In *The Creaking Chair*, for example, an Egyptian assassin passionately speaks against the wholesale theft of Middle Eastern art treasures by unfeeling Westerners. Clearly, dramatists writing procedurals have seen fit to moralize, no matter how extraneous to their mysteries such facile thought may be.

---

27 The police fail in *Murder on the Second Floor*, *I Killed the Count*, and *The Unexpected Guest*.

28 In the concluding lines of *At 9:45*, the victim and his father espouse just such a rewarding of the assailant:

"HOWARD. Help her, father! Help her! . . .
CLAYTON. Captain Dixon, if my son dies, I am going to make it my business to take care of this girl; if he lives, he'll do it himself" (III.11, 85-86).
Such shallow thought is expressed in procedurals through a diction that is more remarkable than in most other types of mystery plays. The uniqueness lies in the specialized vocabulary utilized in procedurals to lend a greater semblance of reality to the police interrogations. To modern (1976) audiences desensitized by repeated exposure to police jargon and the stichomythic question-and-answer scenes of television procedurals like Jack Webb's Dragnet series, the "cop talk" in early procedurals may seem rather ordinary. At the time of its initial appearance, however, such diction was new and startling. It aided the plays in depicting the seamy, unknown world of policemen and criminals. The pulp-fiction-style prose of stage procedurals includes such phrases and sentences as "We've sweated all the servants," "grilled him," "cop," "roundman," "on the bum," "creak," "beat it," "frame-up," "third degree," "come clean," "shoot [i.e., tell me]," "spill it," "doped it out," and "fall guy" (Creaking, II.64; III.110; At 945, I.1.19, 21; II.42; II.55, 57, 59, 61; III.71). When not employing such a specialized vocabulary in the rapidly alternating questions and answers of the interrogation scenes, procedurals offer nothing extraordinary in the treatment of diction.

Unlike diction, spectacle and sound play roles in procedurals that are greatly reduced from their pre-eminent positions in murder-house mysteries. The most noteworthy aspect of setting is that the nature of procedurals calls for multiple locales, but the limitations of the stage ordinarily force the plays into single settings. Because few procedurals keep the police on stage throughout the play's action, a second locale for discussions by the suspects would prove
beneficial. Such multiple settings are employed effectively in *At 9:45*, *Murder on the Second Floor*, and *Criminal at Large*. The more typical single setting necessitates the invention of artificial reasons for getting the police out of the room while the suspects discuss the investigation. The scenes of plays with only one setting usually take place in an all-purpose locale such as a living or drawing room (*The Creaking Chair*, *Murder on the Second Floor*, *I Killed the Count*, *The Hollow*, *Spider’s Web*, *Towards Zero*). Procedural authors also employ libraries or studies (*At 9:45*, *The Donovan Affair*, *The Unexpected Guest*) and even the hall of a priory (*Criminal at Large*) for their police investigations. Occasionally the settings of such rooms show the influence of murder-house decor; dark corners, secret compartments, hidden doors, and secret panels (*The Creaking Chair*, *Criminal at Large*, *Spider’s Web*) are not uncommon. More often authors indicate that rooms be "handsome" (*Donovan*, I,7; *At 9:45*, I,1,5) or "furnished with taste" (*Hollow*, I,1). Only in the rarest instances do the police conduct any of the detective work at

---

29 An example of the absurdity of forcing a procedural into a single set occurs in *I Killed the Count*. Throughout most of the play, the suspects are kept under guard in rooms well away from the site of the investigation. As the climactic moment approaches, however, the police bring them all into the main room. Then the police are suddenly called out of the room for a pointless reason, thereby allowing the plotters to discuss their crime on stage. The problem becomes even more apparent when the next scene calls for the police to confront yet another witness alone: the officers must request that the other suspects step into another room for a moment (III,83-91).
headquarters (Criminal at Large); the lair of the police serves as a stronger suggestive force than as something actually seen.

Sound and lighting play only minor roles in all but those few procedurals that possess murder-house characteristics. The Creaking Chair, the police play most dependent on sound effects, offers assorted noises that rival the suggestive sounds of The Cat and the Canary; the repertory of effects includes a squeaking wheelchair, clicks, sharp snaps, thunder, creaks, and a "low monotonous wailing accompanied by the thumping of a tom-tom" (I.14, 44; II.82). Other procedurals simplify their use of aural effects, which consist mostly of gunshots (Donovan, II.54), thunderstorms (Hollow, III.85), and off-stage antics by escaping killers (Zero, III.11.80). Lighting, when used in a noteworthy way, consists mostly of the standard mystery

30 Headquarters is spoken of as being a place where unknown peril awaits guilty and innocent alike. Almost every procedural contains the obligatory threat to the uncooperative witness that he be taken to headquarters for more intensive questioning. The following examples indicate the sameness of this standard feature from one procedural to another:

"Well, Daly, are you going to come clean or do you want a little ride in the wagon? . . . They'll finish with you down at headquarters" (At 9:45, II.57).

"You wait till I get you to the station. I'll teach you to respect the law" (Creaking, II.78).

"KILLIAN. Now please don't force me to extreme measures, Miss Rankin.
JEAN. Extreme measures?
KILLIAN. Answer me or I'll have you sent down to the station house" (Donovan, I.20).

"You'd better remember, or I'll send you somewhere where they'll cultivate your memory" (Donovan, II.47).

"Suppose I was to hold you as accessories and take you down to the station--tonight?" (Criminal, II.11.68).
device of villainy in the dark. People are shot (The Creaking Chair), stabbed (The Donovan Affair), or strangled (Criminal at Large) under the cover of darkness. Occasionally criminals steal a valuable artifact (The Creaking Chair) or a significant piece of evidence (The Donovan Affair) during a blackout. Further use of lighting consists of enhancing the sound-effects of a storm with simulated lightning bolts (The Creaking Chair, The Hollow). In most procedurals, however, such visual and aural enhancement bears scant significance to the solution of the mystery and to the maintenance of interest. With its emphasis upon verbal interrogation and apparent deduction, the police procedural emerges as the mystery formula least dependent upon extensive sound and spectacle.

Those qualities of the procedural formula that make it distinct from murder-house plays and all other types of mystery dramas can now be stated succinctly. The procedural focuses on a murder investigation conducted at the scene of the crime by two or more police officers, whose honesty and innocence are above question. Suspects and witnesses are confined or watched closely by the police until the murder is solved or until the police are foiled.

Both early and late points of attack are used. When a play utilizes a late attack, it consists almost entirely of police interrogations. An early point of attack, on the other hand, allows for more detailed characterization of both victims and suspects before the commencement of the investigation. Whether the procedural sections occupy the entirety of a drama or only a fraction of it,
such scenes of police activity depict the gathering of concrete clues and testimony from which a detective (a policeman or an interested amateur) deduces either who committed the murder or who among the suspects could not have done the deed. Authors often rely upon such typical mystery features as a least likely person, an insane killer, a self-incrimination, or a lengthy curtain speech in the solution scenes to such plays.

The standard ingredients of police melodramas create both assets and problems. One of the great shortcomings of a procedural is its inherently episodic nature, which results from an emphasis upon haphazard interrogations of witnesses. On the positive side, a police drama with an early point of attack possesses the intrinsic advantage of plot complexity, a feature more prevalent in all procedurals than in murder-house plays. Treatment of the material is seldom serious; the authors even include comic suspects and ridiculous police to ensure against a too serious air in their plays. The magnitude of the material is seldom great, and the authors do little to heighten the complexity of their mystery problems. Since fear, hate, and suspense are difficult to maintain in a purely procedural format, emotional arousal consists almost exclusively of bafflement.

Characterization may be fully developed in some procedurals, but more often characters evolve only as far as their roles in the murder under investigation demand. Thought consists primarily of the deductive (or seemingly deductive) process, although many procedurals discuss the subject of justice and vigilantism tangentially. Diction is noteworthy for its use of slang vocabulary associated
with police investigation. The action does not turn on sound and spectacle in the procedural scenes. For the most part, the police drama eschews visual and dramatic materials and emphasizes verbal and ratiocinative ingredients, which makes the procedural a closer relative to its narrative counterpart, the detective story, than is the more spectacle-filled murder-house mystery.
CHAPTER FOUR

PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS

A third major formula for confined mysteries relegates the search for the solution of a crime to a position of secondary importance. A detailed portrayal of a character's psychological collapse, which is precipitated by his commission of a crime, dominates the mystery puzzle in these plays. The mystery questions of such dramas ask, "How will the minds of these people be affected by their contact with a crime?" rather than pose the more standard query of "Who done it?" Plays written according to this formula first appeared in the late 1920's and were termed "psychological thrillers." Although many earlier mysteries employed insanity or the effects of fear upon mental acuity, no mystery play before Patrick Hamilton's 1929 success, Rope [Rope's End in the United States], portrayed psychological deterioration of the villains and let that psychological emphasis overshadow concern for a solution to the mystery. Three years after Hamilton's initial thriller, J. B. Priestley offered a

---

1 The authors of the plays applied the name "psychological" to their works. See Reginald Denham's comments on the plays of the 1920's and 1930's quoted in Stanley Richards, ed., 10 Classic Mystery and Suspense Plays (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1973), pp. ix-xi.

2 Patrick Hamilton, Rope; or, Rope's End (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1930). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 271-73.
subtle approach to psychological thrillers with his first solo effort for the stage, Dangerous Corner. \(^3\) Since the appearance of such early attempts, psychological thrillers have remained a dominant force in the field of stage mysteries. They have more recently been represented on stage by William Archibald's The Innocents, \(^4\) a ghost mystery that relies heavily upon the effects of fear upon the mind, and Sleuth, \(^5\) a tongue-in-cheek attempt to revamp the aging formula. In the latter play, author Anthony Shaffer created a theretofore nonexistent balance in thrillers by adding an emphasis upon bafflement to the formula.

Compared to previous formulas, the beginning of a psychological thriller contains a lesser exposition of details of the crime and a correspondingly greater degree of character development. One factor that makes such an approach possible arises from the subordinate importance of the crime. Details are not essentials because the crime itself is not of paramount concern. Furthermore, the relatively small number of characters in these plays \(^6\) permits greater

\(^3\) J. B. Priestley, Dangerous Corner, in Best Mystery and Suspense Plays of the Modern Theatre, ed. Stanley Richards (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1971). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 270-71.

\(^4\) The Innocents is discussed in Chapter Six as a ghost-play variation on the psychological-thriller formula. See pp. 196-205.

\(^5\) Anthony Shaffer, Sleuth, in Best Mystery and Suspense Plays of the Modern Theatre, ed. Stanley Richards (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1971). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 273-74.

\(^6\) The number of characters ranges from two in Sleuth to eight in Rope.
development than is possible in such a character-laden formula as
the murder-house mystery. In each of these plays the first scene
merely establishes the characters' dispositions or mental states be-
fore any psychological effects of a crime begin to cause changes.
Authors usually handle such initial scenes at a leisurely pace. For
example, the first minutes of Sleuth consist of witty verbal sparring
that helps to establish characterization of the two opponents, Milo
and Andrew, but does not hint at the approaching violence.

Similarly, the middle of each of these thrillers presents few
clues and abounds instead in slow alterations in character. In Rope
the author includes an occasional clue, such as an incriminating
movie ticket, in order to hinder the killers' plans for a perfect
crime. Character qualities and changes in character, however, create
most of the complication for the villains. Their plan first weakens
when the leader, Brandon, attempts to bolster his facade of confidence
in his partner Granillo's view by daringly speaking of bones in chests
at the very moment that the two killers and their dinner guests are
eating off a chest containing the victim's body. While Brandon's
seeming confidence may enhance Granillo's image of him, it also
arouses the curiosity of Rupert, the play's functional detective.
Nevertheless, such talk would not be sufficient to precipitate the
villains' downfall without erosions in their confidence. Their in-
creasingly nervous reactions to Rupert's joking questions only kindle
his curiosity. As his inquiries become more serious and probing, the
murderers begin to lose control, thus assuring their failure.
Braggadocio and a single piece of evidence (the ticket) coupled with the unstable characters of the killers set in motion a series of events and questions that make the villains' capture inevitable.

Development of the plot in *Dangerous Corner* differs from that of *Rope* in that many details from the night of the crime are provided. Nevertheless, those facts do not function as clues, because almost all such revelations are explained when first presented rather than being left unanswered until a final solution scene. Instead, the facts serve to reveal the lives and characters both of the people offering the details and of the persons hearing them for the first time.  

Although much of the complication in *Sleuth* arises from its many major discoveries and reversals, a nearly equal amount of its development derives in typical psychological-thriller fashion from depiction of changes in character. The first act consists chiefly of a single lengthy transformation of Milo's mental state by his tormentor, Andrew. In the second act focus shifts to Andrew, whose alteration is effected in a series of mental games played on him by his first-act victim. Whether an alteration of character comprises most of the development, as it does in *Rope*, or only a portion of it, as in *Sleuth*, the middle of a psychological thriller must contain a detailed portrayal of character change so as to prepare for the character's collapse in the end or solution scene.

---

7That such information is not included solely for the purpose of solving the mystery is further substantiated by the fact that the information continues to be presented long after the murderer has confessed.
The ending of a psychological thriller grows out of character development as much as do its beginning and middle. The downfall of the central character (usually but not always a villain) results from either the collapse of his mind under pressure or his misjudgment of the character of others. Patrick Hamilton's killers suffer both misfortunes. As noted earlier, even the self-assured Brandon falls apart as Rupert shows his understanding of the murder scheme. Similarly, Brandon misreads Rupert as an inferior but kindred mind who would concur with a great adventure in murder for murder's sake. Brandon so wrongly interprets the situation at the end of the play that he permits Rupert to see the body and then rather confidently explains why Rupert must not tell the police. Brandon seems genuinely awestruck when Rupert, quite literally, blows the whistle on him (III.89-90).

J. B. Priestley uses a two-level mystery in Dangerous Corner, which somewhat alters his approach to the solution. Not only does this play, like all psychological thrillers, ponder the effect of crime on the minds of its characters, but it also poses the standard mystery question, "Who done it?" Clearly the less important question is the latter, and it is handled in typical mystery fashion through self-confession by the killer. The relative insignificance of that part of the ending can be seen in its position in the play: the confession comes at the beginning of the final act. Most of the remainder of the play shows the effect of that disclosure upon the individuals and particularly upon Robert, the chief investigator.
Only with his detailing of Robert’s reactions does the author provide his final answer to the question of how well the characters will withstand the pressures resulting from the crime.

Because Shaffer uses a pattern of interlocking mystery questions and resolutions in addition to a psychological concern, *Sleuth* contains a multelty of solutions, each of which is a major discovery that precipitates a reversal. Out of each reversal, a new mystery question arises. For example, at one point in the second act the primary concern involves ascertaining what happened to Milo. The answer to that question (that Milo is alive and seeking revenge) precipitates a reversal in fortune for Andrew. The mystery question then becomes "How will Andrew be able to save himself from Milo?" The pattern of question-discovery (solution)-reversal-new question continues until the final answer occurs seconds before the end of the play. The methods of solution read like a listing in a "how to" book for mystery writers: Shaffer includes confession, inadvertent self-revelation, deduction from clues, and character-centered solutions. The final and ultimately most important question has its answer arising out of depiction of character, as befits a play of the psychological school. The question concerns whether Milo is lying about having gone to the police; Andrew must assess Milo's ability to lie and then must act accordingly. Andrew misjudges Milo for two reasons: he does not realize how strongly his first-act tormenting has altered Milo’s character, and he does not perceive his own state of agitation over Milo’s taunting, which has impaired
Andrew's normally sharp insight into human character. Andrew guesses that Milo is lying, shoots him, and then cries in despair as the police arrive moments later. By enabling Milo to lie convincingly to the once-perceptive Andrew, the author not only provides an answer to the final mystery question but also reveals just how the two men have changed as a result of their mutual cruelty. Even in as radically different a play as Sleuth, therefore, the effect of character change plays a significant role in the ending, as it should in all psychological thrillers.

Almost as striking an aspect of plot in psychological mysteries is the remarkable degree of unity found in these plays. Most unity problems in mysteries result from inherently episodic devices such as presentation of clues and interrogation of witnesses. By diminishing the importance of clues and testimony, psychological thrillers remove those intrinsic blocks to unity. Even more importantly, these dramas concentrate upon a distinct cause-and-effect situation, the deterioration of character as a result of stress following a crime. Dangerous Corner illustrates that causal pattern clearly. The premise of the play is that a single remark can set a chain of events in motion. Priestley depicts how a comment about a music box leads to more remarks on a different subject, a suicide. As friends of the deceased remember the circumstances of his death, they are led to make startling revelations. Those disclosures bring about severe alterations in character, which in turn result in a murder confession, more revelations, more character change, and a
final suicide. None of the links in the chain can be removed or even rearranged without disrupting the pattern that Priestley indicates leads inexorably toward death. Through such careful linkage of events and development of the probability and necessity that those events will turn out as they do, Priestley creates a rarity among mysteries—a well unified play.

Although psychological thrillers differ from most other mysteries in the matter of unity, they display no uniqueness in their lack of complexity. Like many other mysteries, these dramas are essentially simple, with their emphasis placed upon suffering, or the thoughts and feelings of the characters. Most psychological thrillers lack the major discoveries and reversals that lend a play complexity. Generally, the only reversals occur near the ends of the plays, as is typical of many other types of mystery dramas. In Rope, for example, Rupert reappears just at the moment that the two killers believe their plan has succeeded. His late reappearance represents a discovery to Brandon and Granillo and precipitates a reversal of their fortunes. The same late discovery and attendant reversal can also be found in Dangerous Corner, in which a quest for information reveals that the

8 In an epilogue Priestley changes a single incident. A character gets music on the radio (III.733), and the dancing that follows obliterates all thought of the remark about the music box. The chain is destroyed and a suicide avoided.

Priestley's manipulation of time anticipates his "time plays," which began to appear in 1937 with Time and the Conways. In those later dramas Priestley employed J. W. Dunne's theory of Serialism, "the curious feeling which almost everyone has now and then experienced—that sudden, fleeting, disturbing conviction that something which is happening at the moment happened before." See Richards, ed., Best Mystery, p. 672.
deceased did not commit suicide but was murdered instead. While their discovery-reversal patterns lend Rope and Dangerous Corner some complexity, such late attempts suffer from the faults noted in connection with murder-house mysteries. Furthermore, the progressive deterioration of the characters under stress never undergoes a reversal. The movement toward collapse begins quite early in the action and continues steadily throughout each drama. Therefore, as psychological thrillers, these plays are extraordinarily simple.

None of the above observations holds true for Sleuth, which is one of the most complex of all mystery plays. The Shaffer drama contains eight major discovery-reversals, seven of them coming in the second act. Nevertheless, the revisions Shaffer makes in the psychological formula lend credence to the previously stated observation that simplicity works best in psychological thrillers. The complexity of Sleuth detracts from its study of character by providing an appealing adjunct, a puzzling and even confusing series of mystery problems. The more complex the play becomes, the greater is its bafflement, thus taking much of the focus from the character exploration aspect. Consequently, the same engrossingly complex turns of plot that make Sleuth an exciting piece of mystery theatre also serve to weaken it as a psychological thriller.

9See Chapter Two, pp. 73-75.

10In Rope Granillo has already begun to feel stress when the play begins. He is never depicted as calm and sure of his safety.
Sleuth also differs from older psychological-formula plays in the area of seriousness. While the mystery aspect of each thriller must remain, as in all mysteries, only seemingly serious, the psychological study receives a more sober treatment in most of these plays. Rope goes so far in that direction without much relief through humor\(^\text{11}\) that critics at the time of its premiere dubbed it "disgusting" in comparison with the less serious mysteries of its day.\(^\text{12}\) While not as suggestively gruesome, Dangerous Corner takes a similarly serious look at the problems attendant upon delving too deeply into the past. Priestley avoids even a suggestion of humor, which might seem to dilute the loftiness of his character study. Conversely, Shaffer begins Sleuth by emphasizing the game-like nature of the mystery format, a factor that the authors of most psychological thrillers appear to find only marginally tolerable. He then proceeds to subordinate the seriousness of his psychological study.

The only attempts at humor in Rope are, like the rest of the play, rather macabre. For example, the entire episode of eating dinner off the top of a chest in which a body has been hidden is treated as a joke by the murderers. Black-comic double-entendres also can be found. The following exchange about the boy, whose murder has not yet been discovered, takes place between one of the killers and a guest:

"BRANDON. As a matter of fact, he's the living image of yourself. . . .
RAGLAN. Me? In what way?
BRANDON. Oh, in every way. Same age. Same height. Same colour. Same sweet and refreshing innocence.
RAGLAN. Oh, shut up. I'm not an athlete, anyway.
BRANDON. No. But you're just as much alive. In fact, more so" (I.25).

Hamilton notes the reaction of critics in his "Preface on Thrillers," which appears in the published edition of Rope, pp. vii-ix.
not only to that game-like quality but also to comic dialogue, such as the following witty banter:

ANDREW. Basically the firm of Prurient and Pry Ltd., whom you and Marguerite have seen fit to employ. Don't look so innocent. Those Woodbine-stained private detectives who've been camping outside Tma's flat for the last week.

MILO. So you spotted them?

ANDREW. A Bantu with glaucoma couldn't have missed them. No one can read the Evening News for four hours in a Messerschmitt bubble car, and expect to remain undetected (1.211).

Unlike his predecessors, Shaffer uses humor liberally to point the absence of serious intent in his play. While earlier authors attempted to impose their serious studies of character upon a form patently lacking in seriousness, Shaffer recognizes the limitations of that form and works skillfully within them.

In the area of emotions that the plays arouse, psychological thrillers obviously depend less upon bafflement than is characteristic for mystery dramas. Again Sleuth proves to be an exception. In these dramas dealing with mental collapse under pressure, most of the stress takes the form of fear or hate. Rope offers a maximum amount of those emotions with an accompanying dose of suspense. The first moments of the drama establish the probability of fearful incidents through the use of low light-levels and ominous talk of bodies and murder. Fear grows steadily after the sympathetic characters (that is, all except the murderers) are introduced into the room in which the victim was tortured and slain. Both fear and suspense increase as the detective, Rupert, becomes more likeable or "like ourselves" and as the villains' perceptions of his awareness of their
crime increase. Hate for the killers builds concomitant with the arousal of fear and suspense. The inverted form of this play\(^\text{13}\) allows for an early revelation of the murderers' identities and permits the author to identify clearly the objects of hatred, thereby making arousal of that emotion easier than in other mystery formulas. The advantages of inversion in the creation of hate are balanced by an almost total loss of bafflement, but in psychological thrillers an absence of baffling materials is not nearly so important as in most other mysteries. In fact, it may even be an advantage, since the audience can devote its full attention to character deterioration when it is not pondering "Who done it?"

_Dangerous Corner_ differs somewhat from _Rope_ in its emotional makeup. Because the story does not take an inverted form, a modicum of bafflement exists. Nevertheless, it has only minimal importance in maintaining the play's interest, since bafflement is dispelled early in the third act long before other emotional material is relieved. Hate and suspense play an even less significant part in Priestley's melodrama because the author provides no object of hate, no villain, and no anticipation of danger. Even the so-called murderer elicits sympathy when she reveals that she accidentally killed the victim while fighting off his attempt to rape her. Priestley concentrates instead on fear. His version of fear subtly departs

\[^{13}\text{Inverted mysteries disclose the villain's identity at their outset and place emphasis upon how the culprit will be caught by the detective. For a complete exploration of the inverted formula, see Chapter Five, pp. 171-81.}\]
from the variety found in most mysteries, in which physical danger arouses the emotion. Fear has its basis in this play in the mental dangers facing the characters as they uncover old secrets. Although the fearful incidents are mental and interior rather than physical and visible, they pose no less a threat to the characters' well-being. Fear mounts for all individuals in the play until each reveals his worst secrets and suffers from the mental strain.

Sleuth departs from the patterns of its predecessors in its use of excessive bafflement, while it maintains fear and hate as well. The latter emotions develop gradually as detailed characterizations emerge. From the outset Andrew acts pompous, over-confident, and overbearing. When Shaffer adds malevolence to the recipe, Andrew becomes an object of hatred. Conversely, Milo cannot hope to match wits with his formidable adversary. Placing such an ineffectual but ingenuous young man in danger for his life arouses fear. With Milo's apparent death at the end of the first act, danger is removed and fear disappears along with it, but hatred of Andrew continues to grow. The later discovery that Milo was only tormented and not killed fails to diminish that hate. The remainder of the play merely depicts Andrew's deserved repayment in kind. Although hate figures prominently in both acts of this thriller, bafflement overshadows it in the second half of the play. The complex and complicated series of mystery questions, discoveries, and reversals effectively arouses bafflement. The play's complexity offers more than mere confusion; it allows for unique arousal and relief of bafflement. The highly
repetitive pattern has something of a quantum effect, in which baffle­ment is constantly aroused and then satisfied by a solution to each mini-mystery. While a number of separate puzzling situations arise, they come so fast and so often that they maintain an appearance of constant bafflement. In his integration of bafflement into a type of mystery that usually relies upon fear, Shaffer demonstrates his ability to inject new vitality and variety into one of the essentially rigid mystery formulas. 14

In virtually all areas of the preceding discussion of plot, character figured prominently. Realizing the particular significance of character in these thrillers, the authors have often sought innovation in their approaches to its revelation. Hamilton shows particular originality in his presentation of character in Rope. Much of his inventiveness comes in the way he creates the all-important first impression of the villains. Instead of showing the killers from the beginning and giving them tangible human form, he provides only their voices and the silhouettes of their figures. As the villains frankly discuss a cold-blooded murder, their voices create vivid impressions of two almost inhuman killers. Only after establishing their monstrous, villainous qualities does the author give them visible human forms. The supporting roles in the play are drawn to type, as is standard in mystery plays, but Hamilton again makes novel use even of such characters. He conceals his other major character, the

14 Shaffer is not alone in his desire to alter the standard formulas. Examples of variations on the established patterns are examined in the sixth and seventh chapters.
functional detective Rupert, among the typed minor figures, thereby creating a false initial impression that Rupert adheres to type and is as vapid, bored, and insensitive as the characters with whom he is grouped. Only as Rupert reveals more of his real character does it become apparent that he belongs instead in a separate class as a more than worthy adversary for the murderers. In Dangerous Corner character revelation consists primarily of directly depicting the changes people undergo as they uncover secrets about their past lives. More remarkable is Priestley's evocation of the unseen victim, Martin, whose character unfolds in minute detail through not only what people say about him but also in the subtly differing perceptions of him by his friends, lovers, and enemies. His appearance, habits, and tastes all become well established during the course of the play. In Sleuth, the thriller with the least remarkable treatment of character, all of the first act except for its closing moments consists of a leisurely presentation of the characters of Milo and Andrew. The last scene of the act then depicts another essential feature of character in psychological thrillers—a change from one mental state to another.

Character change in psychological plays is virtually synonymous with deterioration. Probably most typical of the plays under examination is Rope, in which not every character changes and not all alterations are for the worse. The typed characters seem oblivious to the forces at work around them. They know nothing of the murder and do not readily perceive obvious changes in the behavior of major
characters. The villains, however, follow a pattern of deterioration and collapse that is standard for central characters in psychological thrillers. Granillo's destruction is the more overt. He first appears in a state of nervousness and reduces to one of panic in which he utters "a horrible, shuddering, muffled scream" (II.51). Moments before he reverts to a catatonic silence, he starts in horror, makes "terrible, piercing, falsetto" screams and groans, staggers around the room, and then gives in to a "low, long-drawn-out, shuddering sob" (III.81). Hamilton handles Brandon's decline with greater finesse. While Brandon makes occasional overt responses, such as a display of tension by banging on the trunk when he feels "sudden terrible rage" (II.55), most of the time he retains at least a veneer of confidence. His deterioration is demonstrated subtly through his increasingly impaired judgment, which causes him to make grave misreadings of Rupert as the plight worsens. The alteration in Rupert himself does not represent so much an actual change as it does an emergence of his true character. As noted earlier, only as the play progresses does he overcome the false, typed impression and emerge as his noble, intelligent, heroic self. He allows his real personality to show completely only with his final denunciation speech, when he is seen "suddenly letting himself go---a thing he has not done all evening, and which he now does with tremendous force, and clear, angry articulation" (III.89). Rupert's repression of his aggressive, positive personality enables him to fool Brandon completely and lead him into entrapment.
Change in both Dangerous Corner and Sleuth differs from the typical psychological-thriller pattern in that it is unidirectional: all characters deteriorate. In the Priestley play variety appears only as a matter of degree. The secondary figures suffer only minor embarrassments or momentary depressions. While the experience alters all of them, they seem capable of living with their new discoveries. One person's collapse, however, is total: Robert, the man who forces the investigation to the limits, cannot bear up under the anguish of what he has learned. At the end of the play, hecatalogues the many changes in his world, which he perceives as being in utter disrepair. His anticlimactic and ambiguous suicide only calls attention theatrically to an established fact: Robert has destroyed himself. Sleuth portrays a two-fold deterioration not unlike those of the murderers in Rope. In the Hamilton drama, however, the declines are simultaneous, whereas Sleuth shows the collapse of one character in the first act and that of the other man in the last half of the play. Andrew destroys Milo in the opening act. The younger man allows himself to be treated foolishly, dressed like a clown, and mentally tortured unmercifully. Before he "dies" in a mock shooting, he shudders spasmodically, shakes with fear, and screams for quarter in a high falsetto voice (I.232-33). Even though he is resurrected in the next act, the old Milo is dead. The new, post-deterioration man exhibits a shrewdness and callousness that were alien to his former self; revenge becomes his sole ambition. When he gets that revenge even at the cost of his own life, he manages to smile triumphantly (II.262).
Andrew's second-act decline is considerably slower than Milo's, as Andrew fluctuates between moments of nervousness or panic followed by periods of stability. Nevertheless, the effect is the same: each man destroys the mental balance of the other. In Andrew's deterioration, however, Shaffer adds a touch of irony in that the man who effects that destruction is not the one whom Andrew tortured but the one he created through his tormenting.

As in other aspects of these psychological thrillers, their thought differs considerably in content from that in the previously discussed confined-mystery formulas. Deduction plays a greatly reduced role; in Dangerous Corner it is almost nonexistent, while in Rope and Sleuth deductive processes occupy only small parts of the plays' total actions. Like murder-house mysteries and procedurals, however, these thrillers often contain brief but supposedly serious discussions of weighty subjects that are only tangentially related to the mysteries. Hamilton manages to tie his deviations from the course of the action more closely to the central concern of his play than do most mystery dramatists. Although he provides discourses on such subjects as the value of human life, the morality of murder, and the fairness of capital punishment, he usually depicts such thought as being glib and shallow. The purpose of such patently superficial thought lies in the play's all-important facet of a misreading of Rupert's character. He freely engages in vapid, pseudo-intellectual banter, often with minor characters like Leila and Raglan. Consequently, he seems, like them, rather foolish, immature, and
ineffectual. Brandon's error lies in this area of thought—he mis­
takes Rupert's harmless, frankly shallow speechmaking as a true indi­
cation of his character and believes that comments made during dinner
reveal how Rupert would act when faced with a moral dilemma. Un­
fortunately for Brandon, nothing could be farther from the truth.
J. B. Priestley works in more typical mystery fashion by imposing
some of his own special interests on Dangerous Corner. He includes
such pet topics as time bending, the efficacy of truth, getting past
obstacles in life, and the shallowness of one man's knowledge of
another. Happily, Anthony Shaffer avoids all such pseudo-serious
discussion in Sleuth.

These psychological mysteries serve as excellent examples of
works in which the entirety of the drama is required to express their
thought. The three dramas fully depict the results of stress upon
the mind, and all come to the same conclusion—that stress leads to
deterioration and collapse. The same idea occasionally appears in
plays not of the psychological school; Owen Davis's murder-house
mystery, The Ninth Guest, makes such a case. The difference lies in
the fact that Davis treats the effects of stress superficially and
chiefly through typically tangential discussions. When the topic of
stress resulting from a criminal act becomes the driving concern of
an entire work, however, the drama begins to move in the direction of
the psychological-thriller formula.

Diction, the vehicle for that thought, is striking in psy­
chological thrillers because of a degree of sophistication in its
use. In *Dangerous Corner* Priestley depends upon his ability with language to create desired effects. Since he does not employ the typical mystery fear-builders of suggestive sound and spectacle, *Dangerous Corner* relies upon its polished sentences for much of its appeal. Priestley's experience as a novelist surely aided him in his ability to write graceful prose for his early stage effort. Shaffer matches Priestley's control of language with his aforementioned masterful handling of verbal wit. Not only does the dialogue serve the welcome function of lightening what could easily become a rather gruesome study in human torment, but it also works as a key indicator of a character's control. The more sure an individual is of himself, the greater is his command of a witty turn of phrase. Consequently, Andrew moves from his early verbal gymnastics to wearisome, humorless pleading. Milo on the other hand leaves his reticence and banality behind after the first act and demonstrates a new-found command of diction as he begins to dominate Andrew. In *Rope* Hamilton employs diction as a primary means of identifying his typed characters and of indicating which characters belong to the same type. The bored, disinterested young people speak in a fashion befitting their vacuity. Hamilton describes Leila's speech in the following manner:

She has a fairly good stock of rather *outre* words which she brings out with a rather comic emphasis, . . . as though she doesn't mean what she is saying. In this way she never actually commits herself to any emotion or feeling, and might even be thought deep. But she is not (I.26).

Hamilton then gives similar language to Rupert; he is enormously affected in speech. . . . He brings his words out not only as though he is infinitely weary of all things, but also as though articulation is causing him some definite
physical pain which he is trying to circumvent. . . . His sentences are often involved, but nearly always syntactically complete (1,31).

By linking Rupert to Leila through a similarity in diction, the author subtly furthers his efforts to disguise his functional detective and put the murderers off guard. Like Priestley and Shaffer, Hamilton demonstrates both greater concern and skill in the treatment of diction than do most mystery dramatists.

As might be expected in a formula characterized by departures from strict guidelines, sound and spectacle in psychological thrillers exhibit a variety that makes generalization about these aspects difficult. As already observed, Dangerous Corner makes scant use of either sound or spectacle in typical fashion for mysteries, but Priestley does not neglect the traditional devices in Dangerous Corner out of ignorance of them. In fact, he signals his awareness of them early in the play. After a few minutes of incidental conversation by the ladies in the play, Priestley contrives to have the stage in "complete darkness, except for the moonlight which silhouettes the four women against the window." In the moment of darkness someone fires a revolver, which causes the women to scream (1,679-80). What at first appears to be a typical initial murder in a stage mystery proves moments later merely to be men taking target practice. From that point until the repetition of that scene in the epilogue, guns remain silent and light-levels high. In so acknowledging the more traditional uses of sound and spectacle in mysteries and then ignoring them, Priestley effectively indicates his disdain for such unsubtle enhancements.
Sound and spectacle play a more central role in *Sleuth*. Shaffer provides some typical off-stage suggestions of objects through the use of the two production elements. The most noteworthy example entails the combination of the sounds of a car, pulsating blue lights, ringing doorbells, and loud knocking on a door to create the effect of the arrival of the police (II.262). Scenically the house and its furnishings, including dozens of complicated games and puzzles, function to emphasize the game-like nature of the battle between Andrew and Milo. The author also brings visible violence into his version of the mystery play, a form that ordinarily covers gunshots and death with darkness. Shots are fired in full view of the audience; objects explode or characters bleed profusely upon impact of the bullets. Milo's first-act "death" is particularly gruesome: Andrew places a gun at the victim's head, pulls the trigger slowly, and watches the body fall backward down the stairs (I.233). Disguise, both visually and vocally, also figures prominently in the play. The makeup artist has the problem of transforming Milo into a taller, heavier, balder, and totally unrecognizable character for his surprising reincarnation in the second act. The actor playing Milo has an even greater challenge. Not only must he develop a similarly undetectable voice to match his new persona, but he must also supply two other distinct, unrecognizable voices that he uses off stage. In both visual and vocal disguise, the effects cannot merely be performed; they must be executed skillfully, so as to make the disguises effective.

In *Rope* Hamilton relies extensively upon sound and spectacle, but his effects fall along more traditional, suggestive lines than
the concrete, visible representations of Sleuth. The keynote for the use of sound in Rope is a subtle build in intensity. When the play begins, activity from the two killers can be faintly seen, but "The silence is complete" (I.13). The first human sounds heard are occasional exclamations and unanswered questions uttered by the murderers. When conversation finally begins, it is punctuated with frequent pauses, periods of "tense stillness" (I.16), and moments of silence in which a box of matches can be heard "rattling in the air" (I.14). As more characters arrive on stage, conversation increases and the quiet moments become infrequent. The author then supplies a gentle rainfall, which builds in intensity as the problems of the villains mount. The culmination of the increase in sound comes with the final retributive whistle blasts used by Rupert to signal the police.

Spectacle functions in a similarly important fashion. The "faintly bizarre" setting (I.13) suggests the warped personalities of the murderers. Suggestion comes even more strongly into play in Hamilton's masterstroke of using the body-concealing chest as a dining table. While the chest itself is not intrinsically horrifying, it evokes a macabre feeling when the guests eat a meal on it. Lighting in the play features the overworked but effective evil-in-the-dark approach. The thriller opens with the prolonged dark scene during which the villains complete their hiding of the corpse and review the details of their successful exercise in mayhem. Not only does the combination of darkness and talk of callous homicide readily establish the probability of more fearful incidents, but it also
firmly associates death and darkness in the minds of the killers. In the many scenes in the dark that follow, the murderers' thoughts always revert to death. Even the usually controlled Brandon grows tense and easily excitable when the lights are turned out and his mind wanders to thoughts of the corpse in the chest. Consequently, the dark scenes contribute to the mental collapse of the killers. Without blood, bullets, or exploding vases, Hamilton successfully uses suggestion through spectacle to enhance greatly the quality of fearfulness in his study of psychological deterioration. Whether an author employs such traditional suggestiveness or Shaffer's newer emphasis on visible violence or Priestley's toying with overused mystery techniques, sound and spectacle play a significant, though sometimes restricted, role in these character-centered plays.

This analysis of three psychological thrillers has revealed the formula to be one allowing considerably more variation than is found in most mystery plays. Nevertheless, the broad restrictions of the formula are clear. All these plays, which portray the detrimental effects of crime upon individual psyches, emphasize character while diminishing the importance of the mystery aspect itself. The beginnings of the plays introduce extensive character development; alterations in character occupy the middle of the plays; and the resolution scenes portray the final effects of stress upon the characters. Unity of action is much more typical in these plays than in most mystery formulas, since the action ordinarily depicts a cause-to-effect relationship between the distressing incidents portrayed and the mental collapse of one or more characters. Simplicity in
plot seems most desirable because complexity tends to increase perplexity in a mystery, a process that would detract from the central character-study. As the authors delve into character and its deterioration, their plays usually present a greater semblance of seriousness than is ordinarily desirable in a mystery drama. Among emotional materials, bafflement is less prevalent than in other forms, and suspense may often be lacking as well. Either fear or hate, however, can always be found in psychological thrillers, since those emotional ingredients are the chief forces that destroy the mental stability of the characters.

Obviously characterization figures prominently in all psychological thrillers. The favored method for its revelation involves detailed development by showing characters in action. The most noteworthy aspect of character is that at least one major figure must undergo a severe decline in mental acuity that ends in his complete destruction. In thought, diction, sound, and spectacle, the plays differ greatly from one another. The element of thought, however, is consistent among the examples in its reduction of the importance of deduction and in its use of the entirety of the action to express the mentally debilitating effects of crime. Furthermore, in at least one example, ordinarily tangential discussions are carefully integrated into the depiction of the forces leading to the central characters' destruction. Diction is handled in a more skillful and sophisticated manner in these thrillers than in most mysteries, while sound and spectacle play such exceedingly varied roles that a formulaic observation is impossible.
Such numerous points of dissimilarity between early psychological thrillers and the more recent Sleuth reflect a goal mystery writers have begun to pursue: variety within the formerly strict confines of a formula. Departures from the basic patterns are not entirely recent developments, however. As early as the second and third decades of the century, in an attempt to revitalize mystery plays, authors were varying the formulas in sometimes subtle but ingenious ways, as will be seen in Chapter Six.
In the preceding chapter it was observed that a loosening of formulaic restrictions characterized the development of psychological thrillers. Other mystery formulas demonstrate even less strict adherence to minutely prescribed patterns. Those latter formulas may exhibit common characteristics only in one or two areas, such as plot and character, while all other materials in their structures show scarcely any degree of similarity. Two formulas, the details of which extend no farther than plot or character, are often employed in confined mysteries. Those loosely restrictive formulas are inverted mysteries and "Had I But Knowns" (HIBK's).

The first of those formulas, the inverted mystery, makes a single, simple alteration in the usual approach of all other detective formulas that results in major changes in plot. An inverted play merely transposes the revelation of the villain's identity from

---

1 The term "inverted" mystery has been borrowed from the lexicon of narrative detective fiction. The device was developed by H. Austin Freeman in The Singing Bone (1912), but was given its fullest use in the novels of Anthony Berkeley Cox (writing as Anthony Berkely or Francis Iles). Other terms applied to inverted mysteries include "unorthodox" mystery and "inside-out" crime story. See Tage la Cour and Harald Hegensen, The Murder Book: An Illustrated History of the Detective Story (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), p. 94.
the end to the beginning of the play, thereby shifting focus from "Who done it?" to "How will he be caught?" Confinement is not essential to that type of play, but many confined mysteries employ such a structure; therefore, inverted dramas make up a considerable and significant portion of the body of confined-mystery plays. In the strictest sense, an inverted approach may not actually be a single formula, since it is always used in combination with other formulas. For example, inverted and psychological formulas unite in Rope and A. A. Milne blends a procedural with inversion in The Fourth Wall [The Perfect Alibi in the United States]. Despite its amalgamation with those formulas and others, an inversion technique causes enough alteration in the features of plot that it may be treated as a separate formula.

As noted above, an inverted mystery begins with an answer to the normal mystery question, "Who done it?" Inversion can be used with either an early or a late point of attack. A play employing an early attack depicts details leading to and including a major crime,

2Patrick Hamilton, Rope; or, Rope's End (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1930). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 271-73.

3A. A. Milne, The Fourth Wall (New York: Samuel French, 1929). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 275-76.

4Formulas yet to be analyzed that are used in combination with the inverted include ghost plays (A Murder Has Been-Arranged by Emlyn Williams) and HIBK's (Walt Until Dark by Frederick Knott).

5Other formulas derived from variations on the major ones are examined in Chapter Six, pp. 195-218. Those sub-formulas have a less radical effect upon the original pattern than does inversion.
which usually occurs immediately prior to the first-act curtain. Such a beginning, as is found in Milne's *The Fourth Wall*, contains not only a brief introduction of the characters but also carefully presents the motive for the crime and depicts the clues that will eventually lead to the villain's capture. In his drama Milne makes the motive obvious long before the crime; a dinner conversation leads the victim, Arthur Ludgrove, to reveal that two convicts once vowed revenge against him (I.1.10). Clues to the villains' downfall are initially presented during the perpetration of the imperfect crime on stage, as is almost always done in an inverted play with an early point of attack. Milne carefully details the murder and the steps taken by the two killers to make the death appear a suicide (I.11.24–27). In the many actions of the murderers during their crime lie the clues that put the play's amateur detectives, Jimmy Ludgrove and Susan Cunningham, on the trail of the villains. In a late-point-of-attack play such as *Rope*, the crime is not depicted, since it has been committed before the drama begins. Nevertheless, the criminals still must reveal themselves. The author clearly identifies them as criminals; he then explains rather than shows the evildoers perpetrating their villainy, and he also presents clues essential to the villains' capture. In *Rope* Hamilton shows the murderers putting the final touches on their crime and then has them gleefully review their attempt at a perfect murder (I.9-13). He also introduces a single

6 Such an inverted drama resembles a standard early-attack procedural in this regard. The only difference lies in the fact that the lights are not turned out during the crime in an inverted mystery.
essential clue, the victim's theatre ticket (L.16). With either an early or late point of attack, one factor must, of course, remain constant: the "who done it" question must be replaced by the inverted-mystery question, "How will the criminal be caught?"

Once the villain, his crime, the clues, and the inverted question have been identified, the lengthy middle section of the mystery begins. That middle part details the process by which the detective ascertains the culprit's identity. Clues become all-important and create most of the interest in this section, a fact that may at first seem surprising since the villain's identity is known. Clues remain essential, however, since the mystery question will be answered chiefly through the detective's use of them. Furthermore, inversion makes clues much easier to follow, because the direction in which they lead has already been revealed. Also somewhat surprising is the fact that authors treat clues more fairly in inverted stories than in virtually any other formula. Since an author of inverted mysteries does not have to make clues confusing in order to conceal identity, he can present them fairly. In fact, he faces the opposite problem from his standard-mystery counterpart: he must make the logical process of following clues abundantly clear, because the audience's ability to trace that procedure by the detective comprises

7The clues and their perusal by the detective serve almost entirely as the interest retainer, as far as the inverted-mystery aspect is concerned. Since inversion is not used alone, however, much of the interest may also derive from the qualities of the combined formula. Consequently, in Rope appeal rests equally, if not more strongly, with a psychological study of two murderers' mental deterioration.
most of the play's appeal. Consequently, inverted mysteries contain those features of fair play that are often lacking in stage "whodunits." In the Milne mystery, for example, clue summaries appear at regular intervals (II.45-46; III.1.58-59) to show how far along the way to a solution the detectives have come. By the time any inverted mystery moves into its ending, these fairly presented clues must have led the detective to a solution of the crime. He, too, then knows "who done it"; however, he still must catch the criminal.

The end of an inverted mystery features its solution scene or, more precisely, the capture of the known criminal by the detective. In their approach to the solution, authors of inverted mysteries show a remarkable lack of variety. The method remains constant: the detective, who has now deciphered all clues, confronts the criminal with overwhelming and irrefutable evidence and obtains an admission of guilt. Since villains in mysteries are seldom wont to surrender without a fight, the confession usually must be elicited through entrapment. The criminal makes his admission only when he believes himself either to be alone with the detective or to have the sleuth in his power. In The Fourth Wall one of the killers tells all while he thinks himself alone with the detective. The wily sleuth Susan, however, has sneaked another witness into the room to hear the admission of guilt. Likewise, the murderer believes himself to be in command of the situation since he has a gun.

Milne finds the clue-explaining process so interesting that he presents two such scenes in The Fourth Wall. He first gives a wrong interpretation of them by the police (II.46-48) and then a correct explanation by the amateur detectives (III.1.52-63).
Unfortunately for him, Susan has the bullets (III, ii, 71-74). The murderers in Rope behave in a similarly imprudent fashion when they show the body to the detective, who is outnumbered, crippled, and presumably disinclined to inform the hated police of murder. The detective overcomes his handicaps with a sword-cane and obtains a full confession. Only then does he surprise the murderers with what they take to be an out-of-character action on his part: he uses a police whistle to call a member of the local constabulary (III, 78-86).

While these two examples far from exhaust the possibilities for solution scenes in inverted mysteries, divergence from these patterns is slight. 9

The ending to an inverted play contains numerous problems for its playwright. All loose ends related to clues should be tied together, as is true in all clue-centered mysteries. Even more problematical is a tendency toward verbosity and away from theatricality. Since solutions consist primarily of a detective's recitation of evidence to his prey, endings often become embroiled in endless talk.

The fact that all evidence presented by the detective has appeared twice before, when introduced at the time of the crime and when the detective uncovers it during his investigation, merely compounds the

---

9 Occasionally, inventive approaches can be found. In Emlyn Williams's A Murder Has Been Arranged, the ghost of the victim frightens the killer into insanity, at which point the murderer does a very insane thing indeed: he confesses.
problem. The result is an intrinsically verbose conclusion, a quality usually avoided in mysteries.\(^{10}\)

In addition to its effects upon the beginning, middle, and end of a play, inversion enhances the desirable quality of unity of action. Unity arising from following a logical chain of clues to its single, necessary conclusion frequently occurs in these heavily clue-centered plays. As opposed to the more typical disjointed clue-gathering and haphazard interrogations found in standard formulas, these fair-playing inverted dramas carefully present one clue's leading to another, which subsequently leads to yet one more. As each clue results in further discoveries of others, capture of the criminal becomes both the probable and, eventually, the necessary result. Rope serves as an excellent example of the logical, causal pattern that is found in most inverted mysteries. The single clue of a theatre ticket leads the detective, Rupert, through a series of deductions that inevitably point to Brandon and Granillo as the murderers. As far as unity is concerned, such a play benefits further from its early revelation of the villain's identity. Since the direction in which clues point is obvious, inverted mysteries do not suffer from an appearance of being episodic, as do most detective plays.\(^{11}\) Despite such advantages over other mystery formulas, these

\(^{10}\) Some authors have worked to retain interest throughout the final scene. Such devices as a ghost (A Murder Has Been Arranged) and a killer unwilling to accept defeat (Wait Until Dark) have enlivened the endings of some inverted mysteries.

\(^{11}\) This problem inherent in the structure of mystery plays is discussed in Chapter Two, p. 71.
plays can still be largely episodic. In *The Fourth Wall*, for example, with its multiple evaluations of clues by criminals, police, and amateur detectives, much of the action seems repetitious; it contains scenes that could be transposed and even removed without disruption of the plot. Obviously, inversion provides no guarantee of unity. Nevertheless, it tends to make unity more readily achievable by removing inherent mystery blocks to unity.

In the area of complexity, inversion of a standard mystery formula has little effect. Inverted plays certainly can possess complexity, but generally that complexity arises not from inversion but from the formula with which it has been combined. Only those inverted mysteries with an early point of attack contain an inescapable reversal at the time of the crime. As can be seen in *The Fourth Wall*, the early stages of such a play depict a pursuit of the victim by his assailant. In the Milne drama *Laverick* and the less obviously villainous Carter lay their trap for Ludgrove, the victim. After they catch and kill their prey, the direction of the plot fully reverses itself so that the former pursuers, Laverick and Carter, become the pursued, the objects of the detectives' search. Such a reversal from predator to prey marks a major complexity in inverted plays with an early attack that is seldom matched in other mystery formulas.

Even more than with complexity, magnitude and seriousness of inverted plots are predominantly products of the formulas combined.

---

12 The police-investigation scene can easily be omitted. It serves to delay the real solution scene involving Susan and Jimmy.
with inversion. The emotional ingredients of these dramas, however, differ greatly as a result of an early revelation of the criminal's identity. Bafflement must suffer substantially. The interest aroused by the detective's inexorable movement toward a foregone conclusion serves as a weak substitute for perplexity arising from a concern for "Who done it?" Conversely, fear, hate, and suspense benefit greatly from inversion and a loss in bafflement. In Rope, for example, the author spends the opening minutes in developing Brandon and Granillo as callous murderers. Hate for them arises almost immediately.\(^{13}\) Fear must wait until the hero is clearly identified. Once Rupert is revealed as a diligent detective, fear arises for his safety as he places himself in increasingly greater jeopardy in an attempt to trap the murderers.\(^{14}\) The enhancement of suspense is a somewhat more difficult matter. Inversion makes it clear when a villainous character with evil intentions is present. Placing the detective in the presence of a criminal strengthens the potential for danger to the heroic character. Such a threat of impending peril is an essential ingredient in suspense. Like fear, suspense seems strongest in the solution scene. When the detective is left

---

\(^{13}\)Because of the early identification of the villains, hate is created for them more easily than in most mysteries in which the object of hatred is ill-defined until the closing minutes.

\(^{14}\)Fear ordinarily comes rather late in an inverted mystery since the hero is seldom in danger until then. While he searches for the criminal, he is relatively safe, since the villain seldom feels threatened by the search, if he knows about it at all. Only when the detective must reveal his knowledge in confronting the villain does he place himself in grave danger and thereby arouse fear.
alone in a room with a character known to be a killer, the potential for danger seems great. As the sleuth reveals his deductions, he himself represents a threat to the villain. The now-desperate criminal consequently poses an even greater immediate danger to the detective. All the ingredients for suspense are present: fear and a hero in imminent danger from a hateful villain. Just such a situation occurs in the chief examples in this study, Rope and The Fourth Wall. As expected, suspense is highest at that point in each drama. Obviously the inversion factor greatly enhances the potential for suspense as well as for hate and fear in these plays.

Beyond its influence upon the emotional ingredients in plot, the inverted formula has little effect upon the plays. As far as characterization is concerned, the sole essential feature of this formula requires that the villain be clearly identified as such at the time of the crime. Thought, diction, music, and spectacle do not seem to be affected in any peculiar way by the process of inversion; instead, the plays demonstrate a great variance in these elements, which is attributable to the dissimilar formulas combined with the common inverted one.

The inverted-mystery formula, then, uses a rather simple device that changes aspects of plot but has little effect upon other elements. The process of revealing the villain's identity at the outset causes major plot alterations in those formulas that are always used in combination with inversion. The beginning of the play identifies the criminal either by showing him commit his act of lawlessness (early point of attack) or by having him talk of the deed to a cohort
(late point of attack). During the opening scenes, clues are presented; however, they play a greater role in the middle of an inverted mystery when the detective deduces from them the villain's identity. The resolution scene of the play shows the detective capturing his prey by confronting him with the evidence. Inverting the mystery not only alters the mystery question from "Who done it?" to "How will he be caught?" but it also lends the play a degree of unity by removing some typical mystery blocks to that important quality. The many inverted mysteries with an early point of attack also possess an inherent complexity resulting from a reversal following the crime. Inversion further serves to change the emotional materials as well. The seemingly indispensable mystery feature of bafflement is, in fact, dispensed with. Inversion replaces it with an increased capacity for evoking hate, fear, and suspense, the latter two proving especially strong in the final moments of the play. This relatively unrestrictive formula, if it may be so termed despite its lack of detail and rigidity, most often is subordinated to the qualities of any mystery formula with which it may be coupled. One example of such a combination of inversion and another formula is the "Had I But Known," which seldom exists in the theatre in anything other than inverted form.

15 The term "Had I But Known" is also borrowed from narrative fiction. The derisive appellation was coined by Ogden Nash, who belittled the formula in his poem, "Don't Guess, Let Me Tell You." See The Art of the Mystery Story, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), pp. 319-20.
This second loosely restrictive formula, the HIBK, descends from narrative fiction works by female novelists like Mary Roberts Rinehart, who allow their female characters to continuously place themselves in great danger. Usually the heroine's innocent, trusting, foolish, or even stupid nature causes all her troubles; one or all of those qualities makes her oblivious to dangers that the least alert or suspicious person would perceive. In plays following the HIBK formula confinement consists almost solely of trapping or imprisoning the unfortunate woman. The agent confining her is either a villain or, less frequently, a seeming villain. The pattern of confinement is readily apparent in two relatively recent examples of the formula, Frederick Knott's *Wait Until Dark* and Monte Doyle's *Signpost to Murder*. Although Susy, the heroine of *Wait Until Dark*, appears unaware of her plight throughout much of the drama, a trio of criminals keeps her under constant surveillance. In the Monte Doyle thriller, the apparent villain, Roy Collier, imprisons the heroine, Sally, immediately upon his appearance in her home. Since confinement in an HIBK comes from an unusual source, a criminal in or near one's house, the time during which the woman does not leave the setting can be

---

16. The criminals' plan to imprison Susy is detailed in the first scene before confinement begins. See Frederick Knott, *Wait Until Dark* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1967), I.i.13-18. Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 278-80.

17. As soon as Roy walks on stage, he "stretches out a hand over Sally's shoulder and covers her mouth, smothering her cry." See Monte Doyle, *Signpost to Murder* (London: Samuel French, 1963), I.i.13. Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 276-78.
extended almost indefinitely, as it is in *Signpost to Murder*. Under ordinary circumstances a character would not remain at home for several days on end; however, a gun-toting homicidal maniac in the bedroom can keep almost any woman in her place. In such a confined situation, the action of a play may take place over several days or even weeks, a considerably longer time span than is possible in most confined-mystery situations.

Details of the HIBK formula affect only plot and character. The numerous similarities between *Wait Until Dark* and *Signpost to Murder* are indicative of the formula's plot restrictions. An HIBK begins with a brief scene that establishes the situation before confinement begins. Often that scene introduces the existence of an earlier crime, which eventually will lead the villain to plague the unfortunate heroine. Frederick Knott uses a bungled heroin plan in his play to serve as the reason for entrapping Susy. He quickly establishes the necessary information that a heroin-filled doll has disappeared, and that its only possible location is Susy's apartment. Therefore, the villains decide to confine the woman until she reveals the doll's whereabouts (I.1.12-14). The opening scene in Doyle's drama similarly details circumstances involving murder and insanity that will lead to Sally's imprisonment in the next scene (I.1.2-9). In addition to establishing the pre-confinement situation, the beginning introduces the heroine and her weaknesses and also clearly identifies the villain. Knott accomplishes that too facilely.

\[1^R\] In *Signpost to Murder* Roy keeps Sally prisoner for twenty-eight days (III.47).
Toward the end of the villains' discussion of their impending crime, the author contrives to have Susy enter so that her chief flaw, blindness, becomes immediately apparent (I.1,18-19). By that time in the play the villains have been clearly labeled as such and have been depicted as ruthless in their quest for their goal. Not only does the author draw the obvious battle lines for the conflict to follow, but he also manages to show at how much of a disadvantage the heroine's flaw places her. The HIBK mystery question should also be made clear by that time; invariably the question is "How will the heroine survive against such a formidable opponent?" While Doyle closely parallels Knott in his inverted-style identification of heroine and villain, he adds an uncharacteristic second mystery question to the standard one: he ponders whether the villain actually is insane. By providing a two-level mystery question, the playwright overcomes the usual shortcoming of inversion, the loss of bafflement. Only at the end of the drama does he answer the question of insanity, thus

19 It is the need to identify the source of danger, the villain, that forces the author of an HIBK to depend upon an inverted approach, which easily makes the villain's identity clear to the audience without revealing anything to the heroine.

20 Actually only one of the criminals, Roat, is shown as ruthless, but one such character is sufficient to place an HIBK heroine in the appropriate amount of peril.

21 The usual HIBK question concerning the heroine's survival does not engender bafflement since it does not involve an attempt to establish an identity or decipher a puzzling situation. Instead, it promotes the emotional ingredient of fear for the heroine's safety. The question of Roy's sanity, however, arouses bafflement since it is closely related to the strange events occurring in the house. An answer to the sanity question provides an explanation for the strange happenings as well.
maintaining bafflement continuously in a type of play ordinarily devoid of it.

The middle of an HIBK concentrates on its heroine in the clutches of her enemies. Acting just as expected by her adversaries, the highly predictable female places herself in jeopardy by gullibly going to the villain for help. In Wait Until Dark Susy unsuspectingly asks one of the criminals to call the police for her, which allows him to phone his cohorts instead and set their plan into motion (I.11.32). Signpost to Murder shows its distraught heroine alone in her home opening the door to a man from the local insane asylum, who claims to be searching for an escaped homicidal maniac. When she lets the helpful fellow in for a look under her beds, he proves to be none other than the fugitive himself (I.11.13). In addition to her initial error, an HIBK heroine continues to trust the villain altogether too long for her own good. Even though Susy has become suspicious of two of her tormentors in Wait Until Dark, she continues to believe that the third criminal is a friend. Sally proves even more trusting, especially considering the fact that she knows her captor to be a wife-killer. Despite the apparent danger, she sleeps with him, revives him when he faints, does not tell the authorities of his presence, and remains alone in the house after she eventually warns the people from the asylum. Each of her actions seemingly places her in grave danger.

After the woman has mired herself in enough trouble because of her shortcomings, she begins to overcome her faults. At that
point in each HIBK an inherent major reversal occurs. *Wait Until Dark* provides the better example. Early in the action, lies told by the plotters come so quickly that Susy's naturally perceptive mind is caught up in an emotional assault resulting from the suggestion that her husband is a murderer. When she later has time to regain her composure and think, she sees through the plans of the criminals. Knott dutifully marks that point in the mystery: "This is Susy's real turning point—from here on she picks up" (II.1.44). For most of the remainder of the drama, the heroine becomes the aggressor, using a strong offense as her best defense. She may suffer a setback, however, in her battle for life. In both *Wait Until Dark* and *Signpost to Murder* the heroines suffer a reversal at the moment of apparent victory. One of the villains in *Wait Until Dark* concedes defeat and prepares to leave the wily Susy unharmed. Before he can make good his escape, the less daunted murderer, Roat, kills him and again places Susy in jeopardy (II.11.68). When it seems in *Signpost to Murder* that Sally has rid herself of her maniacal companion for the first time in two weeks, she steps into her bath only to find the fellow waiting for her (II.11.46). The setbacks prove to be only momentary, however, as the plays reach their conclusions with the women victorious.

The ending depicts the woman's victory over her assailant and answers the mystery question of how she survives. In *Signpost* the "momentary" setback lasts fourteen more days, but Sally spends the time well in ingratiating herself with Roy so that she can catch him
off his guard and warn the authorities. Conversely, the ending of Knott's play comes only seconds after Susy's latest problem and proves to be somewhat more effective theatrically. A series of reversals involving who has dominance in a physical life-and-death struggle marks the ending to *Wait Until Dark*. Since verbal explanations have been made along the way, Knott can devote his ending to such events as knife-throwing, gasoline-pouring, skulking in the dark, and stabbing.

In addition to a slow and voluble ending to Sally's plight in *Signpost to Murder*, the author must answer the other part of his two-level mystery. He somewhat compensates for the first lackluster finish by providing an answer to the second question that precipitates an unexpected final reversal. Roy proves not to be insane, as has slowly become apparent throughout the latter half of the drama. That discovery leads to the final explanation that shows Sally instead to be an insane killer. The last-minute reversal of the villain-victim roles of Roy and Sally serves as Doyle's attempt to maintain interest to the end of his thriller.

Since HIBK's adopt an inverted format of revealing the villain from the outset, they display the unity of action characteristic of inverted mysteries. As noted earlier in this chapter, the knowledge of where the clues are leading, if there are any, makes the causal link of the pattern stronger than when the clues appear haphazard and are assembled only in the final solution scene. A removal of part of the series of incidents disrupts the logical
chain that leads the heroine to realize that the villain is, in fact, not her friend.

In addition to their tendency toward causal unity, HIBK's possess an inherent complexity that is often lacking in other mystery formulas. The previously noted mid-play reversal in which the stupid, trusting heroine becomes perceptive and suspicious lends these plays their complexity: the pursuer, the villain, becomes the pursued after the heroine's character reversal. In some cases, such as in Signpost to Murder, the reversal can be a double one. The role of the pursued shifts from Sally to Roy when she gains his confidence and then turns him over to the authorities. Again roles and direction of plot reverse when Sally is revealed to be an insane murderer and Roy an innocent pawn of her machinations. At that point she again becomes the pursued, as he tries to convict her of the crime and thus prove his own innocence (III.58-59).

While HIBK's offer nothing of note in their small magnitude and seemingly serious treatment, they do show their own distinctive patterns involving emotional ingredients. As noted earlier, bafflement does not belong intrinsically in the HIBK formula. None exists

22 These observations hold true for Wait Until Dark, which adheres closely to an inverted formula and presents a clear set of clues that the heroine follows en route to her conclusions. Signpost to Murder with its surprise ending is not actually inverted, but only seemingly so. It is not clear where the infrequent clues are leading, and no chain of clues can be followed to the final solution. Scenes instead consist largely of repetitious material such as Roy's assertion of his sanity and Sally's apparent uncertainty as to whether to believe him. This repetitiveness and an absence of clear causality from one scene to another make the Doyle drama considerably more episodic than is usual for an HIBK.
in *Wait Until Dark* because of the inverted-style early identification of villains; bafflement found in *Signpost to Murder* comes not from its HIBK qualities, but from Doyle's imposition of an added standard mystery question upon that of the HIBK. More characteristic of this formula are fear and hate, both of which are essentials to an HIBK. Fear arises from placing the heroine at the mercy of murderers, smugglers, or maniacs. The villain who jeopardizes the health of the unwise but likeable heroine supplies the attendant hate. While fear and hate can always be found, suspense occurs somewhat infrequently, although it is by no means absent from HIBK's. *Wait Until Dark* evokes suspense in its final scene in the dark when the heroine's fate is left in doubt because the lights have been turned off (II,iii,71-77). In *Signpost to Murder* moments of suspense occur when a situation seems fearful but the heroine does not perceive it as such. After Roy has disappeared from the cottage in the second act, Sally assumes that she is alone. The author has made it abundantly clear that no one has searched the bathroom thoroughly. As Sally disrobes for her bath, she comes inexorably closer to the moment when she must enter the bathroom with all its potential danger. Suspense arising from a strong possibility of danger builds until the unsuspecting woman enters the room and sees the insane man with a gun (II,ii,46).

---

23 Hate is not as fully developed in *Signpost to Murder* as in *Wait Until Dark* because the villainy of Roy in the former play never seems clear. Even if he were a killer (which he is not), he does not act maliciously. If he were to kill, it would be the result of his mental disorder and not because he possesses hateful qualities.
The dissipation of all four emotional materials comes late in the plays in good mystery fashion. In the Monte Doyle play, hate, fear, and even a degree of suspense reach their culmination when Roy surrenders his gun to the authorities, thus signifying the end of the physical danger. Bafflement then remains the only consideration, and it is dealt with in a final explanation scene that includes the startling last-minute reversal. Knott manages to build suspense, fear, and hate to an incredible level in his finale by having his villain and heroine engage in their full-scale physical fight. All three emotional ingredients achieve their catharsis only moments before the final curtain: a flashlight beam relieves uncertainty as to the outcome of the struggle when it shows the corpse of the villain and the unharmed figure of the heroine (II.iii.77). Such a use of emotional materials in which all ingredients reach full formulation simultaneously at the close of the mystery marks the height of artistry in the treatment of a plot by an HIBK author.

The remaining distinctive features of HIBK's involve details pertaining to character. These plays depend heavily upon character types as a means of quickly identifying villain and heroine. The former is of special concern, because his evilness must be evident from the outset. Consequently, authors of HIBK's leave little doubt in their characterizations of villains. The broadness of character creation can be seen clearly in such a figure as Roat in *Wait Until Dark*. He enters by deliberately slamming a door into someone's face. From that point his affability rapidly declines. He insults and belittles his colleagues, murders women, carries a trick knife, and
delights in torturing a blind person. The author has little good to say about him beyond his fastidiousness in keeping his fingerprints off the furniture. Since Roy, the apparent villain in *Signpost to Murder*, acts relatively civil except when forced by circumstances to be aggressive, he does not fit the mold of a typical HIBK evildoer. This avoidance of such a clear-cut villain enhances bafflement in the play.

The heroine belongs to a type peculiar to HIBK's, the defective female. All heroines in HIBK's seem cut by the same die; all have a handicap or character trait that makes them easy prey for the villains. In *Wait Until Dark* Susy has the obvious problem of being blind, but she also suffers in other ways. Her blindness is relatively recent (one year) and she has not yet acclimated herself to it. That maladjustment and the panic Susy feels when reminded of her helplessness compound the problem of her blindness. In *Signpost to Murder* Sally, too, possesses a blindness, but only a figurative one. She seems too eager to believe in Roy's sanity despite the almost incontrovertible proof of his erratic actions. It is not enough in an HIBK, however, for the female merely to have such defects. She must also alter during the course of the action, for only in overcoming her flaws does she have a chance to survive. Despite all other character weaknesses, the woman proves to be strong willed when the pressure increases, and the strength of her will helps her to overcome all other obstacles. Sally forgets her supposed belief in Roy and tells the police of his presence. Susy defeats her panic by the force of her determination to free her husband from suspicion of
murder. She even manages to rid herself of her handicap of blindness by putting out all the lights in the room for her final confrontation with the villain. She emerges triumphant only when she fully overcomes her disadvantage by extinguishing the one source of illumination she forgot (II.iii.77). Shorn of her weaknesses, the heroine of a stage HIBK proves herself more than a match for any devious males.

As far as other details are concerned, no clear formulaic guidelines exist. Thought may center on deduction, as it does in the Knott play. In Doyle’s drama, however, scarcely a hint of the deductive exists. Knott avoids tangential, weighty topics, while Doyle seems to have Pirandellian pretensions when he ends his play with an inversion of the mad-sane roles of Roy and Sally. Beyond the obvious modern surface realism, diction does not figure strikingly in either example. Apart from obligatory screams by frightened ladies, sound plays a similarly unremarkable role in both examples, although the possibilities for its use in an HIBK should be as great as in other mysteries. Spectacle, too, has a varied function in the two plays. Signpost to Murder contains few typical mystery uses of spectacle, while Wait Until Dark employs one of the most elaborate

In Signpost to Murder Sally “backs away and screams” when she finds Roy in her bathroom (II.ii.46). Wait Until Dark calls for its heroine to scream when attacked by someone whom she thought was dead (II.iii.75).
lights-out scenes ever devised. Obviously the formula allows for great latitude in this final element as well.

The formula for an HIBK, like that of inverted mysteries, is a simple one. A woman who possesses some weakness becomes the unwitting prey of a man largely because of that weakness. The action begins with a crime that will grow to involve the woman, a clear identification of the villainous male, and a similar notation of the woman and her faults. The middle of an HIBK depicts the woman's flawed character leading her into the clutches of the villain. As she begins to correct her defects, the situation reverses: the woman sees the villain for what he is, and she sets out to capture or punish him. Despite momentary setbacks, the woman completely overcomes her flaws and, in doing so, defeats her adversary. An HIBK generally is unified, complex, and only seemingly serious. Its prime emotional factors are fear and hate, but suspense, too, can be found in small amounts. Bafflement is largely dismissed from an HIBK because of the necessity of identifying the villain and his plans from the outset. In the areas of thought, diction, sound, and spectacle, the play does not follow an obvious pattern.

The above summary of the HIBK formula derives from the analyses of *Wait Until Dark* and parts of *Signpost to Murder*. The latter play's secondary mystery question and its last-act reversal transform

---

25 The last fourth of the play never has more illumination than a single light, such as a small table lamp, the bulb in a refrigerator, or a flashlight. During much of the time the author requires a complete blackout so that "the audience can hear what goes on but see nothing at all" (II,111,71).
it into an entirely different sort of play. If those secondary features concerning Roy's sanity are discounted, the play serves as a fair example of an HIBK and has been used as such in this chapter. What the author has done in his drama is to impose a new feature, bafflement, upon the formula. Doyle's slight variation on the old pattern results in a radically different drama. Other such variations on the five formulas already presented are the central concern of the following chapter.
CHAPTER SIX
VARIATIONS

In addition to the major formulas for writing modern mystery dramas, many sub-formulas exist that are simply variations on the standard approaches. Four such variations appear on the list of successful confined-mystery plays: ghost drama, which dwells upon supernatural ingredients and often enlists aid from occult forces to solve the mystery problem; collective-detective mystery, in which the detective function shifts constantly from one character to another; environmental mystery, which employs the entire theatre-building as an integral part of its setting and assigns an active role of participation to the audience; and propagandistic detective drama, in which extraneous, politically related thought is imposed upon a basic mystery formula. A brief analysis of these four variations reveals the extent to which a single change in a mystery formula can radically alter the standard pattern.

The first of these sub-formulas, ghost drama, violates the general rule for writers of mystery that prohibits the use of fantasy, supernatural forces, or occult sciences.¹ Since a detective

¹Ronald A. Knox states the rule succinctly in "A Detective Story Decalogue": "All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course." See The Art of the Mystery Story, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), p. 194.
purportedly solves a mystery by a rational process of deduction, authors consider it unfair to use supernatural forces to reach a solution. Such aid to the detective effectively removes a work from the realm of true mysteries, in which detective and audience alike get an equal opportunity to assess clues and solve the problem. Nevertheless, as has been noted previously in this study, stage mysteries have never been particularly fair in their treatment of clues and solutions. Authors of mystery drama have seen fit on occasion to employ supernatural materials both as part of the basic premise of their works and as a means of solution.

Four confined-mystery plays utilizing varying amounts of supernatural ingredients are Bayard Veiller's *The Thirteenth Chair*, Arnold Ridley's *The Ghost Train*, Emlyn Williams's *A Murder Has Been Arranged*, and William Archibald's *The Innocents*, an adaptation of Henry James's short novel, *The Turn of the Screw*. Essentially, each of these dramas belongs to one of the major confined-mystery formulas.

---

2 Bayard Veiller, *The Thirteenth Chair* (New York: Samuel French, 1922). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 290-91.

3 Arnold Ridley, *The Ghost Train* (New York: Samuel French, 1932). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 282-84.

4 Emlyn Williams, *A Murder Has Been Arranged* (New York: Samuel French, 1931). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 287-88.

Veiller's play possesses the standard qualities of a procedural, while the Ridley work is an example of a murder-house mystery. *A Murder Has Been Arranged* is an almost perfect formula play of the inverted school. *The Innocents*, with its strong delineation of character and depiction of the collapse of mental acuity under great stress, obviously stems from the psychological-thriller formula. Although the plays fit neatly into separate categories, some points of similarity may be found. Those resemblances arise directly from the employment of supernatural material and, therefore, offer some insights into its use in standard mystery formulas.

A supernatural motif greatly affects a mystery's method of solution. Before such methods can be examined, however, the typical nature of the mystery questions should be noted. The question to be answered at the end of a supernatural play may be either "Who done it?" or "What is happening?" *The Thirteenth Chair* and *A Murder Has Been Arranged* ask the first question or a formula-based variation of it. 6 In *The Ghost Train* and *The Innocents* the mystery questions belong to the second category: the central characters seek explanations for mysterious events that are taking place.

Plays posing the first mystery question must, of necessity, have supernatural, non-logical solutions. If such "whodunits" were to use a standard deductive solution, few supernatural elements would remain. The dramas would simply be typical examples of the major

6 In *A Murder Has Been Arranged*, which is an example of an inverted mystery, the standard murder question is reversed to "How will the murderer be caught?" For further explanation of this point concerning inverted mysteries, see pp. 171-74.
formulas that merely include allusions to seances (The Thirteenth Chair) or ghost-chasing (A Murder Has Been Arranged), since they do not contain any inexplicable incidents before the entrapment of the villain, as do plays such as The Ghost Train and The Innocents, in which ghostly occurrences are more pervasive. In the resolution scenes of both The Thirteenth Chair and A Murder Has Been Arranged, however, supernatural elements are fully integrated into the action and become the means to uncover the villain's identity.

Such methods of solution are actually modern versions of a deus ex machina, the Euripidean device of having the gods almost magically resolve an insoluble situation. In The Thirteenth Chair the guests and a medium spend most of their time disproving the existence of supernatural forces. When the medium can find no other method of catching the criminal, however, she appeals to the occult world for a "real message" (III.101). Her importuning is finally answered at the moment of solution, when strange forces douse lights, open windows and doors, and make the murder weapon reappear (III.103), thereby driving the killer insane and causing him to admit his misdeed. A deus is necessary because the functional detective, the medium, has admitted defeat and because no clues to the killer's identity have been presented. Since it follows the inverted formula, 

Before their solution scenes, plays like The Thirteenth Chair and A Murder Has Been Arranged contain only talk about supernatural forces. All of the early, seemingly inexplicable incidents eventually prove to have logical explanations. In their use of mere verbiage about ghosts, such dramas do not differ appreciably from standard formula plays like The Bat and The Donovan Affair.
A Murder Has Been Arranged emphasizes the question of how the killer will be trapped into revealing his crime. Because the cautious murderer has devised a foolproof plan, a deus must again be injected into the solution scene of a play that has continually hinted at ghosts but has offered none up to that point. As occurred in the Veiller play, supernatural forces take over where the mortal shortcomings of the problem solver leave off. The ghost of the victim makes a startling appearance on stage and so unnerves the killer that the villain inadvertently reveals how he falsified evidence. He then, rather conveniently, goes insane (III.105-06).

In supernatural dramas using the second mystery question of "What is happening?" two general methods of solution are possible. One approach discounts all supernatural influences and offers a supposedly logical explanation, no matter how strange events may have seemed up to that point. The use of such a non-supernatural solution, while at the same time retaining the overall impression of a ghost story, is possible because all events prior to the solution have borne the impression that supernatural forces are at work. In The Ghost Train, which utilizes such an approach, the strange events in the play at first appear to be the fulfillment of a legend involving a phantom locomotive. No clues leading to any other explanation are

---

8 It can, of course, be argued that such a play does not belong in the category of supernatural mysteries; however, such a drama is actually as supernaturally based as are the "whodunits" with a deus ending. The deus plays assume the supernatural label during and after the solution, while this type bears the supernatural appearance before the explanation.
provided. At the moment of solution, however, the detective reveals his identity and presents a lengthy, unexpected, and improbable explanation of the previously inexplicable occurrences. Somewhat more artistic, unified, and structurally logical is the solution that takes a diametric approach, in which seemingly supernatural events receive no further explanation. William Archibald uses such a solution in *The Innocents* rather than resort to an improbable, last-minute recounting of a hoax. He develops his resolution gradually along firmly established lines of the probability and eventual necessity that supernatural beings are, in fact, very much at work in the home of the innocent children.

The types of emotions aroused by supernatural mysteries are even more noteworthy than their methods of solution. In most mystery formulas bafflement dominates. Only occasionally, such as in murder-house mysteries, do fear, hate, and suspense contribute significantly to the emotional makeup of crime dramas. In supernatural plays the roles reverse. Bafflement is subordinated to fear and its attendant emotions of hate and suspense. Furthermore, the less the play resembles a standard mystery (that is, the more pervasive its supernatural ingredients), the less important bafflement becomes. In *The Ghost Train*, with its eventual logical explanation, bafflement seems strongest, since no one ever completely accepts the possibility of supernatural influence and all of the characters continue to seek a reasonable solution. Conversely, *The Innocents* depicts no one doubting the presence of the ghosts from the moment that it is suggested
they exist. From that point on, the mystery element of bafflement is effectively eliminated in the Archibald drama. Fear, hate, and suspense fill the supernatural plays and become increasingly strong as bafflement dissipates. Of the three emotions aroused, fear is strongest, but ordinarily suspense, too, arises considerably. As in all mysteries, creation of hate remains a problem during those scenes that occur before the villain's identity is known.

The three emotions develop earliest and strongest in The Innocents, since the play is virtually devoid of bafflement after the fourth scene. Particularly effective is the creation of suspense and hate, both of which benefit from the early acknowledgment of the existence of ghosts. Since it is evident that ghosts are the sources of the trouble in the play, hate is easily created for them. Because the governess realizes she is fighting almost insurmountable foes, defeat seems inevitable. The inescapable misfortune that must

9 Archibald prepares for belief in the existence of the ghosts by presenting them as actual beings long before he reveals that they are the spirits of dead people. The male ghost first appears in the second scene of the play (I,ii,386). He is scarcely more than a shadow. During the remainder of that scene and throughout the next two scenes, however, the man makes his presence and his powers increasingly obvious to the governess, Miss Giddens. Only after she describes the man's distinctive appearance to Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, does Miss Giddens learn that the mysterious intruder is a spirit:

"MISS GIDDENS. You know him? MRS. GROSE. Quint, . . . He went away. MISS GIDDENS. Went where? MRS. GROSE. God knows where. He died" (I,iv,400).

10 Once the ghosts are accepted as the reason for the strange actions of the children, the chief concern becomes one of how to end the supernatural influence. The initial mystery question of "What is happening?" has been answered,
accompany a final confrontation provides excellent material for cre-
ation of suspense, which depends heavily upon an expectation of disas-
ter. While such difficult-to-achieve emotions as those aroused in
The Innocents can be evoked only by a skillful dramatist, the poten-
tial for them exists more strongly in all supernatural plays than in
any of the other confined-mystery formulas.

Just as fear, hate, and suspense replace bafflement in a play
placing emphasis on supernatural ingredients, deduction gives way to
discussion of preternatural occurrences. All too often such talk is
external to the play and seems to be merely an addendum. Such thought
usually appears in supposedly weighty discussions about the existence
of supernatural forces. In The Thirteenth Chair Bayard Veiller pro-
vides debates over the trickery employed in seances, with the medium
asserting that she possesses "a power— a wonderful— power" (I.18).
The Ghost Train contains debunking of spooks in the face of apparently
incontrovertible proof that ghosts exist (II.47). Occasionally, as
in A Murder Has Been Arranged, the action of the entire play centers
around efforts to establish the existence of ghosts. Only William
Archibald disdains the use of empty philosophizing on supernat
occurrences. He presents the ghosts in The Innocents as a reality
above discussion and debate, thus allowing thought in his play to
concern itself with a complex question, the responsibility of every
individual for both his duties and his actions. The answer or, more
precisely, the exploration of the question is correspondingly complex;
Archibald examines responsibility throughout his tale of supernatural
possession and not merely in occasional set speeches. Ultimately he offers no answer, but only more questions, as befits such a complicated quandary.

Sound and spectacle play especially important roles in plays utilizing a supernatural motif. Both elements function in all ghost mysteries as principal contributions to the creation of fear. Each play demonstrates, however, its own peculiar variety in the use of sound or spectacle to evoke the fearful. Sometimes the setting dominates in the creation of fear, while at other times sounds, music, lighting, or even special effects serve as the primary contributors.

In The Thirteenth Chair the drawing-room setting does little to establish the probability of fearful incidents. Instead, the author depends on special effects utilized in combination with elaborate sound and light cues. The technique is most apparent in the final ghost scene: a door swings open by itself; window curtains fly back and the shade rises noisily; light streams in through the window and illuminates the ceiling as the room lighting dims; a knife embedded in the ceiling is revealed in the light and then begins to fall; it sticks in the table below, directly in front of the killer (III.101). The complexity of the effects goes beyond the mere number of them crowded into a short span of time. The single device of the falling knife involves an elaborate system of slots and wires to enable the showing of the knife as it falls and embeds itself in the table. The following stage direction best conveys the complexity of this small but powerful special effect:
In ceiling, directly over table R., is a double slot to hold knives. During first act, the knife, in down stage slot, is let down in sight of audience. Seen with point sticking in ceiling. Between second and third acts, the knife that falls on cue, during the third act, is placed up stage slot in ceiling, with point downwards. Setting the knife down in view of audience in first act, as well as releasing the second knife so that it falls, and sticks in table during third act, is worked by strings off stage R (I,6-7).

Such an exceedingly elaborate blend of sight and sound is only one of many instances of Veiller's strong dependency upon the two elements.

Arnold Ridley utilizes a mysterious setting as well as special sound and visual effects in The Ghost Train. His deserted train station is "dingy . . . dirty . . . grimy . . . smoked up . . . scarred" (I.7). Ridley particularly excels in his suggestion through sound and lighting of the unseen ghost train. Strongest aid in the creation of the phantom vehicle comes from an assortment of sounds: "Clang-clang-clang . . . whistle . . . roar . . . noise of the engine . . . grinding of the brakes . . . hissing" (I,9). The stage electrician is called upon to augment the sound effects with simulations of headlights, red flares, and the swiftly moving lights of the coaches (II,73) in order to provide a thoroughly horrifying and representational experience.

Although the two plays that actually depict ghosts, A Murder Has Been Arranged and The Innocents, do not use realistic sound extensively, they fully utilize lighting and visual effects, including

While The Innocents does not contain much representational sound, the action of the play is underscored with abstract, horrifying noises such as "a low vibration, beginning as an almost inaudible hum . . . an answering throb, deep and vibrating . . . powerful vibration, sharp, ringing . . . musical" (II,11,436-38).
on-stage disappearances of the ghosts from time to time (Murder, III.106; Innocents, II.iii.439). The Emlyn Williams play utilizes the less-than-novel, but still effective, feature of a gloomy deserted theatre as the setting for supernatural events, while Archibald calls for the setting of his drama to be so nondescript that it is dominated by fluid lighting (Innocents, I.1.375). No matter to what extent each play employs separate sound effects, lights, scenery, or special visual effects, all of the above examples clearly demonstrate how important sound and spectacle are to the supernatural motif in the evocation of the fearful.

Although there is no separately detailed formula for supernatural or ghost mysteries, plays utilizing that motif possess the common characteristics examined above. Their plot resolutions ordinarily depend upon a non-logical, supernatural explanation. On the rare occasions when the solution is logical, supernatural ingredients dominate the play prior to the explanation. Bafflement is minimal in most ghost plays and is subordinated to fear, hate, and suspense. The dramas' thought does not involve deduction, but instead usually develops in discussions of the existence of supernatural powers. Both sound and spectacle serve as major contributors to the creation of fearful situations. In all other areas of analysis, each ghost play closely adheres to the characteristic features of the formula from which it is derived.

A second variation on the basic formulas comes not from adding a feature, but from the substitution of one for another. The
collective-detective mystery, as represented by Cock Robin, takes a standard procedural story and omits the police. The officers of the law are replaced, not by a single amateur detective, but by a collective-detective, a group of people who perform the functional role of a detective. This multi-person detective force is the sole remarkable feature of Cock Robin; in other aspects it closely resembles other procedurals with an early point of attack. The plot is complex, as a result of the delay of the murder. Characterization is sketchy, while diction consists of realistic speech blended with quasi-period language used in a play-within-the-play. The authors make a somewhat futile attempt in spectacle to enliven their unimaginative setting by depicting it from varying angles in different acts. That last bit of innovation marks the limits of the play's uniqueness in all but its treatment of the detective.

In what has often been labeled a rather pedestrian piece of hack work intended solely to turn a quick profit, the eminent authors Elmer Rice and Philip Barry have ably demonstrated how to handle a collective detective or multiple protagonist. On the surface their approach seems quite simple: in place of a single character, the authors supply many. If that were the extent of their technique, Rice and Barry could be faulted for contributing to the disunity of an

---

12 Elmer Rice and Philip Barry, Cock Robin (New York: Samuel French, 1929). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 281-82.

13 The inventive set may, in fact, be the product of the imagination of Jo Mielziner, who designed the scenery for the original production.
already inherently episodic formula. The authors do more, however, than replace oneness with plurality. Actually their technique never calls for more than one character to assume the role of functional detective at a given moment in the play. What the authors achieve in Cock Robin is the creation of a situation in which the role of detective shifts rapidly and fluidly from one character to another so as to convey the impression that there is a group detective working to solve the crime. Shifting of guilt makes possible this fluidity of movement. As apparent guilt changes from one person to another, the prime suspect or a friend coming to his aid must show how the evidence points in yet another direction or to another person. The new suspect (or his defender) then assumes the detective function. Though unapparent in performance or after a cursory reading, the shifts in detectives in this example become quite obvious when closely examined. With the realization that a murder has been committed, a detective is required. Julian Cleveland, an in-law of the deceased, rules out the bothersome presence of the police until the crime is solved. Since it is his decision to omit the police detectives, he first assumes the role of functional investigator. His interpretation of the evidence points to Richard Lane, a jealous rival of the victim. McAuliffe, the stage director, comes to Lane's aid and assumes the guise of detective. He explains away the clues against Lane and in doing so effectively places suspicion on Torrence, the man who fired a property gun in the play-within-the-play. Torrence then sets to work proving his innocence. The pattern continues throughout the
second and third acts until the ingenue, Carlotta, seems guilty. Faced with the hateful prospect of seeing his newly found love carried off to jail, Lane, the original suspect, solves the mystery. The authors have by then placed the dual mantels of suspect and detective upon most of their characters and have come full circle to reach the solution. In the hands of Barry and Rice this device involving a substitution in detectives proves an effective variation on an overworked formula.\(^4\)

Another type of confined-mystery sub-formula derived by imposing a distinct motif on a standard formula is what might be called an environmental detective play. Only infrequently have mystery dramatists attempted this technique, in which the theatre itself and all its contents, including the audience, become an integral part of the play. Except for dramas such as *Cock Robin*, which merely use a theatre setting, examples of even a limited environmental approach are minimal. Emlyn Williams employs the theatre in which the audience is sitting as the setting for *A Murder Has Been Arranged*; however, his method goes little beyond filling in blanks in the script with names and dates corresponding to each separate production and performance of the play. Williams ignores the presence of the audience. More audience involvement occurs in *The Gorilla*, by Ralph Spence,

\(^4\) The collective detective is not peculiar to *Cock Robin*. In plays like *Ten Little Indians* and *The Ninth Guest* in which everyone is suspect, the detective role is ill-defined out of necessity and can be viewed as being assumed by several characters (those remaining alive). However, neither of those plays displays the carefully linked pattern of *Cock Robin*, in which shifts of guilt lead to new characters assuming the detective function.
when the title character romps up the center aisle of the theatre, but the device is extraneous to the play as a whole. In Thomas Fallon's *The Last Warning* police place the audience under arrest, but the involvement is entirely passive and the environmental element is introduced only in the final scenes. Seldom has the Broadway theatre employed an environmental approach so extensively, however, as in the mystery play, *The Spider* by Fulton Oursler and Lowell Brentano, in which the murder takes place in the audience.\(^{15}\)

In all of its elements except spectacle, *The Spider* resembles a typical police procedural with occasional murder-house qualities.\(^{16}\) The play contains a standard murder scene, arrival of the police, confinement of all suspects as material witnesses, and threats to haul everyone to headquarters for more violent questioning. There is nothing remarkable in the play's paucity of clues, implausible solution, lack of unity, and simplicity of plot. The emotions aroused are chiefly bafflement and fear, as would be expected in a play patterned on procedural and murder-house formulas. From the tough, stupid police to the screaming females and sinister foreigners, the characters seem familiar to a frequenter of mystery melodramas. Thought and diction similarly offer nothing new or striking;

---

\(^{15}\) Fulton Oursler and Lowell Brentano, *The Spider* (New York: Samuel French, 1932), I,17-18. Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 288-90.

\(^{16}\) It is not particularly significant that the best example of an environmental mystery is a procedural. The technique could conceivably be applied to any of the confined-mystery formulas with varying degrees of success.
a remote semblance to a deductive process is hinted at in the final scene, and the police speak their standard tough-guy jargon. Even in the areas of sound and spectacle much of the material in The Spider had appeared in countless earlier mystery plays. Lights are extinguished before shots are fired. Women scream for no apparent reason. Special effects taken directly from the typical magician's repertory augment other devices used to instill fear during the melodrama. The sole novel feature of spectacle involves the extraordinary staging of the play. Except for two brief scenes,¹⁷ the action of The Spider takes place on the stage and in the auditorium of a vaudeville theatre, the theatre in which the paying customers are viewing the play. Not only does the entire theatre become the "stage" for the production, but the real audience members also are incorporated into the play.

The authors of The Spider strenuously work to convey the impression that the audience members become involved in a murder investigation while they are attending a performance at a vaudeville theatre. The creation of that illusion begins on the street and in the lobby. The outside decoration of the theatre building consists of streamers and bunting typical of a low-class vaudeville house during its celebration of a special occasion. The lobby contains similar displays, as do the boxes in the auditorium itself. Annunciators adorn both sides of the stage. Ushers dress like those in a vaudeville house and bear the name of the fictional theatre on their

¹⁷One scene (II.i) takes place in a dressing room, and another (III.i) is placed in the theatre manager's office.
hats. The program they distribute tells of the acts for a vaudeville show and says nothing about a mystery melodrama. The performance itself begins not with the play proper, as the authors note, but with a series of vaudeville acts such as skaters and black-face entertainers (I.7-8). After several minutes of vaudeville entertainment the mystery commences unobtrusively during a magic act. At that point the authors are no longer content to let the audience sit passively and enjoy the novel setting. Instead, Oursler and Brentano almost immediately get the paying customers involved in the activities.

Audience participation begins when the house lights are brought up and the magician descends into the auditorium. Actors planted in the audience help to get the people in the mood to participate. The fictional members of the audience first offer objects for use in a mindreading act; however, the magician then selects articles from real audience members and uses those objects in his act (I.14). Soon afterward the murder takes place in the audience, thus giving the paying customers a vicarious sense of personal danger. After the arrival of the police, the audience never is allowed to revert to its passive role. Officers roam the aisles of the theatre, guard the exits at intermission, and force people back to their seats when the stage detective wants their attention (I.45). The height of audience involvement comes in the second act when brave viewers are asked to join hands and participate in a seance (II.11.73). As befits a play with such extensive direct audience involvement, the
solution occurs when the killer is tackled in the center aisle of the theatre while trying to sneak out in the dark (III, III, 103). Since The Spider maintains its audience-participation motif until the closing moments in such a fashion, the play could prove hazardous to those (e.g., critics) who do not see fit to stay for the curtain call.

A final example of a sub-formula created by imposing an additional feature on an otherwise standard formula play is the propaganda mystery, which enjoyed a limited popularity during the Second World War. While the use of political opinion and the denigration of a particular ideology have never been major factors in Broadway mystery theatre, propaganda did enter into the mystery formula in many plays produced on a regional basis at the time that the United States was preparing for and embroiled in war. Furthermore, mysteries on film and in many other forms readily advocated liberty and democracy in the face of fascism. Everyone from Wonder Woman to Sherlock Holmes fought the hated Nazis. Although elements of propaganda appeared less frequently in Broadway mysteries than in other dramatic forms, the Nazi-centered propaganda boom obtained an early boost in New York

18 For example, N. Richard Nusbaum's Incognito played in Philadelphia in 1941, and Emmet Lavery's Murder in a Nunnery entertained Los Angeles audiences in 1942.

19 Wonder Woman was a red-white-and-blue clad comic-book goddess who marshalled the powers of Mount Olympus against Hitler. A series of Sherlock Holmes films starring Basil Rathbone transported the Victorian sleuth to the time of World War II and depicted the master detective as foiling the villainous fascists.
with Clare Boothe's *Margin for Error*,²⁰ the first hit play to deal
with the subject of the Hitler regime.

Except for its anti-Nazi features, *Margin for Error* is a
fairly standard example of a police procedural. All the expected
qualities of a police play are present: an early point of attack,
a slow introduction of characters, and a careful creation of motives
for the eventual murder. Reversals accompany not only the discovery
of the body, but also the seldom-used procedural device of revealing
that several people have tried to murder the victim.²¹ The play also
contains an obligatory confinement speech²² and threats of rougher
treatment at the police station.²³ The only standard procedural
feature not adhered to is the use of two policemen.²⁴ Nevertheless,
the propaganda ingredients permeating the drama transform it into
an entirely different sort of play.

On the level of characterization the effect of propaganda be­
comes rather obvious. As is to be expected in a mystery play, char­
acters are typed; however, propaganda requires an exceptional

²⁰Clare Boothe [Luce], *Margin for Error* (New York: Random
House, 1940). Further references to this play will be noted in the
text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 285-86.

²¹Herbert Ashton, Jr. used this pattern in *The Locked Room*,
a mystery of the early 1930's.

²²"None of you is leaving!" (II,129).

²³"The Homicide Squad will ... massage him with a hose.
He'll come out a couple of inches shorter" (II,141).

²⁴Although two police officers are on duty, only one appears
on stage.
refinement of type to caricature. Boothe provides such an approach to character and even acknowledges it when she describes her victim as "the type of German who makes caricaturists' lives easy, and pro-German propaganda difficult" (I.24). The author reduces the types to the purest of blacks and whites, so that no one can fail to distinguish the ideological heroes from the villains. The following sketch of Moe Finkelstein, a Jewish American, leaves little doubt where the author's sympathies lie:

Moe is in his late twenties, small, slender and almost handsome in a rather wistful Jewish way. Elaborately and awkwardly polite to his superiors, he is nevertheless fully conscious of his status as a public functionary. His demonstrations of good-will could only be mistaken by snobs for servility. In common with most of the people of his race, he has the gifts of ready sympathy, loquacity and inquisitiveness. Born in some sub-human crevice of a large American city, he has kept intact his allegiance to his family and to his God (I.6).

The antithesis of that introduction is a somewhat less flattering portrait of an American Nazi:

Otto Horst, the American Bund leader, is a fat, forty-year-old ex-eloquence teacher, with a pasty intramural complexion, who has attempted in vain to suppress his pedagogical pudginess by wearing a tight-fitting Nazi-brown military uniform. . . . Horst is ruthless but timid, he is without a shred of humor, and is generally dour, unless drunk with his own verbosity. Always having imagined himself as a cunning fellow, he is really a facile target for any form of guile or mischief which originates in a superior mind. He is a pushover for flattery, and when it is not forthcoming from others, he is quick to knock himself practically insensible with it. 'Tis a pity he is an American (I.5).

The Fuhrer himself receives a similar treatment, even though only his voice is heard: "And now the Awful, Awful Voice of Hitler, the man who talked a nation and perhaps a civilization to its doom begins,
hysterical, guttural, hideously sure and hard and loud" (I.118).

Boothe describes her other characters in the same overly simplistic manner. Only occasionally is a portrait ambivalent and never does that approach occur without a reason. Max, for instance, seems rather likeable for a Nazi; not only does he speak flawless English, but he is also "a nice fellow . . . well bred and well tailored; in short he is the exact opposite of all his own leaders" (I.5). Eventually the reason for Max's personal, sartorial, and elocutionary excellence is made clear: his grandmother was Jewish. Only in such an exceptional case can character treatment in a propaganda play fall anywhere but in the strictest of good-bad delineations.

Propaganda also greatly influences thought in a mystery. Writers of "whodunits" have always been fond of imposing serious moral discussions on their seemingly serious form. Favorite among such topics have been questions of justice, guilt, and vigilantism. Seldom, however, has an author of mysteries indulged himself to the extent that Clare Boothe does in Margin for Error. Most of the imposed thought in her play consists of either anti-Nazi or pro-Jewish sentiments: Nazis should not have the right to free speech; Jews are "a biologically sound and superior race" (I.17). Often Boothe merely lets the foolish Nazis speak for themselves. Their un-American aphorisms abound: "Books are dangerous!" (I.33) and "Democracy is a good word for that. Stupidity is better" (I.50). Boothe also

25"But when a guy . . . stands on his Constitutional rights to preach murder--there oughta be some Constitutional way to give him a military funeral" (I.13).
includes the standard German threats about one's relatives. She likes that method of depicting the underhandedness of Nazis so much that she uses it on two different occasions (I.23, 51). Naziism is represented as being so detestable in Margin for Error that even the Nazis themselves admit it. The villainous Consul exclaims in one of his infrequent truthful moments, "Do you think I want to go back to Germany any more than you do? It is an easier country to serve than to live in—just between us" (I,61). Occasionally anti-Nazi thought rises above isolated, one-line attacks against Hitler's regime; however, the scenes that appear to present discussions of the issue are actually assemblages of the same one-liners, as can be seen in this brief exchange:

DENNY, Every cause gets the leader it deserves.
CONSUL, I take that as a great compliment to our cause in Germany.
DENNY, But some causes can't stand transplanting.
CONSUL, We don't transplant. We sow good seeds which propagate naturally.
DENNY, Baumer, we can't argue. We begin from opposite premises. You believe the citizen was born to serve the state. We believe the citizen is the state—
CONSUL, Our belief has created a great Germany.
DENNY, All the returns on Germany are not in yet. Don't forget, America's still the richest and freest nation.
CONSUL, I hope you can defend this fat Eden (I.80-81).

As extraneous as such arguments are to a mystery, they might still persuade and eventually lead to definite alterations of viewpoint about the problem under discussion. Boothe fails, however, to provide reasoned debate or workable solutions to the serious material she
appends to her mystery. Her rebuttal to Nazi racism employs merely more racism and a strong reliance upon ethnocentric biases.26

Diction, music, and spectacle contribute similarly to Boothe's anti-Nazi portrait. The heroic Jew speaks charmingly and ingenuously in a New York-ese that he himself describes as "Just an American way of talking" (I,47). He peppers his diction with such stereotyped Americanisms as "jeez," "you ain't no brother of mine, mister!" "O. K." "Hizzoner the Mayor," "yeah," and "nope" (I,47-51). Conversely, the wicked German Consul speaks not only standard Nazi rhetoric in strongly accented English, but he is also given in moments of stress to uttering the most ungraceful and unmelodic of Teutonic phrases, such as "Schweigen Siel" "Ach, der Tag!" and "Lassen Sie mich!" (I,51, 55, 69). The same sort of anti-German, pro-Jewish advocacy occurs in the use of music. A recording of a Mendelssohn piece played by Heifetz is enjoyed by all the characters including the Nazi Consul, who mistakes it for Wagnerian opera (I,37). When he is apprised of his error, the German replaces the offending record with the more Teutonic "Liebestod," which does little to improve anyone's disposition. Strident German music also sets the mood for violent events. "Deutschland ü ber Alles" introduces Hitler's radio speech, which soon develops into a carefully orchestrated cacophony

26 For example, the closest she comes to explaining how Nazism could have been avoided in Germany is an ethnic slur against Teutonic names:

"Schicklegruber, that's Adolf's real name. His mother's name, his father never gave him one, as everyone realizes intuitively. Just think, history might have been different if he hadn't changed it to Hitler! . . . Heil Schicklegruber!" (I,104).
of the Awful Voice and the "thunderous, . . . maniacal roar of the 'Seig Heils'" that are supposed to "fill the theatre" while the murder apparently takes place (I,120). Spectacle never functions with such complexity. The stage directions merely note that the room in the German Consulate is paneled in "clumsily carved" wood and conveys an impression of deepening gloom (l,3-4), thereby indicating the author's desire to carry the anti-Nazi feeling into this element as well.

Margin for Error is not unlike the other mystery plays, such as The Thirteenth Chair, Cock Robin, or The Spider, which impose their own particular novelties on otherwise standard formulas. While some dramatists may be faulted for excessiveness or heavy-handedness, as appears to be the case with Boothe, all the authors of such plays have sought to do something worthy of commendation: having selected the basic form of a confined-mystery melodrama, they have attempted to expand the ordinarily severe limitations of that form. Unfortunately, in their quest for novelty playwrights such as Boothe have sometimes imposed too much upon a frame that cannot support many appendages.
CHAPTER SEVEN
COMIC MYSTERIES

Comedy has played a significant role in mystery theatre from the inception of that approach to melodrama. The first modern mystery play and the oldest drama dealt with in this study, Seven Keys to Baldpate by George M. Cohan, 1 comically treats many of the overworked devices found in mystery novels. Few mystery dramas since Cohan's initial detective play have been devoid of a touch of humor, 2 although most mystery works maintain an appropriate melodramatic appearance of seriousness. The authors of mystery dramas use an occasional bit of comedy merely to lighten that seriousness ever so slightly so that the subject matter of crime does not seem overly gruesome. Several plays, however, have gone beyond a superficial use of comedy and have followed more closely the pattern used by Cohan. Confined mysteries that have taken such a comic slant include another Cohan vehicle, The Tavern. 3 Owen

---

1George M. Cohan, Seven Keys to Baldpate, in 10 Classic Mystery and Suspense Plays, ed. Stanley Richards (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1973), pp. 797–887. Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 299–300.

2It should be remembered that even macabre psychological thrillers such as Patrick Hamilton's Rope contain moments of humor. See Chapter Four, p. 154.

3George M. Cohan, The Tavern (New York: Samuel French, 1920). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 300–02.
Davi's *The Haunted House*, Ralph Spence's *The Gorilla*, George Batson's *Ramshackle Inn*, and the most successful of them all, Joseph Kesselring's *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

All these plays carry their comic elements so far that they represent a wholly unserious form: they are comedies disguised as melodramas; that is, they employ mystery-melodrama plot incidents for the chief purpose of laughter and ridicule rather than fear, hate, suspense, or even bafflement. The most facile method of imposing comedy upon the melodramatic form is a parody of the latter. Consequently, authors of humorous mystery plays have employed parody as their principal approach to a comic treatment of crime. Like the plays in the

---

4 Owen Davis, *The Haunted House* (New York: Samuel French, 1926). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 295-97.

5 Ralph Spence, *The Gorilla*, revised ed. (New York: Samuel French, 1950). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 294-95.

6 George Batson, *Ramshackle Inn*, revised ed. (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1944). Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 297-98.

7 Joseph Kesselring, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, in *Best Mystery and Suspense Plays of the Modern Theatre* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1971), pp. 409-508. Further references to this play will be noted in the text. A synopsis of this play appears in the Appendix on pp. 292-94.

8 William E. Over, in "The Rehearsal and Its Place in the Development of English Burlesque Drama in the Seventeenth Century," Diss. Ohio State 1975, p. 242, defines parody as "The high burlesque of a particular work (or author) achieved by applying the style of that work (or author) to a less worthy subject (or author)." At its simplest, parody is merely a humorous imitation of a serious writing. It is said to change sense to nonsense or, to use more Aristotelian terminology, seriousness to ludicrousness.
preceding chapter, these works incorporate a slight alteration in the
standard formulas (the replacement of a seemingly serious approach by
an unserious, parodistic one) that results in a radically different
drama, a comic mystery.

Essentially the method used to scoff at the sober originals
calls for an author to exaggerate the many familiar incidents, tech­
niques, and details of the more serious mysteries to the point of ab­
surdity. In doing so a playwright makes the borrowed ingredients
laughable and in most cases shows how preposterous they were even in
their original unexaggerated form. The writers of these comedies
favor murder-house mysteries as the chief recipients of their ridicule,
but features of procedurals, "Had I But Knowns," and even psychologi­
cal thrillers also appear in comic mysteries with considerable fre­
quency. This chapter examines the means whereby the features of
standard formulas are exaggerated in these plays to create comedy out
of melodrama.

In the realm of plot, authors of comic mysteries can be ac­
cused of nothing, if not of obviousness. They begin derision by em­
ploying some of the more ubiquitous features of the expository scenes
in standard thrillers. A favorite target of their satirical barbs is
the rapid introduction of essential information leading to the crime.
Almost universally, authors of these comedies treat such exposition
with exceeding brevity. When that is impossible, the celerity with
which they present essential expository material serves to indicate
the superficiality of such information, as evidenced in the following speech from Seven Keys to Baldpate:

My husband is the president of the Reuton-Asquewan Suburban Railway Company. He has agreed to pay a vast amount of money for a certain city franchise; a franchise that the political crowd at Reuton has no power to grant. They are going to cheat him out of this money and use it for campaign funds to fight the opposition party at the next election. If he sues for his money back, they are going to expose him for entering into an agreement he knows to be nothing short of bribery. The present mayor is at the bottom of it all . . . I ran to my husband tonight and begged him not to enter into this deal. I warned him that he was being cheated. He wouldn't believe me, but I know it's true. He's being cheated, and will be charged with bribery besides. That's why I risked the mountain on a night like this. I must have been followed, for I was shot at as I reached the top of Baldpate. Oh, I don't know who you are, but you're a man and you can help me (I.839-40).

While the speech is anything but brief, it effectively mocks a propensity in murder plays to handle a plethora of information as expeditiously as possible in order to get more quickly to the villainies. A similar comment on the rush of mystery dramas toward scenes of mayhem is made by the suddenness with which the crime itself is committed in these parodies. Although crimes come early in some standard mystery plays, they often occur in comedies with the rise of the curtain. In Ramshackle Inn, for instance, a character is murdered for no explicable reason only seconds after the start of the drama (I.7); The Haunted House begins with an apparent burglary (I.5). When an actual crime does not take place immediately, comic playwrights at least provide an obviously expeditious means of

9 Though Cohan inserts these lines in the middle of his play, the speech is clearly derivative of the rapid early exposition of murder-house mysteries.
establishing the probability of fearful incidents. Such transparent introduction of fearful materials ranges from the simplicity found in *The Tavern*, where Cohan merely has the first character on stage trem­ble with fright (I.9), to the heavy-handedness of *The Gorilla*, in which mysteriously moving furniture and a radio broadcast about ghosts (I.7-8) set the mood of mysteriousness.

Authors of parodies even more mercilessly lampoon the middle sections of mystery plays. Complications resulting from a crime that was so rapidly introduced early in one of the opening scenes of the play now become objects of derision. Again the parodist's tool is exaggeration, but of a different kind. Many familiar but unfunny devices found in mystery plays appear largely unaltered in comic mysteries. A degree of humorous exaggeration comes not from the devices themselves but simply from an overabundance of them. The roster of mystery-drama ingredients found in the development and complication scenes of these plays stretches almost endlessly, as the following partial list indicates: a fake ghost (*Haunted*, III.70), pistol shots (*Baldpate*, I.837), an insane culprit (*Arsenic*, III.11.497), suspicion of the wrong man (*Ranshackle*, II.37), corrupt police (*Tavern*, II.83), a real ghost (*Baldpate*, II.882), framing the hero (*Baldpate*, II.866), the "dead" coming to life (*Haunted*, I.30), a detective who inductively reasons from miniscule clues (*Haunted*, I.37), a big city policeman on hand to assist local officers (*Gor­rilla*, I.20), a mysterious face at a window (*Gorilla*, I.35), a talk­ing skeleton (*Gorilla*, II.72), secret panels (*Gorilla*, II.57),
chicanery in the dark (Ramshackle, I.34-35), a mysterious hand sneaking around a corner (Gorilla, II.66), torture (Arsenic, III.1.491), and a foolish person walking into a trap (Arsenic, III.11.489-90).  

So many such overworked complicating factors appear in each comedy that a logical unraveling of them seems an impossibility. Some plays, such as Seven Keys to Baldpate and The Gorilla, even assume an antilogical stance in their indiscriminate use of such devices: anything that is totally out of place and unrelated to most, if not all, that has preceded it becomes an optimum device of further complication.

---

10 Only a single instance of each device has been noted. Actually most of these details occur repeatedly in the six plays. For example, the favorite use of an insane or mentally troubled individual occurs in all the plays except The Haunted House and Ramshackle Inn.

11 One other mystery device complicates comic mysteries almost exclusively: a vanishing corpse or "busy body," as it was labeled by Donald E. Westlake in the title of one of his comic mystery novels. What would ordinarily be a loathsome, repugnant object becomes a comic prop instead. The humorous use of a corpse in stage mysteries begins with Seven Keys to Baldpate, in which a body disappears and then reappears toward the end of the drama (II.871), and continues in most of the comic mysteries. Usually authors display their inventiveness by providing variations on the Baldpate approach, as in Ramshackle Inn, in which the body is placed in a sack for easier handling (II.57). A bagged body also appears in The Gorilla; however, the person stuffed therein is merely unconscious (III.96). In The Haunted House the originality lies in the fact that the corpse has vanished so completely that no one ever sees it (III.93). Joseph Kesselring is particularly dexterous in Arsenic and Old Lace: he provides two bodies, which arrangement enables the characters transporting the corpses to play a game of musical graves (II.461). Whether a busy body is dead or alive, mobile or nonexistent, bagged or unencumbered, it serves as one of the few complicating features that are unique to comic mysteries.

One of the few confined mysteries not categorized as a comedy that employs a busy body is Agatha Christie's Spider's Web. The use of the device in that drama does much to make it one of the most amusing of Christie's many tongue-in-cheek mysteries.
The authors of these comedies face the prodigious task of providing solutions for such seemingly insoluble masses of complication and confusion. In the less muddled mysteries, typical ingredients of mystery solutions can be used to comic effect, as is done in Arsenic and Old Lace (insanity as an explanation of criminal behavior), Ramshackle Inn (deduction leading to a single logical solution), and The Haunted House (confession by the villain when escape appears impossible). In those dramas that seem anti-logical because of their exceedingly complicated scenes of development, a unique comic solution has been developed. Cohan first used the special explanation in Seven Keys to Baldpate; he explains all of the seemingly impossible events by revealing in an epilogue that most of the play is an enactment of a novel being written by the leading character, Magee (Epilogue, 886-87). Ralph Spence borrows Cohan’s solution for The Gorilla, in which most of the play similarly visualizes a drama as it is read to a potential producer (III,115). Such a technique, in effect, places the inexplicable activities in a frame or in quotation marks. "Anything goes" becomes the byword of plays with that solution. The technique carries with it a last satirical thrust at the detective genre: it implies that mysteries are so ridiculous that their authors can and do get away with anything.

All such ingredients of plot as exaggerations, anti-logic, and framing devices serve to emphasize the unserious nature of comic mysteries. The authors themselves are careful to note that their
plays should never cross the barrier even into seeming seriousness. Furthermore, they employ several means of pointing their intent to mock seemingly serious mysteries. Cohan seems particularly fond of emphasizing his parodistic approach by identifying the object being ridiculed, as can be seen in the following exchange from *Seven Keys to Baldpate*:

MAGEE. You harm that girl, and I'll get you if it's the last act of my life!

CARGAN. I've read that kind of talk in books.

MAGEE. I write books of that kind, but I'm talking real talk now! (II.861).

Later in the same play Cohan has his central character admit that most of the drama is "Wild, terrible, horrible melodrama. . . . Treated as a joke" (Epilogue.887). Similarly, in *The Tavern* Cohan underlines his comic intent by inserting questions whose answers are all too clear: "Are you trying to poke fun at me?" (II.62) and "Surely you wouldn't have me take this seriously?" (II.81). Owen Davis also tries to make the parodistic nature of *The Haunted House* apparent when he observes that his work should be enacted in a "satirical spirit" of "half-exaggeration" (I.13). Further to ensure that their plays remain obviously comic, playwrights often include such expected ingredients as visual humor and verbal jokes, many of which come directly from farce. *The Tavern* features such typical

---

12 For example, George Batson warns about the body in *Ramshackle Inn*. He includes the prohibition that the corpse "should not be too realistic" (II.54). He fully realizes that even a remotely human body carted about the stage can easily become grisly; therefore, he cautions against exceeding the perilously close limits of unseriousness.
"sight gags" as people sticking their tongues out at those they hate and choking someone to keep him silent (I.15-16). Owen Davis uses more complicated visual comedy that is dependent on precise timing when he has characters play a slapstick scene involving a door in *The Haunted House* (I.8). Other visual farce devices found in these dramas include slaps in the face with wet clothes (*Ramshackle*, I.15), slow takes (*Gorilla*, I.41), double takes (*Arsenic*, I.443), and a chase through the audience (*Gorilla*, III.114). Such visual humor is at least as old as the *commedia dell'arte*; most of the verbal jokes seem scarcely any newer. Freshness in comic lines ranges from the many theatre-related comments of *Arsenic and Old Lace* to the old-and-not-so-favorites of *The Gorilla* and *Ramshackle Inn*. Effectiveness aside, verbal comedy, like the visual humor found in these parodies, marks the authors' efforts to avoid even a suggestion of seriousness.

13 "Why, Mortimer [the critic] hates the theater. . . . He writes awful things about the theater. You can't blame him, poor boy. He was so happy writing about real estate, which he really knew something about, and then they just made him take this terrible night position" (I.420-21).

14 Included in *The Gorilla*'s aging repertory of jokes is the following hilarity about people ministering to an unconscious friend: "ALICE. Mr. Garrity, do you think a drink of brandy would help? GARRITY. It might. (Takes brandy, gulps it down and hands glass back to Alice) Thanks" (II.59).

15 The author assures the reader that the following will get a laugh: "If I'd known I was leaving a jackass in charge, I might just as well stayed myself" (II.61). He makes no guarantees, however, about his less original witticisms such as "I've always hated the sight of blood—especially my own" (III.71).
Magnitude is yet another aspect of stage mysteries that receives the attention of comic writers. The excessive complications that dominate comedy mysteries reflect the attempts in more serious detective plays to make the problems under consideration seem more perplexing than they are. Owen Davis best parodies such artificial enhancement of magnitude when he reveals that the victim in his baffling case actually is a milk cow (III.93). Comedy writers further belittle the typical insistence that murder be the subject of investigation, because any less heinous crime would weaken a mystery's already insignificant magnitude. As has been noted earlier, people in humorous detective dramas may be murdered at the beginning without a word of explanation, thereby lampooning the supposed necessity of a murder by getting it out of the way as quickly as possible. In The Tavern George M. Cohan uses a diametric approach: the play contains no deaths and few moments of even remote danger until the final minutes. As if remembering that he must include murder, Cohan provides three unnecessary deaths off stage during the denouement.16 Though his approach differs from that of other authors, Cohan's satirical comment is the same: while murder is not essential to a

16 The following exchange includes the reference to the triple slaying:
"STEVENS. Who were those two men doing all the shooting out there?
FREEMAN. Officers of the Law. . .
STEVENS. Why did they shoot and kill the man who just left the tavern?
FREEMAN. They killed him! William is dead!
STEVENS. Dead as a door nail. . .
GOVERNOR. They'll hang for this,
STEVENS. No, they won't. I shot and killed them both" (II.90).
mystery, it has become so ingrained in the formula as an enhancer of magnitude that authors perceive it as being indispensable.

The excessive complications that serve well to parody magnitude cause problems in the matter of unity. While such confusions even function effectively to satirize the episodic and illogical qualities of many stage mysteries, complications in the parodies cause an extraordinary lack of unity even for comedies, which by their nature tend toward episodic plots. As is the case with many parodies and satires, these joking mysteries often suffer from worse instances of the faults they are belittling than do the objects of their ridicule.\(^7\) Although the reason for this flaw in comic mysteries is clear, a lack of unity need not be considered a necessary evil in parodies of mystery plays. In those infrequent examples that do not parody excessive complication so mercilessly as do the Cohan efforts, unity of action proves far more easily achievable. Actually, the degree to which a comic play lacks unity is dependent on the particular formula being lampooned. The more unified the parent formula, the greater is the unity evidenced in its comic-mystery offspring.

Therefore, a comic version of an episodic murder-house play, such as \textit{Seven Keys to Baldpate}, presents considerably more inhibitors of

\(^7\) Parodies or satires in mystery form are not alone in this regard. For example, Terry Southern and Mason Hoffenberg claim to have set out to satirize the ridiculousness of modern pornographic novels in their creation, \textit{Candy}. The novel became one of the biggest sellers in the 1960's, not because it was brilliant satire, but because it contained excessive versions of the material that had made the objects of its derision so popular; therefore, \textit{Candy} was one of the most pornographic novels on the market.
unity than does a comedy like Arsenic and Old Lace, which has its ancestry in a more readily unifiable formula, the HIBK.

Because of their close resemblance to the parent formulas, comic mysteries also exhibit a lack of complexity, as do most of the more serious formulas. In general, these parodies possess the same degree of complexity as the formulas they are copying. Since most such parodies are of murder-house plays, they hyperbolize that pattern's usual simplicity in plot, in which startling discoveries and reversals come only in the waning moments. Cohan, who seldom misses a chance to lampoon seemingly serious mysteries, provides the best example of such eleventh-hour pseudo-complexity when he includes two late reversals in the revelation scenes of Seven Keys to Baldpate, the second peripety being more annoying, unsatisfying, and expedient than the initial one. While the first reversal seems necessary so that the author can extricate himself from an impossible situation he has created, the second serves only to mock the mystery writer's belief in the necessity of supplying just one more surprise.

Just as comic mysteries were seen to differ obviously in their degree of seriousness from standard-formula mysteries, these humorous versions also depart from serious treatments in their emotional materials. Laughter and ridicule, which serve only a secondary

---

18 The first reversal reveals that none of the prior events have been real. They have been staged by a group of actors hired by the novelist's friend to distract the author from writing (II, 883). The second reversal discloses that even that explanation is not true. All of the events, including the first explanation, are part of a novel (Epilogue, 885-87).
function in other detective plays, move in these plays to a foremost position of importance. Bafflement is present in most of these works, but its paramount position is greatly eroded. A sign of that difference is the fact that solutions can be handled cavalierly, as they are in Seven Keys to Baldpate and The Haunted House, without totally destroying the effectiveness of the plays in the theatre. Hate is still evoked in those instances where it would have been strong in the serious models being lampooned. In Arsenic and Old Lace, for example, the clearly identified evildoers, Jonathan and Dr. Einstein, remain objects of hate. A comic treatment of their deadliness, however, mitigates the hateful potential of the material significantly. Similarly, comic mysteries abound in what would ordinarily be fearful situations, but their comic ingredients effectively negate that potential also. Violence is mitigated like that of farce, in which customarily harmful actions do not inflict pain or create physical danger. Without a real threat, there is no fear and, consequently, no suspense. Thus, laughter and ridicule become predominant not only because of an abundance of comic incidents but also because those laughable ingredients serve to remove the ordinarily stronger but conflicting emotional materials of fear and suspense.

19 Arsenic and Old Lace does not draw heavily on bafflement. Its absence results not from the fact that the play is a comedy, but instead comes from the drama's being patterned after the HIBK formula, which has little bafflement in its serious versions as well.

20 Such fearful materials are not included because they are necessary for the creation of comedy; they instead stem from the ingredients of the formulas being parodied.
In their treatment of character, comic mysteries pursue the pattern of exaggeration that is so clearly evidenced in their plots. Such comic overstatement of character manifests itself in the many eccentric types that are responsible for much of the humor in these plays. Such types appear with even greater frequency than in more sober works, in keeping with the exaggeration of the more obvious features of the standard formulas. In particular abundance because of their comic potential are dumb cops. Seldom have police been so stupid, at least in the annals of fiction. In one instance they follow the tracks of a dog, which they think are a woman's footprints (Haunted, II.56), while on another occasion they admit to never knowing anything about the cases they try to solve (Haunted, II.65). The plays call for even the more intelligent officer in the traditional team to be "quite dumb" (Gorilla, I.25). Many other outré characters join the stupid law officers in these eccentric-laden dramas.

Gohan capitalizes upon the comic-mystery proclivity for whimsical characters with his mystery novelist in Seven Keys to Baldpate, who lives life as if it were a detective story, and with his loveable lunatics in The Tavern. In The Haunted House Owen Davis also employs a novelist who cannot separate fiction from reality. For good measure, Davis includes a policeman who is not only mentally deficient but who also faints at the sight of blood (III.92). The Gorilla might seem to take the prize for strangest character with its cavorting, audience-roaming ape; however, by sheer weight of numbers Arsenic and Old Lace is the play most steeped in and dependent upon
eccentricity of character. In addition to a plethora of idiotic en­
forcers of the law, Kesselring provides old ladies who poison lonely
men as a hobby, a man who believes himself to be Teddy Roosevelt, a
plastic surgeon with a drinking problem, and a murderous fellow whose
resemblance to Boris Karloff is a direct result of the former char­
acter's dipsomania. Even the supposedly normal Mortimer is not a
model of correct behavior; presumably most theatre critics do not
write their reviews on the way to the theatre in order to save time,
as Mortimer does (I,444). By including such eccentrics in their
plays, the authors strive through character to create much of the
necessary laughter and ridicule in their comic mysteries.

Unlike character, thought and diction receive only minimal
ridicule from comedy playwrights. Mockery of thought is apparent
chiefly in the inclusion of pseudo-scientific explanations for a
criminal's lawbreaking. In The Haunted House, for instance, a would­
be Freudian detective talks of complexes and suppressed desires and
employs psychoanalysis to restore the faculty of speech to a man who
never lost it (I,38-40). Similarly, the title character in The Go­
rilla claims that his reason for murdering people stems from the
fact that girls do not like to hug him because he has hairy arms
(III,113). Comic mysteries also parody the use of supposedly sound
reasoning to arrive at a solution. In the Owen Davis play the de­
tective persistently reasons from his observations in a manner
worthy of Sherlock Holmes himself; unfortunately his conclusions
almost always prove to be erroneous. As added material for the
appearance of illogicality, the authors also employ non-sequitur thought in many of the plays. While Cohan appears to have instituted the practice in his irrational comedies, non sequiturs figure most prominently in Arsenic and Old Lace. The thought patterns of the Brewster sisters are as labyrinthine as any found in the entire mystery field. Their thinking often follows what might be termed an "insane logic," which is entirely consistent with the characters of the two women. For instance, the sisters explain their latest murder to their nephew in the following manner:

MORTIMER. Aunt Martha, men don't just get into window seats and die.

ABBY. No, he died first.

MORTIMER. But how?

ABBY. Mortimer, don't be so inquisitive! The gentleman died because he drank some wine with poison in it.

MORTIMER. How did the poison get in the wine?

MARTHA. We put it in wine because it's less noticeable. When it's in tea it has a distinct odor.

MORTIMER. You put it in the wine?

ABBY. Yes, And I put Mr. Hoskins in the window seat because Dr. Harper was coming (I.435).

Although there is an erratic trail of logic in the sisters' reasoning, none of their answers are responsive to Mortimer's questions, with the result that the sisters appear to think illogically to a sane person. Less evident in these plays is any effort to derive humor from diction: comic language comes chiefly in the form of the use of
those bad lines that occur with altogether too much frequency in more serious mysteries.\textsuperscript{21}

Although the authors of mystery comedies fail to lampoon thought or diction as mercilessly as they do other elements, the playwrights do not overlook the strong dependency of mysteries upon sound and spectacle. Settings for these parodies occasionally rival those of the most device-filled of the parent plays. Ralph Spence employs a living room in \textit{The Gorilla} that is riddled with as many sliding panels, hidden doorways, trap doors, and false-backed fireplaces as the set for \textit{The Cat and the Canary}. The typical lighting of mysteries is the subject of even more obvious parody. When a murder uncharacteristically takes place with the lights up in \textit{Seven Keys to Baldpate}, someone immediately insists that they be extinguished for the investigation (II.86). The tendency of lighting to wane periodically in mysteries gets a comic treatment as well. When lights act erratic, they do so with a vengeance, as can be seen in the opening to \textit{Ramshackle Inn}:

\begin{quote}
Lights go down. Patton lights match and goes to light candle. Lights flicker up. Puts match out. Starts to read again. Lights go down. Lights candle. As he begins to read by candlelight, lights come up again. As he starts to blow out candle, lights go down (I,5).
\end{quote}

Through that use of comic overstatement, a device ordinarily used to evoke fear becomes laughable instead. Sound receives the most

\textsuperscript{21}The best example occurs in \textit{The Tavern}:

"VIOLET. You can't frighten me. I'll have my revenge if I have to hound you to the end of your days. VAGABOND. By gad, I never heard the line read better" (II.62).
ridicule in the plays that utilize a storm as the means of confinement. In no less than three of the comedies, *Seven Keys to Baldpate*, *The Tavern*, and *Ramshackle Inn*, the fierceness of the weather is heard each time someone opens an outside door. In two of the plays the noise simply sounds inordinately loud, but in *The Tavern* the storm rages so harshly that pistols fire when the door opens (I.9). Such approaches to sound and spectacle carry the method of exaggeration for comic effect through to those final two elements.

The formula for comic mysteries is the simplest of all. The creation begins with a standard formula, usually that of a murder-house mystery. Devices of parody such as exaggeration of weaknesses and eccentricities of characterization are combined with visual jokes and verbal humor to alter the seemingly serious original formula until it becomes undeniably ludicrous. The emotional statement of the play thereby shifts from fear and bafflement to laughter and ridicule. Such a simply stated, though not easily achieved, process leads to the creation of a piece of comedy that is disguised in the outward form of melodrama.
CHAPTER EIGHT
CONCLUSION

Now that the confined-mystery plays under study have been
categorized and analyzed, general observations about them can be of­
ered with some assurance. Most comments must relate, however, only
to the broadest of criteria, because of the diversity found among con­
fined mysteries. The most obvious observation holds true for all mys­
teries: the dramas deal with crime and criminals. In most instances
murder serves as the major crime, but illegal acts ranging from black­
mail to infidelity also animate the dramas. Each confined mystery
poses a question to both characters and audience alike; that question
(usually "Who done it?") emanates from a criminal act. The answer to
that crime-related question surfaces only near the end of the mystery
and ideally results from the actions of the character who has been
investigating the crime. That character, the detective, also ap­
ppears in all confined mysteries. He need not be a professional in­
vestigator; he must only function as the investigating force. Beyond
that general observation, variety creeps into the character of the
detective as it does into most other aspects of these dramas: de­
tectives may be professionals or amateurs, individuals or a group of
people, clearly identified or ill defined. Because of such differ­
ences further remarks about these mysteries must be couched in less
In the realm of plot, all the plays begin with an introduction of the crime and the posing of the all-important mystery question. When a play uses a late point of attack, the crime occurs at the outset and the beginning section of the drama is brief. A mystery employing an early attack has a considerably longer opening section, an attribute that allows for character development and creation of motives before the commission of the crime. The middle of a confined-mystery play commences after the discovery of a major crime and depicts a detective's search for a solution, which usually takes the form of a criminal investigation. In the details of that search variety enters into the development scenes of such mysteries. A plethora of different conclusions follows that diversity in development. Although each of the mysteries provides its mystery question with an answer, which usually amounts to revealing the criminal, the means of doing so varies.

More commonality among all categories of confined mysteries can be found in the areas of unity, complexity, seriousness, and emotional ingredients. Confined mysteries generally lack unity of action. Furthermore, even when a play possesses a degree of unity, it may convey an impression of being episodic because of the uncertainty of where the seemingly unrelated clues lead. Complexity, like unity, usually is absent in confined mysteries. While the plays may seem
complex, they actually abound in excessive complication and problems of seemingly great magnitude. Seldom do the dramas contain the major discoveries and reversals necessary for complexity, except in their final moments. Even more commonality among categories appears in the seemingly serious approach mystery playwrights take toward their crime-related materials. In general, the authors include a considerable amount of comedy to ensure that patently serious crimes will never seem too gruesome. Although the emotional ingredients usually included in these mysteries—fear, hate, suspense, bafflement, and ridicule—are alike, their importance varies greatly from one category of play to another. The least prevalent emotion is hate, which proves difficult to achieve in mysteries since the object of hatred, the villain, is unidentified throughout most of the drama. On the other hand, when an author reveals the villain early, hate plays a particularly strong role in the emotional makeup of the play.

An extensive use of types epitomizes character treatment in all confined mysteries. Because of the importance of crime in mysteries, all characters can be grouped into categories based on their relation to the major criminal activity; each agent is either a detective, victim, suspect, or an auxiliary figure. More specific types populate each of those major categories of characters, so that a myriad of stereotypical figures appears in the body of confined mysteries. Apart from the use of types, the most pervasive aspect of character in mysteries involves the proclivity for character transformation, which occurs in all confined mysteries except those in
which the author presents the criminal act as being morally justifiable.

Although thought varies from play to play and from one character in a play to another, some broad observations can be about its use in confined mysteries as a whole. Deduction or a semblance of a deductive process permeates the overall thought in most of the dramas. All of the identified categories also abound in tangential topics that are seldom linked to the crime under investigation. Similarly, the plays often present philosophical stances on crime in general. In most confined mysteries "Crime doesn't pay" serves as an appropriate motto; however, mysteries also advocate vigilantism with great regularity.

Diction in these mysteries is unremarkable; only in the rarest of instances does it bear noting. In procedurals, for instance, jargon adds a touch of realism to the dialogue. More noteworthy is the fact that authors display particular skill in diction only in an isolated play such as Rope.

Finally, some general characteristics appear in the areas of sound and spectacle. Confined mysteries employ both elements to augment the plays' mysterious and fearful qualities, the most common device for such enhancement being to extinguish the lights to hide the crime. Dependence upon sound and spectacle ranges from overt violence in recent offerings to a virtual nonexistence of traditional devices in such a drama as Dangerous Corner.

In addition to general observations based upon the analyses of the categories, this study as a whole suggests other comments
about confined mysteries and, by extrapolation, about all mystery dramas. The ease with which the plays fit into restrictive categories and the number of commonalities among plays so grouped suggests the validity of the initial assumption of this study* that mystery plays follow prescribed formulas. That the specific formulas have not heretofore been carefully detailed in handbooks for authors but have been tacitly understood by writers of thrillers remains an unimportant point. It is significant only that such formulas exist and that they are extremely sophisticated, as evidenced by the many details of each major, minor, and sub-formula deciphered in the body of this study.

The indisputable proof of the existence of the formulas makes it possible to attempt to explain the wide-spread popularity of mystery dramas (and of the mystery genre in general): mysteries appeal not on a single, shallow level, as is postulated by denigrators of detective fiction, but on at least two levels, one of which is quite sophisticated dramaturgically. To relatively naive audiences any mystery works either as a melodramatic adventure focusing on a heroic detective's search for a villain or as a simple intellectual puzzle. To a more blase theatregoer unimpressed by excessive bloodletting and facile solutions to life's problems, a mystery play offers an opportunity to respond to expert dramatic craftsmanship. The sophisticated audience member can perceive the problems inherent in writing within the strict confines of a formula. Furthermore, he can appreciate the skill of the dramatist in lending his own originality so that his play, while conforming to a familiar formula, appears to have a
dramatic identity of its own. The ability of the mystery to enthrall both those people unfamiliar with its formulas and those who know the formulas all too well serves as at least one reason for the genre's phenomenal success on the stage.

This study has also led to some insights into the writing of plays according to formulas. Such playwriting is, of course, nothing new. Melodrama, the larger dramatic form to which mysteries belong, can itself be viewed as a kind of super-formula that has experienced changes in details over the centuries. Obviously, works by classical writers of melodrama such as Euripides and Seneca differ from plays by Renaissance practitioners such as Shakespeare and Marlowe. In turn, the melodramas of the latter authors show marked contrast to their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century descendants, the plays of Kotzebue and Pixérécourt. Formula became the watchword in the last century as Scribe and his disciple Sardou worked their own variations on Pixérécourt, elevated the pièce bien faite to a position of pre-eminence, and made playwriting more a science than an art. The twentieth century has continued the pattern of change by replacing the too obviously mechanical melodramas of the preceding hundred years with new approaches such as mystery plays.

The evolution of confined mysteries from 1913 to 1970 appears to have been a microcosmic version of those changes that had previously occurred in the super-formula of melodrama over two millennia. Formulas become too familiar with overuse, and new directions must be sought. Seldom do they come in the form of completely new patterns.
Instead, variations in the older formulas lead gradually to fresher approaches. In just that way, remarkably original but formula-based mysteries such as Arsenic and Old Lace and Sleuth have appeared on the stage. Mystery plays rejuvenate their form through variation rather than through wholesale departure from the older ways, in much the same manner that melodrama as a whole has retained its vitality in the theatre since its inception centuries ago.
This appendix contains synopses of the thirty-four plays that comprise the bulk of this study. The plays are arranged by the chapter in which they are treated and then in alphabetical order by title. Before each synopsis there is a notation of the theatre in which the play opened in New York or London, the date of the premiere, and the length of the initial run.
CHAPTER TWO: MURDER-HOUSE MYSTERIES

THE BAT

by Mary Roberts Rinehart and Avery Hopwood

New York: Morosco Theatre, August 23, 1920—860 performances

London: St. James's Theatre, January 23, 1922—327 performances

LIZZIE ALLEN: An easily frightened maid
CORNELIA VAN GORDER: A spinster who enjoys playing amateur sleuth
BILLY: A Japanese butler
BROOKS: A gardener
DALE OGDEN: Cornelia's niece and the fiancée of suspected embezzler, Bailey
DOCTOR WELLS: Local physician of highly suspicious nature
ANDERSON: A police detective
RICHARD FLEMING: An opportunistic playboy and owner of the house
REGINALD BERESFORD: Fleming's friend
AN UNKNOWN MAN

ACT I. A combined living room and library of a country house.

Cornelia Van Gorder has rented a house from Richard Fleming, a young man who recently inherited the property upon the death of his uncle, Courtleigh Fleming (a bank president). A million dollars happens to be missing from the late Fleming's bank, presumably stolen by Bailey (a young cashier), who has run from the investigating authorities. To further complicate matters, a murderer who calls himself "The Bat" is loose in the neighborhood.

At the rise of the curtain Cornelia is attempting to calm Lizzie (her personal maid) during an electrical storm. The easily frightened Lizzie is bothered by the ghosts, lightning, thunder, and blackouts that have been plaguing the house for two days and have frightened away all other servants except Billy the Jap (the butler). A new gardener, who calls himself Brooks, suddenly arrives, having been hired earlier in the day by Dale (Cornelia’s niece). Brooks proves to be lying about experience as a gardener, but
Cornelia retains him anyway. Dale then arrives home early from an evening out. She is escorted by Doctor Wells, the physician who had served as coroner at the time of Courtleigh Fleming's death. When a threatening note is thrown through a window, the doctor attempts to convince Cornelia to do as the note says and leave the house. The threat of death and the promise of excitement serve only to make the elderly woman more determined than ever to remain. Resigning himself to her position, the doctor leaves, but not before he secretly unlocks a door to the outside. Momentarily, Anderson (a police detective) arrives. He has been summoned by Cornelia to test her theory that thieves and not ghosts have been trying to get into the house in order to find the one million dollars that she believes the late Fleming stole and hid on the premises. It is soon revealed that Brooks is actually the cashier, Bailey, and that he is engaged to Dale. She has helped him gain access so that he can clear himself by finding the money, which he believes is hidden in a secret room in the house. Dale phones the owner of the house, Dick Fleming, and asks him to come over for a moment. She plans to ask him for blueprints that might reveal the location of a hidden room. The detective then enters, interrogates Dale, and reveals his knowledge of her engagement to the fugitive. As the lights go out because of the storm, a mysterious figure wearing a luminous watch enters through the door that the doctor had unlocked. Soon afterward young Fleming arrives and Dale tells him everything about her plan to save Bailey. Fleming finds the blueprints, but only so that he can steal the money. As he and Dale struggle over a piece of the floorplans, he is shot by an unseen person. All other characters enter to discover Dale standing over the corpse.

ACT II. The same.

Anderson suspects Dale of being the murderer, but his investigation is interrupted by two arrivals: the doctor, who has returned to try again to persuade Cornelia to leave, and Reginald Beresford, the man who had driven Fleming to the house. As the detective renews his search for the killer, Cornelia does her own investigating. When left alone with the doctor, Dale tells him that she has hidden the all-important blueprint, and he goes to retrieve it. Meanwhile, another stranger, the Unknown, has slipped into the house. After Cornelia reveals that she knows Bailey's identity, Dale tells her of the blueprint just as the doctor returns, claiming he cannot find it. The doctor then leaves the house momentarily and is soon followed by the Unknown. Beresford then reveals to the detective that the gardener is actually Bailey. Dale is then forced to tell the details of the struggle for the blueprint to all present. The doctor, who has just returned, denies that he found the plans, but in a private interrogation the detective tricks him into revealing the blueprint. After noting the location of the secret room, the detective is knocked unconscious by the doctor, who
binds him and drags him into another room. As the other characters enter before the doctor can flee, the Unknown is discovered tied and gagged at an outside door. Billy enters suddenly, exclaiming that he has seen a ghost. All lights go out in the room as doors are slammed shut and locked from the outside. As they try to escape, the trapped people see that a paper bat has been stuck to one of the doors. They have been locked in by The Bat.

ACT III. The trunk room on the third floor.

A masked man (The Bat) retrieves the money from a safe in a secret room behind the fireplace in the trunk room. As he hears the prisoners breaking out of the downstairs room, he hides the money in another place and exits. The people in the house eventually all enter the trunk room and discover the empty safe. The detective, who has released himself, arrests the doctor for the crimes. After a complicated series of entrances and exits and the discoveries of the money and of another body, that of the supposedly long-dead Courtleigh Fleming, Cornelia deciphers the mystery. Fleming and the doctor had staged the former's fake death to cover the embezzlement. When Cornelia rented the house from the new owner, the two plotters were forced to try to frighten her away so that they could retrieve the money that they had hidden in the safe. The plan was destroyed by The Bat, who killed both Flemings in his attempt to steal the million dollars. Finally, The Bat is captured and his identity revealed. He is the man who has been masquerading as Anderson, the detective. The Unknown, who apprehends The Bat with the assistance of Cornelia, proves to be the real Anderson.

THE CAT AND THE CANARY

by John Willard

New York: National Theatre, February 7, 1922—349 performances
London: Shaftesbury Theatre, October 31, 1922—181 performances

MAMMY PLEASANT: An old negress from the West Indies
ROGER CROSBY: The lawyer
HARRY BLITHE:
CICILY YOUNG:
SUSAN SILLSBY: The heirs
CHARLIE WILDER:
PAUL JONES:
ANNABELLE WEST:
ACT I. The library at Glencliff Manor on the Hudson.

Twenty years after Cyrus Canby's death, his six living relatives gather at his home for the reading of his will. They are Paul Jones, a veterinarian turned mechanic; two nervous women, Susan Sillsby and Cicely Young; a strong modern woman, Annabelle West; and two rivals for Miss West's affections, the charming Charles Wilder and the dangerous Harry Blythe. Joining them for the reading of the will are Roger Crosby (the lawyer) and Mammy Pleasant (the caretaker of the house). At midnight Crosby reads the will, which makes Annabelle the sole inheritor. However, a codicil stipulates that, should she die or go insane, the estate would go to another heir whose name is sealed in a separate envelope. Mammy then gives the heiress yet another envelope from her benefactor, which she is to read while spending the night in the late Mr. Canby's bedroom. It is believed that the envelope may reveal the location of an expensive necklace, which has been missing for years. Soon a guard from a lunatic asylum appears to warn the people not to leave the premises because a homicidal maniac has escaped. As the household prepares for bed, Crosby reveals to Anna that he believes someone has tampered with the envelope naming the successor to Anna in acquiring the estate. As he is about to tell her the names of the people who are trying to harm her, a secret panel opens and an arm pulls him into the wall without Anna's seeing anything. A search is begun to find the missing Crosby and Anna is left alone in the room for a few moments. As she exits to the bedroom, the maniac appears from his hiding place.

ACT II. The bedroom next to the library.

As Anna prepares to open the letter, she is visited by her two suitors. She makes it clear she loves neither of them; instead, her affection belongs to the nervous mechanic, Paul, who also loves her. Anna opens the letter and finds the necklace with the assistance of Mammy. Anna puts the jewelry around her neck and gets into bed. A claw-like hand appears through a secret panel and grabs the necklace as Anna screams and faints. The other characters break into the locked room and revive the heiress. In attempting to prove that she is not insane, Anna finds the release for the secret panel. When it opens, Crosby's body falls into the room.

ACT III. Same as Act I.

Harry takes the two frightened females, Cicely and Susan, to catch an early train, while Mammy fetches a doctor for Anna, and
Charlie goes to get the police. Left alone in the house with Anna, Paul goes to get the part of the will that identifies the next heir to the fortune. By retrieving the envelope from Crosby's body, Paul hopes to find who will benefit if Anna goes insane. While Anna is alone, Doctor Patterson enters and begins to examine her. He then goes to look for Paul and finds him unconscious in the bedroom. When he revives, Paul reveals that the body has disappeared. The doctor soon leaves, believing that Paul and Anna have both had too much to drink. Paul then sends Mammy, who had returned with the doctor, on a secret errand. Paul next goes to investigate more strange noises. The secret panel opens while Anna is alone in the room and the lunatic emerges. As Anna raises a gun that Paul had given her for protection, Hendricks (the guard from the asylum) rushes in to capture the maniac. Anna is not fooled by their ruse and rips a mask from the face of the lunatic, revealing him to be Charlie. While the obviously insane Charlie tries to kill Hendricks, his partner in crime, Paul and Harry rush on to capture them and save Anna. Paul then reveals the errand he gave to Mammy. She is to bring a preacher to perform the ceremony of matrimony for the two lovers.

THE MOUSETRAP

by Agatha Christie


MOLLIE RALSTON: Proprietress of the guest house
GILES RALSTON: Her husband
CHRISTOPHER WREN: An architect
MRS. BOYLE: An imposing woman with a bad temper
MAJOR METCALF: An old soldier
MISS CASEWELL: A young lady
MR. PARAVICINI: A foreigner
DETECTIVE SERGEANT TROTTER: A local policeman

ACT I. The great Hall at Monkswell Manor.

Scene 1. Late afternoon, Giles and Mollie Ralston are opening their new guest house for business on the same snowy day that a murderer is on the loose. The guests arrive momentarily. They are Christopher Wren, Mrs. Boyle, Major Metcalf, and Miss Casewell. Then an unexpected guest arrives: Mr. Paravicini, who has been trapped by the snowstorm.
Scene 2. The following day after lunch. The house is now snowbound. Mollie receives a call from the police saying that a detective is being sent over. Sergeant Trotter arrives on skis a few moments later. He explains that the murderer, a mentally deranged youth, is thought to be at Monkswell Manor and is intending to commit two more murders in order to avenge a wrong done him, his brother, and his sister in childhood. Mrs. Boyle, who was partially responsible for the children's trouble, is strangled in the dark.

ACT II. The same. Ten minutes later.

Trotter begins his investigation of the murder by trying to ascertain where each person was when Mrs. Boyle was strangled. At one time or another, each person appears to be the murderer. During the interrogations the detective's skis disappear. Finally, he decides to re-enact the crime with each person performing the actions that one of the others claims to have been doing at the time of the murder. After Trotter sends the people to various parts of the house, he calls Mollie. When she enters, he reveals that he is the murderer and that she is to be the final victim. Before he is able to strangle her, Miss Casewell enters and convinces him to stop. Eventually true identities are revealed. Trotter is not a policeman, but Major Metcalf is. It was he who hid Trotter's skis in order to prevent his escape. Miss Casewell is actually the demented Trotter's sister.

THE NINTH GUEST
by Owen Davis

New York: Eltinge Theatre, August 25, 1930--72 performances

JASON OSGOOD: A wealthy banker and politician
MRS. MARGARET CHISHOLM: Leader of New Orleans society
HAWKINS: The butler
DOCTOR MURRAY CHALMERS REID: The head of a large university
TIM SALMON: An Irish politician
SYLVIA INGLESBY: Salmon's lawyer
PETER DALY: A young novelist and playwright
HENRY ABBOTT: A brilliant but radical artist
JULIA TRENT: A motion picture actress
ACT I.  Living room of the Bienville Penthouse, a bungalow on top of a twenty-story office building in New Orleans.

Eight guests, many of whom are bitter enemies, arrive at what they think is to be a surprise party; however, there seems to be no host. Only a butler is on hand to greet the guests. Suddenly an ominous voice comes over the radio, telling the people they will all bring about their own deaths before dawn. There is no escape, claims the voice, since the outside door is electrified. To convince the people that the party is a game involving death, the host has placed a body in a closet. The frightened people decide to search the premises for the source of the voice. While all others are out of the room, Jason Osgood (a banker) tries to bribe the voice over the radio. To show that he is serious, he offers to kill the others. He then mixes cocktails and includes a shot of poison, which the host has provided for those seeking an easy way out. In using the poison Osgood pricks his finger and is himself poisoned.

ACT II.  The same.

Scene 1.  Tim Salmon (a tough Irish politician) beats the butler to make him reveal the identity of the host, but the butler is apparently as ignorant of that information as any of them. Soon afterward the butler disappears, as have two other servants. The seven remaining guests decide there is no escape. Then the voice comes over the radio once again. When it threatens to reveal illegal acts in socialite Margaret Chisholm's past, she drinks one of the poisoned cocktails to escape her shame.

Scene 2.  Believing that the murderer is one of those in the room, the remaining six guests hold an investigation. They conclude that Tim Salmon is the most likely candidate for the role of the host. He denies it, but the other men take a revolver and a radio tube from his pockets. His life-long friend, lawyer Sylvia Inglesby, takes the revolver to protect Tim, but young artistic genius Hank Abbott grabs her arm and the gun fires, killing Tim. In sorrow over the death of her friend, Sylvia grabs the knob of the main door and electrocutes herself.

ACT III.  The same.

The missing servants are found heavily sedated in a closet. As lights in the room dim inexplicably, a shot is fired, apparently from the veranda. Hank is grazed and Doctor Reid (a university president) is shot through the heart. Only three of the guests remain alive: Jean Trent (a movie starlet), Peter Daly (her former boy friend), and the wounded Hank. While binding Hank's head wound, Peter covers the man's eyes, knocks him unconscious, and ties him
to a chair. Jean grabs a revolver to protect herself from Peter; however, he convinces her that Hank is the killer. When he revives, Hank admits murdering the others and tries one final time to kill Jean and Peter. When that fails, he resigns himself to his fate. Peter releases him and forces him to open the door. As Peter and Jean exit, Hank takes a dose of poison.

**TEN LITTLE INDIANS (TEN LITTLE NIGGERS)**

by Agatha Christie

London: St. James's Theatre, November 17, 1943—260 performances

New York: Broadhurst Theatre, June 27, 1944—421 performances

**ROGERS:** A manservant  
**FRED NARRACOTT:** A boatman  
**MRS. ROGERS:** The cook and maid  
**PHILIP LOMBARD:** A former soldier in Africa  
**VERA CLAYTHORNE:** A secretary  
**ANTHONY MARSTON:** A young man who drives recklessly  
**WILLIAM BLORE:** A private detective  
**GENERAL MACKENZIE:** An aging army officer  
**EMILY BRENT:** A spinster  
**SIR LAWRENCE WARGRAVE:** A judge  
**DOCTOR ARMSTRONG:** A physician

**ACT I.** The living room of a house on Indian Island, off the coast of Devon, England. A summer evening in August.

Eight strangers arrive on Indian Island for a weekend with a host and hostess they have never met. However, there are no host and hostess; the only people present are two servants, Mr. and Mrs. Rogers. As the visitors get acquainted, a voice on a phonograph accuses them all of murder. The people then discuss their guilt and innocence. Suddenly, Marston (a playboy) dies from drinking a cyanide cocktail. One of the ten china Indians on the mantel under a nursery rhyme about ten dying Indians has been broken.

**ACT II.** The same.

Scene 1. The following morning, Mrs. Rogers has died in her sleep and another Indian has been broken. The guests try to convince themselves that the deaths were successively a suicide and
a natural collapse after shock. When the daily boat from the main-
land fails to arrive, the guests face the fact that they are trapped
on the island by a killer. Lombard (a former soldier) then realizes
that the nursery rhyme is a clue to the way in which each will die.
As the group prepares to eat, General Mackenzie is found stabbed
to death in his chair. Judge Wargrave murmurs that the murderer must
be one of the seven remaining people.

Scene 2. The same day. Afternoon. The surviving guests
discuss the identity of the killer. Soon after noticing two more
broken Indians, they discover two more bodies. Rogers has been killed
with an ax and Emily Brent (a spinster) has been given a fatal in-
jection with a hypodermic syringe.

ACT III. The same.

Scene 1. The same night. The wary guests sit in the candle-
lit room, not daring to turn their backs on one another. The only
surviving woman, Vera, goes to get cigarettes. Suddenly, she screams.
As Lombard, the detective, and the doctor grab candles and go to her
rescue, the judge is left alone in the dark. A shot is fired. The
other four return; Vera had merely been frightened by a strand of
wet seaweed placed in her doorway by the killer. As light fills
the stage, the judge can be seen near the window with a stream of
blood running from a hole in his forehead. The doctor pronounces
him dead.

Scene 2. The following afternoon. The doctor has disap-
ppeared during the night. When the detective runs to look for an
approaching boat, he is killed by a booby trap. Then the doctor's
body washes up on the rocks below the house. Only Vera and Lombard
remain; each is convinced the other is the killer. Vera obtains
Lombard's revolver and shoots him. The real killer, Judge Wargrave,
then reappears. He had staged his death with the gullible doctor's
assistance. As the judge starts to strangle Vera, the wounded
Lombard revives, picks up the revolver Vera has dropped, and kills
the judge. As a boat is heard in the distance, Lombard tells Vera
that he is going to marry her.
CHAPTER THREE: POLICE PROCEDURALS

AT 9:45 (9:45)

by Owen Davis

New York: Playhouse, June 28, 1919--139 performances

London: Comedy Theatre, December 22, 1925--126 performances

Revised version by Davis and Sewell Collins

DOYLE: A policeman

MRS. CLAYTON: Mother of victim

MACK: A policeman

DOANE: A butler

HOWARD CLAYTON: The victim

MARY DOANE: Parlor maid

JUDGE ROBERT CLAYTON: Father of victim

CAPTAIN DIXON: A police detective

DOCTOR NORTON: The physician attending Howard

JIM EVERETT: A former soldier and romantic rival of victim

MOLLY CLAYTON: Sister of victim

RUTH JORDAN: Former fiancée of the victim

MARGARET CLANCY: The cook from the house next door

DALY: The chauffeur

JACK GROVER: Molly's boyfriend

JUDD GILLAN: A waiter at the Ritz

ACT I.

Scene 1. Judge Clayton's library. Police have been called to a home by the mistress, Mrs. Clayton, who has heard a gunshot in the locked library. The officers break the door down and discover Howard Clayton critically wounded with a bullet in his chest. The victim's father, Judge Clayton, and Captain Dixon (the police detective) soon arrive. The evidence uncovered in the ensuing investigation points to different suspects. An eyewitness had seen Daly (the chauffeur) near the room. The apparent weapon bears the initials of Jim Everett (Howard's rival). A piece of the dress worn by Ruth Jordan (an old girl friend) is found in the library.
Scene 2. Waiting room at the Ritz-Carlton. At a nearby dance are Ruth, Jim, Molly (Howard's sister), and her suitor, Jack. It soon becomes clear that Ruth, Jim, and Guillan (a waiter) have all been out of the hotel at the time of the shooting. When Dixon and Judge Clayton arrive, they trap Ruth and Jim in lies concerning their whereabouts, and Dixon arrests them for murder.

ACT II. Judge Clayton’s library.

The suspects are brought back to the Clayton home in an attempt to solve the case quickly. Dixon interrogates each of the key figures; however, he is too successful. Jim, Ruth, and Doane (the butler) each confesses to the crime.

ACT III.

Scene 1. The same. Dixon shrewdly questions the three suspects again and catches them in lies that seem to prove that each is trying to protect someone. Daly then testifies that he, Ruth, and Jim were all near the room where the shooting took place. A policeman returns from the Ritz with letters written by Ruth to the victim, which she had retrieved in her visit to the library of the Clayton home earlier that night. Guillan, who was caught reading the letters by the police, has been brought along as a suspect. As Dixon begins to read the old love letters aloud in a final effort to unravel things, Jim admits his love for Ruth, and she acknowledges that she feels the same affection for him. Suddenly word comes that the victim is conscious.

Scene 2. Howard’s room. Howard and Mary (the maid), who had been in the library with him that night, tell how each of the suspects came to the room seeking revenge. All had left in anger without harming Howard. Then Mary admits having begged Howard to marry her. When he had offered to pay her to leave him alone and forget about their affair, she had shot him in the back. Howard is now sorry for his many misdeeds.

THE CREAKING CHAIR

by Allene Tupper Wilkes
Revised by Roland Pertwee

London: Comedy Theatre, July 22, 1924--235 performances

New York: Lyceum Theatre, February 22, 1926--80 performances
ANGUS HOLLY: Latter's butler
ESSAI AISSA: An Egyptian servant
ANITA LATTER: Latter's wife
ROSE EMILY WINCH: A maid
EDWIN LATTER: An archeologist
SYLVIA LATTER: His daughter
ELEANOR CARRUTHERS: Wife of Latter's associate
JOHN CUTTING: A cub reporter
PHILIP SPEED: A journalist
OLIVER HART: Inspector, Scotland Yard
HENLEY: A police detective
JIM BATES: Another police detective


Archeologist Edwin Latter has returned from Egypt with his young bride Anita, who is troubled by trances and her extreme jealousy of Eleanor Carruthers (the wife of Latter's partner and neighbor). The wheel-chair-ridden Latter receives a priceless Egyptian headdress from his associate, who is still in the Middle East. The artifact is then hidden in a secret compartment. Sylvia (Edwin's daughter) arrives and reveals that she has rather large gambling debts, as does Holly (the butler). John Cutting (Sylvia's fiancé) brings his employer, reporter Philip Speed, to the house to inquire whether Latter has actually received a headdress, as is rumored. When the room where the artifact is concealed is left in darkness, several people enter mysteriously. They are Anita, Holly, and Aissa (an Egyptian butler retained by Mrs. Carruthers). Holly retrieves the headdress from its hiding place and exits.

ACT II. The same. Late the next afternoon.

Doctor Denver arrives, ostensibly to care for Latter but actually to check on Anita's mental deterioration. The police, led by Inspector Hart, then enter the house to begin an investigation of the murder of Mrs. Carruthers, who has been slain during the night. Evidence points to the killer being in the Latter house. Prime suspects are Anita, Sylvia, and Holly. During one interrogation the lights are extinguished and an amulet on Latter's watch chain is stolen. Soon afterward Anita is trapped in a darkened room by a man dressed like her husband. Shots are fired and the police find Anita with a slight wound on her forehead.

ACT III. The same. Immediately.

Anita's wound proves to be only superficial. When Latter is found, he tells how he had been left unconscious by the villain, who
then stole his cloak and chair and left him helpless outside the house. Hart accuses Anita, John, and Sylvia, each in turn, of the murder. Speed reappears and accuses Aissa. Speed makes a mistake, however, and reveals that he has been masquerading as Doctor Denver. Hart then accuses Speed, who pulls a gun and admits he killed as an agent of the secret cult of Ulema, which is dedicated to preserving Egyptian art. He has lingered in order to find the headdress, which was not at Mrs. Carruthers's house, and to recover such trinkets as Latter's amulet. The villain is quickly subdued. Holly then reveals that he has hidden the headdress under the cushion of Latter's wheelchair in order to thwart just such a theft by secret agents.

CRIMINAL AT LARGE (THE CASE OF THE FRIGHTENED LADY)
by Edgar Wallace

London: Wyndham's Theatre, August 18, 1931--191 performances
New York: Belasco Theatre, October 10, 1932--161 performances

MESSENGER: Boy working at the Yard
FERRABY: Sergeant, C. I. D.
TOTTY: Sergeant, C. I. D.
TANNER: Chief detective inspector, C. I. D.
WILMOT: A prison warder
BRIGGS: A convict
LORD LEBANON: Young master of Mark's Priory
GILDER: An American footman
KELVER: A butler
BROOKS: Another American footman
LADY LEBANON: Mother of the young lord
RAWBANE: A decorator
ISLA: Lebanon's frightened fiancée
POLICEMEN

ACT I. Chief Inspector Tanner's room at Scotland Yard. Morning.

The Criminal Investigation Division is involved in solving a strangling that took place at Mark's Priory, the home of young Lord Lebanon. As Chief Inspector Tanner prepares for a lecture, he receives a visit from Lebanon, who is troubled by the murder and the fact that Isla (his fiancée) is so frightened that she is sleepwalking nightly. Lebanon further expresses dismay at constantly being followed by either Doctor Amorsham or two American footmen hired by the lord's mother. After Lebanon leaves, Tanner presents his lecture on
the subject of the strangling. Most evidence indicates the doctor as the killer. Before Tanner finishes, he learns of a new murder. Doctor Amersham has been strangled at Mark's Priory.

ACT II. The Prior's Hall at Mark's Priory.

Scene 1. Late the same afternoon, Tanner and his associates, Totty and Ferraby, investigate the latest murder. Clearly, Lady Lebanon runs the household and keeps a close watch over her son. She soon begins to act suspiciously: she burns a scarf later discovered by the police, lies about when she last saw the latest victim, and refuses Tanner admittance to a locked room. Tanner then gets her to admit that she is glad the doctor is dead. As the police prepare to leave, Isla begs them not to abandon her. Tanner decides to remain through the night.

Scene 2. A few hours later. Lebanon admits that there are moments when he loses consciousness. On one occasion he awoke to find signs that a struggle had taken place during his blackout. His mother unsuccessfully tries to drug him and then attempts to bribe one of the policemen to persuade Tanner to forget about the locked room. As the policemen confer, the lights go out and the sleepwalking Isla enters. She looks for the scarf used in the murder and says that she knows the identity of the murderer.

ACT III.

Scene 1. A bedroom at Mark's Priory. A little later. Lady Lebanon enters Isla's room and asks her to marry Lord Lebanon the next morning so that the family line will continue. One of the servants enters and shows a scarf to Lady Lebanon, who leaves immediately. While Isla is locked alone in the room, a hand emerges from a secret panel to grab the scarf. The two American guards then enter to remove the girl from the room. One leaves with Isla. The other is strangled in the dark as he straightens the room.

Scene 2. The Prior's Hall at Mark's Priory. Immediately following. The police find the unconscious but alive American and begin to search for Isla, who has disappeared. Lord Lebanon appears, pulls a gun, and freely admits to Tanner that he is the killer. Before the police can capture the obviously insane young man, he shoots himself. Lady Lebanon is heartbroken that the noble family line has ended.
THE DONOVAN AFFAIR

by Owen Davis

New York: Fulton Theatre, August 30, 1926—128 performances


JOHN KILLIAN: Inspector of police
CARNEY: A young police officer
PETER RANKIN: Owner of house where murder is committed
JEAN RANKIN: Peter's daughter
DAVID CORNISH: Her boyfriend
LYDIA RANKIN: Jean's step-mother
BEN HOLT: A young lawyer
ANNE HOLT: His bride
RUTH LINSEY: Rankin's neighbor
NEIL LINSEY: Her husband
HORACE CARTER: A guest who becomes the second victim
NELSON: A male house servant
MARY: Another servant
PROFESSOR DONOVAN: A university professor and father of the victim
ROBERTS: A policeman
MRS. DOWD: A police matron

ACT I. Peter Rankin's library. 8 p. m.

While showing that his cat's eye ring glows in the dark, Jack Donovan has been stabbed to death and his ring stolen. The boy's father and Police Inspector Killian investigate. Several people become prime suspects: Judy Rankin disliked the victim; Anne Holt had been seen with him; her husband Ben was jealous; and David Cornish had a gun with him at the time of the murder. Eventually the ring is found in Horace Carter's pocket. He seems to know the identity of the killer. Killian wants to see how much the ring glows and has the lights turned off. When they come on again, all see that Carter has been stabbed.

ACT II. The same. 8:30 p. m.

The guests are in the room discussing the second murder, when it is noticed that David's shirt has blood on it. As Jean tries to destroy the evidence, Killian emerges from a hiding place, but he is too late to stop her. An incriminating letter in a woman's hand is then found. Nelson (the servant) takes handwriting samples from all the women, but he destroys one of the samples. Meanwhile, the police
discover that the ring has again been stolen. Tempers flare as the investigation drags along. Trying to protect her husband Neil from embezzlement charges, Ruth Linsey reveals that Neil and Lydia Rankin were having an affair. The angered Peter Rankin picks up a confiscated revolver and shoots Neil.

**ACT III.** The same. Midnight.

Linsey is sent to the hospital. He says that he has not been sleeping with Lydia. Nelson then tells the female suspects of the letter and the reason for the writing samples. Believing the letter to be hers, Mrs. Holt tries to kill Nelson but is stopped by her husband. After an attack in the dark during which the letter is stolen, Killian decides to let the suspects find the murderer and turn him or her over to the police. First, the suspects turn the lights out in order to allow the ring and letter to be returned to the evidence table by the killer. Lydia then discloses a new piece of evidence and accuses Mary (a servant), whom she claims was having an affair with young Donovan. Mary admits to being the wife of the deceased but claims innocence in his murder. The others are not convinced, and Nelson agrees to turn Mary over to the police. As the others leave the room, he locks himself and Mary inside. He admits that he killed Donovan because of jealousy over Mary. As the insane man tries to kill the woman, Jean emerges from a hiding place and helps Mary keep the villain away until the police come to the rescue.

---

**THE HOLLOW**

*by Agatha Christie*

London: Fortune Theatre, June 7, 1951—376 performances

HENRIETTA ANGKATELL: An artist
SIR HENRY ANGKATELL: The host
LADY ANGKATELL: His wife
MIDGE HARVEY: A poor cousin
GUDGEON: The butler
EDWARD ANGKATELL: Master of Ainswick, the family estate
DORIS: The maid
JOHN CRISTOW, M. D.: A philandering friend
GERDA CRISTOW: His wife
VERONICA CRAYE: An actress
INSPECTOR COLQUHOUN, C. I. D.: Chief investigating officer
DETECTIVE SERGEANT PENNY: His assistant
ACT I. The garden room of Sir Henry Angkatell's house, The Hollow, about eighteen miles from London. A Friday afternoon in early September.

Sir Henry and his eccentric wife, Lady Angkatell, are having guests for the weekend. Unfortunately the lives of the guests are romantically and intricately entwined. Midge Harvey (a poor shop girl) is in love with Edward, who in turn worships sculptress Henrietta. The latter loves John Cristow, who scorns his stupid wife Gerda and still bears a crush for his former fiancee, actress Veronica Craye, who lives near The Hollow. As the group prepares for dinner, Veronica appears unexpectedly and greets her old beau cordially.

ACT II. The same.

Scene 1. Saturday morning. Lady Angkatell tells Midge that John visited Veronica late the night before. As the other members of the guest party go outside to take some target practice with pistols, John is left alone in the garden room. Veronica appears and tries to persuade him to leave his wife. He turns her down, and she leaves in anger. Soon afterward, John is shot by a person he recognizes. Gerda runs on stage and picks up a gun, which the murderer has dropped. The other guests enter to find Gerda with the gun in her hand. John's last words are "Henrietta, Henrietta."

Scene 2. Later the same day. Inspector Colquhon from Scotland Yard and Sergeant Fenny investigate the murder. While the apparent killer is Gerda, Colquhon expresses doubts. He learns of the victim's affair with Henrietta, as well as his midnight meeting with Veronica. When Miss Craye is questioned about her early morning visit, she lies repeatedly. The inspector, who knows of the threats Veronica made to John, seems quite perplexed with the case.

ACT III. The same. The following Monday morning.

Momentarily Gudgeon and Lady Angkatell each seem to be the killer. After they explain the evidence against them, they are no longer suspect. Edward then expresses his love for Midge, and they make their marriage plans.

After the formal inquest, Gerda and Henrietta return first. Henrietta tells Gerda that her secret is safe. Gerda then admits killing John and tries to poison Henrietta. The inspector returns and tells Gerda of his deduction that she killed her husband. As Gerda breaks down, the inspector hands her a drink, which happens to contain the poison she had intended for Henrietta. Gerda unwittingly drinks the concoction and dies. Henrietta and the inspector view Gerda's death as an appropriate punishment for her crimes.
I KILLED THE COUNT

by Alec Coppel

London: Whitehall Theatre, December 10, 1937--184 performances

New York: Cort Theatre, August 31, 1942--29 performances

POLLY: A maid
COUNT MATTONI: The victim
DAVIDSON: Divisional Inspector
RAINES: A police detective
MARTIN: The landlord
CLIFTON: A plain-clothes constable
LOUISE ROGERS: A new tenant
RENEE LA LUNE: An American entertainer
SAMUEL DIAMOND: A businessman
JOHNSON: The liftman
MULLET: Another liftman
BERNARD K. FROY: An American businessman and gambler
LORD SORRINGTON: A nobleman

PROLOGUE. The living room of Count Mattoni's flat. A Friday in
October, 10 a. m.

Polly (the maid) discovers the body of the Count. He has been shot in the forehead.

ACT I. The same. 11:30 a. m.

The police, led by Inspector Davidson, gather the clues on the murder site and then begin interrogations. They speak to the landlord and two elevator operators, as well as the tenants Louise Rogers, Renée La Lune, and Samuel Diamond. Early evidence indicates that either Bernard K. Froy or Mr. Rupert (a mysterious tenant) is the murderer. Davidson suspects that they may, in fact, be the same person. He has Mullet (one of the elevator operators) on hand to identify Froy as Rupert.

ACT II. The same. The action is continuous.

Froy admits killing the Count, but he proves not to be Rupert. Lord Sorrington, who has corresponded with the deceased, arrives for questioning and is identified as Mr. Rupert by Mullet. The nobleman
then confesses that he killed the Count. Soon afterward, Mullet also admits that he alone killed the Count.

ACT III. The same. The action is continuous.

When the three confessed killers are placed together out of hearing of the police, they recall how they carefully planned the murder of the Count, who had cruelly treated his wife Helen, the daughter of Lord Sorrington. The plan was to make all three look guilty; however, it soon becomes apparent that none of them did the deed. Louise Rogers, who is actually Helen, then confesses to the police that she is the killer. As Davidson prepares to take them all away to Scotland Yard, he realizes that none of them can be booked. English law states that two or more persons cannot be charged with a crime known to have been committed by only one person.

MURDER ON THE SECOND FLOOR

by Frank Vosper

London: Lyric Theatre, June 21, 1929—146 performances
Lyric Theatre, November 25, 1929—167 performances (revival)

New York: Eltinge Theatre, September 11, 1929—45 performances

HUGH BROMILOW: A young playwright
LUCY TIMSON: A maid
SYLVIA ARMITAGE: Hugh's girl friend
JOSEPH REYNOLDS: A middle-aged boarder
MRS. ARMITAGE: The landlady
MISS SNELL: A spinster
MR. ARMITAGE: The landlord
JAM SINGH: An Indian student
POLICE-CONSTABLE ROGERS
THE INSPECTOR
POLICE-CONSTABLE WILLIAMS
POLICE-CONSTABLE THOMSON
THE MAN WITH THE BOX

ACT I. The sitting room of Mrs. Armitage's boarding house in Malim Street, Bloomsbury. Late afternoon.

Hugh Bromilow is trying to become a serious playwright; however, Sylvia Armitage feels he should strive for success by writing
a thriller. He writes one for her, using the setting of her parents' boarding house. In the play-within-a-play, Reynolds (a boarder) is running an illegal operation with Jam Singh (an inscrutable Indian). Mrs. Armitage has allowed the former to base his activities in her home because of her affection for the man and her general disdain of her colorless husband. Reynolds is also romantically involved with Lucy (the maid), whom he is trying to abandon because of her being "in trouble." Reynolds alienates Singh, Lucy, and Mrs. Armitage on the evening of a new illegal operation.

ACT II. The stairs and landing of the second floor at Mrs. Armitage's.

Scene 1. Just before midnight on the same day, Singh and Reynolds try to make sure the stairs are clear before they begin their chicanery; however, Hugh and Sylvia linger on the landing after returning from a date. They see Lucy sneak into Reynolds's room. Embarrassed, Hugh and Sylvia go to their own rooms. With the stairs empty, Lucy leaves Reynolds's room. Then Singh and a helper bring a box up the stairs and knock on Reynolds's door.

Scene 2. Next morning. Mrs. Armitage meets Hugh on the stairs and tells him that Miss Snell (another boarder), Lucy, and Singh are all missing. She knocks at Reynolds's door, gets no answer, and enters with her key. Seeing Reynolds's body, she screams and faints. The police, headed by the Inspector, arrive and begin the questioning. Miss Snell soon returns and claims to have been at church. Then Singh enters and panics when he sees the police. He and an officer struggle violently before falling over the railing to the floor below.

ACT III. The sitting room of Mrs. Armitage's. A few minutes later.

The officer and Singh are unharmed by the fall. The latter confesses to dope smuggling but denies a role in the murder. Mr. Armitage returns home from an overnight stay in Brighton and is shocked at the news of smuggling and murder. Just as all the evidence points to Lucy, Hugh discovers her body with an accompanying suicide note. The police believe she killed Reynolds and then took her own life. Hugh disagrees and pieces together the clues, which reveal Mr. Armitage to be the murderer. Armitage admits to Hugh that he found Lucy after her suicide and that he knew of his wife's affair with Reynolds. His jealousy led him to disguise himself as the dead woman and kill Reynolds. Mrs. Armitage and Sylvia learn the truth also, but Hugh does not tell the police, who are convinced that the case is closed.

At the end of the play-within-a-play, Sylvia learns that Hugh is really Leonard Swanage, the famous author whose new play has just opened. The play he has "written" for her is actually his new success.
SPIDER'S WEB
by Agatha Christie

London: Savoy Theatre, December 14, 1954—774 performances

SIR ROWLAND DELAHAYE: An old friend of the Hailsham-Browns
HUGO BIRCH: Another old friend
JEREMY WARRENDER: A young friend
CLARISSA HAILSHAM-BROWN: Mistress of the house
PIPPA HAILSHAM-BROWN: Clarissa's young stepdaughter
MILDRED PEAKE: The gardener
ELGIN: The butler
OLIVER COSTELLO: The victim
HENRY HAILSHAM-BROWN: Clarissa's husband
INSPECTOR LORD: Chief police investigator
CONSTABLE JONES: His assistant

ACT I. The drawing room of Copplestone Court, the Hailsham-Browns' home in Kent. An evening in March.

Clarissa Hailsham-Brown is entertaining three friends, Sir Rowland Delahaye, Hugo Birch, and Jeremy Warrender, at her home. Since the servants have the night off, the men go to a nearby golf club for the evening. Oliver Costello (the present husband of Mr. Hailsham-Brown's first wife) enters and tries to retrieve something from a secret drawer in a desk. Clarissa sees him and an argument ensues. Pippa (Clarissa's stepdaughter) panics at the sight of Oliver, who reminds her of her drug-addicted mother. The girl threatens to kill the man. After Oliver leaves, Henry Hailsham-Brown arrives home and tells his wife that a foreign diplomat will be a secret guest in their home this evening. Oliver sneaks back into the house, but before he can open the secret drawer, he is killed by a person emerging from a secret door to the library. After Clarissa sends Henry to pick up the foreigner, she discovers not only Oliver's body, but also Pippa hiding behind the secret door. Clarissa sends the girl to bed and muses over what to do with the body.

ACT II. The same.

Scene I. A quarter of an hour later. Sir Rowland, Hugo, and Jeremy enter, having been summoned by Clarissa. She convinces them to help her dispose of the body. Before they can act, however, the police show up. They have received an anonymous phone call that reported that a murder had been committed in the house. As the police begin to be convinced that the call was a hoax, they mention that the
late owner of the house may have been murdered for a valuable piece of merchandise, which the murderer failed to find on the body. The gardener, Miss Peake, is questioned and suggests that the police look in the secret compartment behind the door. The panel is opened and the body falls out of the hiding place used by Clarissa and her accomplices.

Scene 2. Ten minutes later. The police question all the people in the house and realize they are being told lies. Clarissa then tells the truth, which the police also refuse to believe; therefore, she lies, saying that she killed Oliver in self-defense. When the now-convinced police get Clarissa to re-enact the crime, they discover that the body has been stolen.

ACT III. The same. A few minutes later.

Miss Peake tells Clarissa that she hid the body to befuddle the police. Clarissa then realizes that Oliver and his killer must have been looking for something hidden in the house. She retrieves an envelope that had been in the secret compartment of the desk. Before she and her friends can uncover the value of the envelope and its contents, Clarissa sees Jeremy trying to smother Pippa, who must have seen the killer. Clarissa then realizes that Jeremy is the murderer. He tells her that the object of value is the stamp on the envelope, and he admits that he killed both Oliver and the former owner of the house. As Jeremy attempts to kill Clarissa as well, the police come to the rescue. With the murder solved, everyone leaves just in time for Henry's arrival. He refuses to believe his wife's story of the night's events.

TOWARDS ZERO

by Agatha Christie and Gerald Verner

London: St. James's Theatre, September 4, 1956--194 performances

THOMAS ROYDE: Audrey's former suitor
KAY STRANGE: Neville's present wife
MARY ALDIN: A secretary to Lady Tressilian
MATHEW TREVES: A lawyer
NEVILLE STRANGE: The center of the love entanglements
LADY TRESSILIAN: The hostess
AUDREY STRANGE: Neville's first wife
TED LATIMER: Kay's friend
SUPERINTENDENT BATTLE: An investigator from Scotland Yard
INSPECTOR LEACH: A local investigator
BENSON: A police constable

ACT I. The drawing room at Gull's Point, Lady Tressilian's house at Saltcreek, Cornwall.

Scene 1. A morning in September. Thomas Royde appears at Lady Tressilian's house for the first time in several years to spend a brief holiday. The situation upon his arrival is quite tense. His old girl friend Audrey is also spending her vacation at Lady Tressilian's, as are Nevile (Audrey's former husband) and Kay (his new wife). Also on hand are Ted Latimer (Kay's close friend and constant companion) and Treves (an old lawyer). To make matters worse Lady Tressilian shows her contempt for Kay, whom she views as having destroyed Audrey's marriage. Mary (the secretary to the lady) seems embittered by the tense atmosphere as well.

Scene 2. After dinner, four days later. It is suggested that Kay has married Nevile only for the money he will inherit from Lady Tressilian. Nevile realizes he loves Audrey and not his new wife. He asks Kay for a divorce, but she threatens him and refuses to grant him his freedom.

ACT II. The same.

Scene 1. Early the following morning. Mary has been drugged, Audrey then discovers Lady Tressilian's body. The old woman has been murdered in her sleep.

Scene 2. Two hours later. Policemen Battle, Leach, and Benson investigate. All the evidence points to Nevile as the killer, Mary then reveals that she saw the victim alive after Nevile left the house for a late visit with Latimer. The police realize Nevile has been framed and ponder who hates him enough to do such a vile thing.

ACT III. The same.

Scene 1. The next morning. Evidence now indicates that Audrey is the killer. She is arrested and seems resigned to her fate.

Scene 2. The same morning. Treves reveals new evidence and proves Nevile to be the murderer. The villain had hoped to see Audrey die, because she had left him for another man. The police then bring Audrey into the room and disclose that her arrest was merely a ruse to protect her from Nevile. The killer escapes and seemingly jumps out a window to his death. As all rush to find the body, Audrey remains alone in the room. Nevile, who has only faked
his suicide, enters and nearly strangles Audrey before the police
rescue her. Kay and Latimer console each other, as do Audrey and
Royde.

THE UNEXPECTED GUEST
by Agatha Christie

London: Duchess Theatre, August 12, 1958—604 performances

RICHARD WARWICK: The victim
LAURA WARWICK: His wife
MICHAEL STARKWEDDER: The unexpected guest
MISS BENNETT: A combined housekeeper and secretary
JAN WARWICK: Richard's half-brother
MRS. WARWICK: Richard's mother
HENRY ANGELL: A male nurse attendant and valet
SERGEANT CADWALLADER: Assistant investigating officer
INSPECTOR THOMAS: Head investigating officer
JULIAN FARRAR: A local politician and friend of the family

ACT I. Richard Warwick's study in South Wales near the Bristol
Channel.

Scene 1. About 11:30 p.m. in November, Michael Starkwedder
has wrecked his car in the fog. He seeks help at the Warwick house
and, instead, finds the body of Richard Warwick. Laura (the victim's
wife) holds the murder pistol and confesses to the killing. Con­
vinced that Richard was a worthless, murderous individual, Starkwed­
der decides to help Laura by making the killing appear to be done by
an outsider. They arrange evidence so that it points to a man whose
son was killed by Warwick's reckless driving, since it seems unlikely
the police could convict the man, who is now living in Canada. The
two plotters then call the police.

Scene 2. The following morning about 11 a.m. Officers
Thomas and Cadwallader question Laura, Starkwedder, and the other
members of the household, Miss Bennett, Jan, Mrs. Warwick, and Angell.
The police seem convinced that the Canadian, MacGregor, killed War­
wick. Julian Farrar (a family friend) arrives to pay his condolences.
Starkwedder suddenly realizes that Julian was present the night be­
fore and that Laura has been protecting him.
ACT II. The same. Late afternoon the same day.

Julian and Laura realize they have been trying to protect each other, when, in fact, neither of them committed the crime. Jan (the retarded half-brother of the victim) then seems the most likely one to be the killer. Mrs. Warwick (the mother) tells Starkwedder that she killed her son, but Starkwedder knows that she is hoping to protect someone. Bennett next talks with Jan, who has gotten a gun and threatens to shoot people. He confesses to the murder. Before he can be captured, he shoots himself in a struggle with Sergeant Cadwallader. Shortly before Starkwedder leaves, he tells Laura how the murder was really committed. He did it to avenge the death of his son. He is MacGregor.
CHAPTER FOUR: PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS

DANGEROUS CORNER

by J. B. Priestley

London: Lyric Theatre, May 17, 1932—151 performances

New York: Empire Theatre, October 27, 1932—206 performances

MAUD MOCKRIDGE: A novelist
OLWEN PEEL: Secretary to the publishers
FREDA CHATFIELD: Robert's wife
BETTY WHITEHOUSE: Gordon's wife
CHARLES STANTON: One of the publishers
GORDON WHITEHOUSE: Freda's brother
ROBERT CHATFIELD: Head of the publishing firm

ACT I. The living room of the Chatfield country home. After dinner.

The owners of a publishing firm, Robert Chatfield and Charles Stanton, are entertaining friends, wives, and novelist Maud Mockridge. The conversation after dinner soon turns to the subject of Martin (Robert's late brother), who committed suicide after money was discovered missing from the firm. A casual remark about a music box leads to a revelation that both Freda Chatfield (Robert's wife) and Olwen Peel (a secretary) had seen the deceased later than they had admitted at the coroner's inquest. The friendly discussion continues until most members of the party, Miss Mockridge, Stanton, and Gordon and Betty Whitehouse, depart for the evening. When left alone with Olwen and Freda, Robert decides to get an explanation of the new information he has learned. After his wife tells him that Olwen is obviously in love with him (a fact Robert has been unaware of), Olwen confesses that she believed Robert to be the thief and has been protecting him by concealing her last discussion with Martin. Robert says he has always thought that his late brother stole the money. It soon becomes evident that the brothers suspected each other because of false information supplied by Stanton. Greatly angered by his partner's lying, Robert decides to get the mystery settled immediately. He calls Gordon and insists that he, Betty, and Stanton return at once.
ACT II. The same. The action is continuous.

A few minutes later the two men arrive without Betty, who has gone to bed. Stanton readily admits having taken the money and having used Martin's suicide to cover his theft. He then warns against any more delving into the murder because of the remaining secrets that might be uncovered. Robert refuses to stop and soon learns that his wife was in love with Martin. Gordon also admits that he, too, was in love with the dead man, and an argument ensues between Gordon and Freda over whom Martin loved more. Betty suddenly appears; she has not been able to sleep, because she fears that her friends are talking about her. The conclusion reached by all is that Stanton is responsible for Martin's suicide because of his lie about Robert's having stolen the money. The friends reason that all Martin's faith in humanity was destroyed when he learned of his brother's purported thievery. In a mood of despondency he took his life. Olwen puts an end to all such speculation, however, when she says that Martin did not shoot himself.

ACT III. The same. The action is continuous.

Olwen confesses to having shot Martin accidentally as she fought off his attempt to rape her. After the mystery has been solved, more secrets become known: Martin was a drug addict and Betty was having an affair with Stanton. Gordon, Betty, and Stanton then leave. Robert, who is gravely bothered by the painful secrets he has learned from his inquest, runs to his bedroom. Freda and Olwen realize that he is going to kill himself. As they futilely run to stop him, the time reverts to the first act. On this occasion the casual reference to the music box does not elicit more talk about Martin's death. The people in the room have passed a dangerous corner in their lives.

ROPE (ROPE'S END)

by Patrick Hamilton

London: Ambassadors' Theatre, April 25, 1929--131 performances
New York: Masque Theatre, September 19, 1929--100 performances

WYNDHAM BRANDON: The killers
CHARLES CHANILLO: The killers
SABOT: Their servant
KENNETH RAGLAN: A student
ACT I. A combination of a study and a drawing-room on the first floor of the house in Mayfair shared by Brandon and Granillo. Evening.

Brandon and Granillo have committed what they think is the perfect crime and are now trying to establish their alibi. Earlier in the day they picked Ronald Kentley up at the Coliseum and strangled him with rope. They then put the body in a chest in the center of their room. They plan to have several people over for a meal and a perusal of some rare books at the same time that the friends of the victim realize that he is missing. The killers will then drive to Oxford and dispose of the body along the way. The guests for the celebration are Leila and Raglan (two rather snobbish and stupid young people), Sir Johnstone Kentley (a book collector and the father of the victim), Mrs. Debenham (Sir Johnstone's quiet sister), and Rupert Cadell (a young poet), who walks with a cane because of a limp. As the killers await the arrival of their guests, they discuss the crime. Brandon, the obvious mastermind of the plan, gets angry when he discovers that the victim's ticket to the Coliseum has not been put in the chest. The nervous Granillo takes the incriminating evidence and places it in his vest pocket. Soon afterward the guests appear, and the meal is served on the chest in which the body has been placed. During the course of the conversation at dinner, Granillo and Brandon both claim never to have gone to the Coliseum. Rupert becomes suspicious of their statements when he sees a Coliseum ticket showing from Granillo's pocket. At the first opportunity he secretly snatches the ticket from Granillo and prepares to solve the curious mystery.

ACT II. The same. The action is continuous.

Rupert's questions about Brandon's childhood preoccupation with stories about corpses in trunks makes the killer somewhat uneasy. His and Granillo's tension increases when they realize that the ticket is missing. Their frantic search is interrupted by the guests, who re-enter the room. Leila's curiosity leads her to ask to see what is inside the trunk, but Brandon is firm in his refusal. As has been happening all night long, the conversation turns to murder. Rupert admits that he often finds murder less reprehensible than capital punishment. Sir Johnstone then receives a call from his wife telling him that his son has not come home. The worried father and the other guests depart. Just as the two murderers begin to congratulate themselves, the doorbell rings. Rupert has decided that he could use another drink.
ACT III. The same. The action is continuous.

Rupert plays on the tension of the two men by darkening the room and talking of murder. He then pins the incriminating Coliseum ticket to his lapel. Granillo's terror becomes quite evident when he sees the ticket, but Brandon retains control of himself. He threatens Rupert in an attempt to force him to leave. Rupert refuses to depart and pulls a sword from his cane. He also produces a whistle, which he claims a policeman gave him during his brief absences from the apartment. Brandon allows Rupert to look in the chest and then tries to convince the horrified poet that the murder was a great adventure. Despite his earlier speech on murder and capital punishment, Rupert is appalled by the senseless killing. He tells the two villains that he will play a jest on them better than the one they played on the victim's father. He runs to the window, throws it open, and sends three blasts of the whistle into the night.

SLEUTH

by Anthony Shaffer

London: St Martin's Theatre, February 12, 1970—2,358 performances
New York: Music Box, November 12, 1970—1,222 performances

ANDREW WYKE: A mystery novelist
MILO TINDLE: His wife's lover
INSPECTOR DOPPLER:
DETECTIVE SERGEANT TARRANT: Police officers
POLICE CONSTABLE HIGGS:


Andrew Wyke has invited Milo Tindle to his home to discuss the subject of Marguerite, Andrew's wife and Milo's mistress. Andrew convinces the younger man that he would like nothing better than to have Milo take the woman off his hands. Andrew fears, however, that Milo's meager finances will not keep Marguerite happy and that she will try to return to her husband. Andrew proposes, therefore, that Milo steal some jewels from the house. Milo can fence the stolen diamonds and Andrew can collect the insurance; both will profit. Milo agrees and commits the burglary just as Andrew instructs him to do it. Andrew then pulls a gun and tells the lover-burglar that the irate husband will now kill his rival. Realizing that he has been
duped into setting up a cover for his own murder, Milo begs for mercy. Andrew, who is oblivious to the entreaties, puts the gun to the horrified man's head and pulls the trigger. Milo collapses.

ACT II. The same. Two days later.

Inspector Doppler arrives to investigate the disappearance of Milo Tindle. When the evidence begins to point toward murder, Andrew reveals that his activities two days before were intended only to frighten Milo, who was not really shot. His collapse after the firing of the gun was from fear and not from a bullet wound. Doppler seems unconvinced and continues to gather even more evidence incriminating Andrew. The aging novelist becomes quite disturbed by the unexpected result of his joke on Milo. Seeing that he has gotten the desired results, Doppler reveals himself to be Milo in disguise. Andrew's relief is quite shortlived, however, because Milo tells him that he actually has killed someone, Andrew's mistress, and has planted evidence implicating the novelist as the murderer. Milo has already called the police, thereby leaving Andrew only a few minutes to retrieve the evidence Milo has hidden in the house. With clues provided by his tormentor, Andrew finds and destroys the evidence just as the voices of the police are heard in the hallway. Andrew tries to regain his composure; he then realizes that there are no police. Milo has tricked him once again into a state of panic. Appreciative of Milo's competitive spirit, Andrew begs him to stay. The younger man scorns Andrew's proposal and starts to leave. In anger Andrew picks up his gun and shoots Milo. The novelist's moment of triumph is cut short by the sound of approaching police cars. As Milo dies, he claims victory in the game they have been playing.
CHAPTER FIVE: LESS RESTRICTIVE FORMULAS

THE FOURTH WALL (THE PERFECT ALIBI)

by A. A. Milne

London: Haymarket Theatre, February 29, 1928—196 performances
New York: Charles Hopkins Theatre, November 27, 1928—255 performances

JIMMY LUDGROVE: Arthur's nephew
SUSAN CUNNINGHAM: Arthur's ward and Jimmy's girl friend
EDWARD LAVERICK: A suspicious gentleman
EDWARD P. CARTER: A genial middle-aged man
MAJOR POTHERGILL: A military man
JANE WEST: A friend of Jimmy and Susan
MRS. FULVERTON-FANE: A widow
ARTHUR LUDGROVE: Owner of the estate
ADAMS: The butler
P. C. MALLET: The local policeman
"SERGEANT" MALLET: His son, a London policeman

ACT I. Arthur Ludgrove's private sitting room at Heron Place, Sussex, through the fourth wall of which we see what happened.

Scene 1. Three o'clock. Susan and Jimmy discuss Arthur Ludgrove (Susan's guardian and Jimmy's uncle), who once incurred the wrath of two men for helping to send them to life imprisonment. The other people at the Ludgrove estate then appear, and most of them prepare to leave on various excursions for the afternoon. Ludgrove remains at home.

Scene 2. Three-quarters of an hour later. Edward Carter (a guest in the house) comes to warn Ludgrove that another guest, Laverick, may be one of the men Ludgrove sent to prison. Carter and Ludgrove devise a trap to catch the villain. The plan works and Ludgrove covers Laverick with a gun after getting the criminal to reveal himself to be one of the former prisoners. Carter phones the police, identifies himself as Ludgrove, and tells the policeman to listen. He then grabs Ludgrove's hand and forces the man to shoot himself.

275
Carter and his partner in murder, Laverick, proceed to make the killing look like a suicide. They have to hurry their actions because the police arrive sooner than expected. Nevertheless, the villains exit undetected.

ACT II. The same. A quarter past five.

Police Constable Mallet investigates the homicide with the assistance of his son, a sergeant from Scotland Yard. Witnesses are interrogated and the Mallets seem convinced that Ludgrove took his own life. Susan is suspicious of their findings and asks Jimmy to meet her in the room at midnight.

ACT III. The same.

Scene 1. Midnight. Jimmy and Susan conduct their own investigation based upon the supposition that Ludgrove did not commit suicide. Slowly they uncover new evidence and find discrepancies in the stories of Carter and Laverick, who are providing alibis for each other. As the two amateur detectives start to leave the room, they see that the door is ajar. Someone has overheard part of their speculation about Ludgrove's murder.

Scene 2. Next morning. Carter tells Laverick that he heard Jimmy and Susan speak of murder, but he is unaware that the youths suspect him and his cohort. Soon after Laverick departs for London, Susan locks herself in the room along with the unwitting Carter. She then asks him to help her catch the murderer, Laverick. Both she and Carter soon drop pretenses, however, when he pulls a gun and asks for the physical evidence that the girl has obtained. Susan gives it to him, but not before she helps her friend, Jane, sneak into the room. Carter then confesses fully to Susan, since he believes her to be the only witness to his testimony. When Susan has heard enough, she calls Jane out of hiding. The surprised Carter threatens to shoot them both, but they inform him that they emptied his gun earlier. He exits only to be apprehended by the police, who already have Laverick in custody. Jimmy enters and attempts to comfort Susan, who now gives in to her emotions and cries for the death of her murdered guardian.

SIGNPOST TO MURDER

by Monte Doyle

London: Cambridge Theatre, February 9, 1962—420 performances
ACT I.

Scene 1. Dr. Forrest's office at Holbrook Asylum for the Criminal Insane. Late afternoon. Roy Collier has been confined to an asylum after he apparently drowned his wife in a bathtub. Dr. Forrest (the superintendent of the asylum) seems sure of Roy's insanity, while Reg Cartwright (a male nurse) feels that Collier may not be suffering from a mental disorder. Roy comes to see Dr. Forrest and pleads for a new sanity hearing, but the psychiatrist refuses. Roy then escapes from the asylum. He knows that a new sanity hearing must be ordered if he can stay free for four weeks.

Scene 2. Sally Thomas's cottage. Fifteen minutes later, the same night, Roy tricks Sally Thomas into letting him into her cottage. He immediately makes her his prisoner and tells her that he has carefully selected her home as the place where he will hide for twenty-eight days. Sally regains her composure and accedes to Roy's demands. When Dr. Forrest appears to search for the escapee, Sally lies about his whereabouts because Roy has a gun pointed at her. After the doctor leaves, Sally reveals herself to be lonely and discontented with her husband, who is often away from home. Roy and the lonely woman then make love on the living-room sofa. An hour later Roy goes upstairs while Sally sleeps. He sees something in the bathroom that shocks him and causes him to faint.

ACT II. The same.

Scene 1. A few minutes later, Sally revives Roy and he says that he saw the body of Sally's husband in the bathtub. When he goes to show her, the body has disappeared. Sally then denies having slept with Roy, and she tells him that he is definitely crazy. She suddenly suspects that her husband may have come home early and been killed by Roy. Roy denies it, and the two agree to see if the husband arrives as scheduled in two weeks.

Scene 2. Fourteen days later. Eight o'clock in the evening. Sally and Roy await the arrival of Sally's husband. When someone is heard at the door, Roy hides. The visitors are Dr. Forrest and Reg, who know that Roy is hiding in the house. Reg investigates the premises as the doctor gets the details of the incident from Sally. When
Reg cannot find Roy, it is assumed that he has fled. Left alone in the cottage, Sally prepares to take a shower. When she enters the bathroom, she finds Roy pointing a gun at her.

ACT III. The same. Fourteen days later. A few minutes before midnight.

Only a few minutes remain until the twenty-eight-day period elapses. Roy and Sally spend the time discussing the strong personal bond that has developed between them. Before the time is up, however, the police arrive with Dr. Forrest and Reg. The body of Sally's husband has been found along with evidence incriminating Roy. The escapee comes out of hiding when he thinks the authorities have left, but he walks into a trap. Roy still claims innocence and begs Forrest to listen. Forrest pretends to ignore Roy and, thus, manages to trick the obviously insane Sally into confessing that she was involved in her husband's murder. The doctor also reveals that Reg must have been her lover and accomplice. Forrest agrees to give Roy a new sanity hearing.

WAIT UNTIL DARK

by Frederick Knott

New York: Ethel Barrymore Theatre, February 2, 1966—373 performances


MIKE TALMAN: A confidence artist
CARLINO: His former partner
HARRY ROAT, JR.: The leader of the heroin smugglers
SUSY HENDRIX: A blind housewife
SAM HENDRIX: Her husband, a photographer
GLORIA: The young neighbor
TWO POLICEMEN

ACT I. The Hendrix's basement apartment in Greenwich Village.

Scene 1. Friday evening. Mike Talman and Carlino, former partners in crime, have received separate calls telling them to come to this apartment. The two talk over old times, mentioning their ring-leader Lisa and the difficulty of earning a dishonest living. Just as the two seem convinced that they have been made victims of a prank, a mysterious character, Harry Roat, enters. He reveals that
he phoned them and then tells the men of his business proposition. The conmen's former associate Lisa has gotten into the drug racket. A few days before, she tricked photographer Sam Hendrix, the tenant of the apartment, into smuggling a heroin-filled doll into the country. When Lisa came to retrieve the doll, it was missing. Roat believes that the doll may be locked in a safe in the room. His plan is to use Mike and Carlino's skills as confidence artists to get Susy (Sam's wife) to give them the hidden doll. The two convicts seem willing to participate, but both inquire as to Lisa's whereabouts. When pressed by Mike and Carlino, Roat reveals that he has murdered the woman and locked her body in the bedroom closet. Lisa's friends decide to decline Roat's offer, but he threatens that he will call the police and incriminate the confidence men, both of whom have foolishly left their fingerprints all over the apartment. Mike and Carlino reluctantly agree to help dispose of the body and retrieve the heroin. As they begin the distasteful work, Susy, who is blind, enters the apartment and senses that someone is present. When her questions get no response, she thinks that she must be mistaken. Moments later she departs, and the villains proceed with their disposing of the body.

Scene 2. Saturday afternoon. Sam leaves on an assignment that will keep him away from the apartment for several hours. Susy is both frightened at being left alone in a neighborhood where a woman's body has recently been found and irritated at Gloria (a girl from upstairs), who seems bent on causing the blind woman problems. Soon after Sam's departure, the three criminals set their plan in motion. Mike poses as an old Marine friend of Sam and gains Susy's confidence when he protects her from an old man (Roat) who breaks into the apartment. After the old man leaves, Susy asks Mike to phone the police. He calls Carlino instead.

Scene 3. Twenty minutes later. "Police Sergeant" Carlino investigates the old man's strange actions and returns to headquarters. Roat then appears dressed as the son of the old man. He relates a tale that implicates Sam in the murder of the woman (Lisa). After Roat leaves, Susy tells Mike of the missing doll, which is the piece of evidence that most strongly seems to link Sam to the murder. Mike then looks out the window and tells Susy that the police are watching the building.

ACT II. The same.

Scene 1. About an hour later. As the villains' plot becomes more complicated, they make several minor mistakes. The alert Susy slowly pieces the evidence together and realizes that Roat, Carlino, and Mike are all working to obtain the doll. While Susy is alone in the apartment, Gloria enters with the doll, which she had stolen earlier in the week. Susy then relies heavily upon the girl in her plan to outwit the criminals. The blind woman sends Gloria to find...
Sam and bring the police. Next, Susy begins smashing lights, unplugging lamps, and dousing all but a single source of light, so that she can fight the villains on an equal ground of sightlessness when the time comes for a confrontation. She hides the doll.

Scene 2. A few minutes later. Mike returns from a phony errand Susy had sent him on to retrieve the doll. He drops all pretense and asks her for the doll. When she refuses, he agrees to leave, since he and Carlino never wanted to take part in the scheme. He tells Susy that Carlino is at that moment killing Roat to avenge the death of Lisa. Mike opens the door to leave and is stabbed. As his body falls, Roat enters the room.

Scene 3. A minute later. Roat tells Susy that he has killed Carlino as well as Mike and will do the same to her if she does not give him the doll. Susy then extinguishes the only remaining light in the room and quickly takes command of the situation, but Roat realizes that Susy has overlooked a light source, the bulb in the refrigerator. He opens the appliance and jams the door so that it will not close. Acting as if defeated, Susy gives Roat the doll. While his guard is down, she stabs him with a kitchen knife. As the severely wounded Roat crawls toward her with a knife in his hand, she tries to close the refrigerator door. Just as Roat reaches her, she pulls the appliance's electric cord and the light goes out. Sam, Gloria, and the police then arrive. They find Roat's body and a frightened but unharmed Susy.
CHAPTER SIX: VARIATIONS

COCK ROBIN

by Elmer Rice and Philip Barry

New York: 48th Street Theatre, January 12, 1928—100 performances

London: Little Theatre, February 24, 1933—32 performances

GEORGE MCAULIFFE: The stage director
JULIAN CLEVELAND: A lawyer
RICHARD LANE: A young lover
HANCOCK ROBINSON (COCK ROBIN): The victim
JOHN JESSUP: A friend of Lane’s
CLARK TORRANCE: A fat young actor
HENRY BRIGGS: The stage manager
EDGAR GRACE: A doctor
ALICE MONTGOMERY: Chairman of the amateur players
MARIA SCOTT: The assistant stage director
CARLOTTA MAXWELL: Lane’s former girl friend
HELEN MAXWELL: Carlotta’s mother

ACT I. The stage setting of a group of amateur players, the interior of an English grog-shop of the Eighteenth Century as viewed from the front of the theatre, 5:00 p. m.

A group of amateur players is putting the final touches on a charity production. Especially difficult is a dueling scene, which director McAuliffe insists on getting perfect. After the scene is rehearsed, Hancock Robinson, the loser of the duel, expresses his dislike of the director and his reluctance to play the scene. Robinson, who is leaving on a cruise immediately after the play, fears that Richard Lane, the other actor in the duel, might really shoot him. Robinson knows that Lane is jealous because Carlotta Maxwell (Lane’s former girl friend) is going with Robinson on the cruise. A change in casting is made to appease Robinson, and the scene is again rehearsed. As the actors prepare to leave the rehearsal, Mrs. Maxwell (Carlotta’s mother) and Dr. Grace (Carlotta’s uncle) try to convince the girl not to proceed with her plans to sail with Robinson. They
tell her of her lover's lechery and of the hatred men like Julian 
Cleveland (a member of the company) harbor for the womanizer. Car-
lotta does not listen to their pleas. As a last resort, Mrs. Maxwell 
and Dr. Grace discuss the possibility of an accident involving Han-
cock during the performance.

ACT II. The setting viewed from the rear of the stage, looking 
toward the back of the front curtain and the audience.
8:30 p. m.

Mrs. Montgomery (the head of the players) welcomes the audi-
ence to the performance and makes corrections in the program. Then 
the curtain goes up on the entertainment. During the dueling scene 
Robinson is really murdered. The performance is halted and the audi-
ence sent home. Cleveland undertakes an investigation to determine 
the murderer's identity before the police are called. Dr. Grace 
confesses to putting a real bullet in the gun used on stage. Although 
he did not intend for Robinson to be killed, Grace seems to be guilty. 
Closer examination of the body, however, reveals that the bullet 
wound is only superficial. Robinson was actually stabbed to death. 
Since Grace had earlier threatened to do just that, suspicion falls 
more heavily upon him.

ACT III. The same. A few minutes later.

Mrs. Maxwell confesses in an attempt to protect Dr. Grace, 
but no one is fooled by her trick. Since Grace adamantly asserts 
his innocence, the investigators look elsewhere. They decide to 
repeat the scene just as Marla (the assistant director with a photo-
graphic memory) remembers it. The recreation points to Carlotta, but 
Richard sees the truth. He realizes that the knife was thrown at 
Robinson and that McAuliffe, an ex-knife-throwing performer, must be 
the killer. After learning of McAuliffe's good reason for killing 
the cad, Marla agrees not to testify, thus assuring that no conviction 
will ever be made.

THE GHOST TRAIN

by Arnold Ridley

London: St. Martin's Theatre, November 25, 1925—655 performances
New York: Eltinge Theatre, August 25, 1926—61 performances
ELSIE WINTHROP: A quarrelsome couple
RICHARD WINTHROP: 
SAUL HODGKIN: The station master
CHARLES MURDOCK: Newlyweds
PEGGY MURDOCK: 
MISS BOURNE: A spinster
TEDDIE DEAKINS: A joking sportsman
JULIA PRICE: An insane lady
HERBERT PRICE: Her uncle
JOHN STERLING: A doctor
JACKSON: An officer of United States Revenue Office
TWO DETECTIVES

ACT I. The waiting room of the railway station at Clear Vale Junction, on a branch line near Rockland, Maine. At 10:30 p.m.

A group of passengers has missed the connection for their train and must spend the night at a decrepit station. Stranded for the evening are the quarreling Winthrops, newlywed Murdocks, prim Miss Bourne, and the obnoxious joker, Teddie Deakins. When the only railroad employee at the station, Saul, tries to close for the evening, the passengers force him to let them remain. Before he exits, he warns them not to leave the building because a ghost train supposedly travels the track at night, bringing death to those who see it. Saul departs and the travelers scoff at his story. A noise is heard on the platform. The passengers open the door only to discover Saul's body.

ACT II. The same. At 11:15 p.m.

A rainstorm traps the passengers in the station. As fears mount, Julia Price (an obviously deranged woman) enters and begs for help. She is followed by Herbert Price (her uncle) and John Sterling (a doctor). The men reveal that Julia's insanity is related to her belief in the ghost train. The passengers tell of Saul's death, but are startled when they discover that the body has disappeared. In secret Teddie gives Charles Murdock a revolver and asks for his help if trouble arises. Moments before midnight, a train rushes down the tracks. Julia faints as her terror reaches its limits.

ACT III. The same. Midnight.

The passengers are locked in the station with Julia, who revives and remembers nothing about the train. Mysterious events begin to occur, making it appear that the ghost story is true. Teddie suddenly pulls a gun on Sterling, shoots one "ghost," and switches the tracks so that a train will derail. When the ghost train returns
moments later, it crashes because of Teddie's tampering with the tracks. He then reveals himself to be a policeman and arrests Sterling, Price, and the still-living Saul as dope and alcohol smugglers. After an attempted escape, Julia, too, is captured and arrested. The ghostly events of the night have merely been staged by the smugglers to keep the passengers indoors while the crooks ran their illegal operation by train.

THE INNOCENTS

by William Archibald

New York: Playhouse, February 1, 1950—141 performances
London: Her Majesty's Theatre, July 3, 1953—188 performances

FLORA: The girl
MRS. GROSE: The housekeeper
MISS GIDDENS: The governess
MILES: The boy
A MAN AND A WOMAN

ACT I. The drawing room of a country house in England, 1880.

Scene 1. An early autumn afternoon. Miss Giddens arrives to begin her job as governess to Flora. While the girl plays in the garden, Miss Giddens and Mrs. Grose (the housekeeper) discuss the former governess, who died under mysterious circumstances.

Scene 2. Three hours later. As Miss Giddens and Flora prepare for bed, a strange shadow of a man appears at the window and blocks out the moonlight.

Scene 3. The following morning. Miss Giddens tells Mrs. Grose how she found it difficult to sleep the night before. She also tells of being stared at by a strange man near the woods. A letter announces that the boy, Miles, has been dismissed from school because he is a contaminating influence on the other young men.

Scene 4. Twilight. The same day. Miles arrives home from school. His casual attitude toward his dismissal infuriates Miss Giddens. While the children play hide-and-seek, the strange man appears at the window. When Miss Giddens describes him, Mrs. Grose realizes it is Quint. She tells Miss Giddens that the strange man is dead.
Scene 5. The following morning, Miss Giddens keeps close watch on the children, but she allows them to be alone for a short while as they play. After the governess and Mrs. Grose discuss Quint's evil influence on the children, Miles sings a song that seems to beckon to the dead. The entire house then vibrates as if a force were trying to enter.

ACT II. The same.

Scene 1. That night, Miles and Flora sneak out of bed and play their strange games. The figure of a woman then appears in the room. Miss Giddens enters and sees the figure, which then vanishes. The children are sent to bed, but they do not stay there. Miles eventually confronts the now-terrified Miss Giddens and warns her not to interfere. After the children return to their rooms, Miss Giddens learns from Mrs. Grose of the sexual relations between Quint and the former governess, who has killed herself. Both Miss Giddens and Mrs. Grose fear that the children have become possessed by the two dead lovers.

Scene 2. The following afternoon, Miss Giddens writes a letter of resignation and is further horrified by Flora's tales of eating dead beetles. The female ghost reappears and is seen by the girl, as well as by the governess and the housekeeper.

Scene 3. Twilight. Mrs. Grose takes Flora to her uncle, while Miss Giddens remains behind with Miles. The governess manages to get the boy to renounce the ghost of Quint. The boy's courageous act breaks the spirit's influence, and it departs. In her moment of triumph over the ghost, Miss Giddens does not at first realize that Miles is dead.

MARGIN FOR ERROR

by Clare Boothe Luce

New York: Plymouth Theatre, November 3, 1939--234 performances
London: Apollo Theatre, August 1, 1940--27 performances

OTTO HOEST: The American Nazi Bund leader
BARON MAX VON ALVENSTOR: The Consul's secretary
OFFICER MOR FINKELSTEIN: A Jewish policeman
FRIEDA: The maid
DR. JENNINGS: A physician trying to help refugees
SOPHIE BAUMER: The Consul's wife
KARL BAUMER: The Nazi Consul
THOMAS DENNEY: A newspaper columnist
CAPTAIN MULROONEY: An Irish policeman

ACT I. The library of the German Consul in an American City, prior to September, 1939. Late afternoon.

The Nazi Consul to the United States, Karl Baumer, is in danger. His evil ways have made many enemies for him, and recently attacks have been made on his life. Among those who have good reason to want him dead are his wife, Sophie, whose father is captive in Czechoslovakia; Thomas Denney (a Nazi-hating American reporter), who is in love with Sophie; Otto Horst (the head of the American Nazi Party), whom the Consul has been ordered to liquidate; Max (the Consul's secretary), whom the Consul seeks to make the scapegoat for the Nazi failures in America; and Dr. Jennings, one of many people who have given money to the Consul to secure the freedom of German prisoners only to learn that their friends have been killed and their money pocketed by Baumer. Compounding the Consul's problems is his sudden recall to Germany at a time when his embezzlement of Nazi money leaves him susceptible to Hitler's wrath. The man assigned to guard the Consul is policeman Moe Finkelstein, a typically lovable and amusing American Jew. As Baumer and his enemies listen to the evening broadcast of Hitler's speech from Germany, each of those wishing the Consul dead approaches him while he sits gazing out a window. Last to go to Baumer is Dr. Jennings, who takes a gun from Baumer's desk and shoots him. Moe enters and discovers the body.

ACT II. The same. The action is continuous.

Moe fears that an unsolved murder will point to him and, thus, allow the Nazis to use the incident as an excuse to murder more Jews in Germany. He decides to find the killer before calling headquarters. Just as Moe admits defeat in his investigation, Jennings confesses to shooting Baumer. Moe then reveals that the Consul had first been stabbed and resumes his detective work. Sophie eventually confesses to the stabbing, but a quick investigation by Jennings reveals that Baumer was first poisoned. Moe searches for cyanide and finds it in Max's pocket, but Moe does not believe him to be guilty. Moe soon solves the case: Baumer had tried to poison Max and make it look like suicide, but in a moment of confusion the Consul had drunk from the poisoned glass himself.
A MURDER HAS BEEN ARRANGED

by Emlyn Williams

London: St. James's Theatre, November 26, 1930—85 performances

MISS CROZE: Sir Charles's secretary
CAVENDISH: The band conductor
MRS. WRAGG: A cook
JIMMY NORTH: A young man masquerading as a reporter
BEATRICE: Sir Charles's young wife
MRS. ARTHUR: Her mother
SIR CHARLES JASPER: The host
MAURICE MULLINS: Charles's distant relative
A WOMAN

ACT I. Here—that is to say, the stage of the St. James's Theatre, London. Now—that is to say, on the night of Wednesday, November 26, 1930, Sir Charles Jasper's fortieth birthday. 8:35 p.m.

Sir Charles Jasper (a student of the occult) is holding a party in a haunted theatre both to celebrate his inheritance at eleven o'clock and to prove the existence of ghosts. Legend has it that the ghost of anyone murdered in the theatre will walk through the haunted building after taking over the body of a dumb woman. Since a man was recently murdered in the theatre, Sir Charles feels that the night of his inheritance party may be the right time for the ghost's appearance. Guests include Beatrice (Sir Charles's wife) and Mrs. Arthur (her mother). Also on hand are Mrs. Wragg (the cook), Miss Croze (the secretary), and Cavendish (the conductor of the band). Pretending to be a reporter, Jimmy North crashes the party in hopes of protecting Beatrice, with whom he has fallen in love. Momentarily he is suspected of being Maurice Mullins, the evil relative who will inherit the fortune if Sir Charles dies before eleven o'clock. Suddenly the real Maurice appears and asks to join the party.

ACT II. The same. 9:30 p.m.

The police phone and reveal that the man whose body was found in the theatre had not been killed on the premises. Sir Charles is greatly disappointed that the curse is not to be in effect. While alone on stage, Maurice and Miss Croze reveal themselves to be lovers. Maurice then outlines his plan to murder Sir Charles. He first stages an argument between Sir Charles and Beatrice, and then he tricks Sir Charles into writing what appears to be a suicide note. Finally, he poisons his distant relative. Beatrice and Mrs. Wragg find the body.
and are not fooled by the suicide evidence. Beatrice then tells her mother, Jimmy, and Miss Groze of the murder and of her suspicion of Maurice. Just as Beatrice's resolve begins to fade, the dumb woman of the legend appears, since a person, Sir Charles, has now been murdered in the theatre. Maurice then enters and inquires after Sir Charles. The others try to conceal their knowledge of his death.

ACT III. The same. 10:30 p.m.

Maurice taunts Beatrice with inquiries about Sir Charles's whereabouts. After he exits, the dumb woman reappears. Quickly the rest of the curse is fulfilled, including the woman's speaking, her death, and the transformation of her body into that of the dead man. As the ghost of Sir Charles appears to sit at the table for the party, Maurice re-enters. When he sees the ghost, he confesses his crime and goes insane.

THE SPIDER

by Fulton Oursler and Lowell Brentano

New York: 45th Street Theatre, March 22, 1927--313 performances
London: Winter Garden Theatre, March 1, 1928--58 performances
Adaptation by Roland Pertwee

HACK AND LARUE: Members of a skating act
LYTELL AND PANT: Members of a black-face act
MONSIEUR CHATRAND: A magician
ALEXANDER: His assistant in mind-reading
JOHN CARRINGTON: The victim in the auditorium
BEVERLY LANE: His ward
DOCTOR BLACKSTONE: A physician in the auditorium
MRS. WIMBLETON: An audience member who is eager to leave
MALONEY: A stage electrician
MR. YOUNG: Theatre manager
BILL: A hood
DICK: Another hood
ESTELLE: An assistant to Chatrand
TOMMY: A Japanese assistant to Chatrand
REPORTER
DOCTOR STERLING: Plants in audience
ALBERT HENRY SMITH: Plants in audience
MAN WITH A GOLF CARD: Chief investigating officer
The police

SERGEANT SCHMIDT:
OFFICER DOUGHERTY:
OFFICER BURKE:
OFFICER SIMPSON:
OFFICER SHAYNE:
OFFICER MYER:
OFFICER JONES:
OFFICER THORNTON:
VAUDEVILLIANS
STAGE HANDS

ACT I. The stage and auditorium of the Tivoli Vaudeville Theatre.

Chatrand is performing his magic and mind-reading act with the help of Alexander (his assistant), who happens to be suffering from amnesia. In the middle of an altercation between Chatrand and John Carrington (an audience member), the lights go out and a shot is fired. When the lights come up, Carrington lies bleeding from his fatal gunshot wound. The police, led by Inspector Riley, arrive and place everyone in the theatre under arrest as material witnesses. Riley soon learns that Alexander is the long lost brother of Beverly Lane, the young woman who accompanied the victim to the theatre. As evidence mounts against Alexander because of his hatred of Carrington, Chatrand uses magic to escape from the police so that he can better help his young friend.

ACT II.

Scene 1. The dressing room of Monsieur Chatrand. The police question Alexander and then go to chase men who have been tampering with the body. Chatrand appears and discusses the evidence with Alexander. The police re-enter. They have captured two hoods, who reveal that the murder was related to dope smuggling. Chatrand tells Riley that he has a plan to catch the killer that involves a seance on the stage.

Scene 2. In front of the house curtain. Chatrand and Riley ask the audience for its cooperation in the seance.

Scene 3. The stage and auditorium of the theatre. Chatrand conducts the seance. Instead of frightening the killer into revealing himself, the act results in the murderer's firing another shot that causes immediate panic.

ACT III.

Scene 1. The office of Mr. Young, manager of the theatre. Evidence again points to Alexander. The police plan to arrest him,
but Chatrand proposes one final plan. He wants to repeat the moment of the crime and thus make the villain reveal himself by reliving the crime. Inspector Riley decides to go along with the trick.

Scene 2. In front of the house curtain. The police make preparations prior to repeating Chatrand's act.

Scene 3. The stage and auditorium of the theatre. Chatrand's plan works. Blackstone, the doctor who examined the dying man, is caught trying to escape. He proves to be the killer and the head of the New York narcotics ring.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAIR
by Bayard Veiller

New York: 48th Street Theatre, November 20, 1916—328 performances

WILL CROSBY: The young lover
HELEN O'NEILL: His fiancée
MRS. CROSBY: Will's mother
ROSCOE CROSBY: Will's father
EDWARD WALES: A friend who seeks a killer
MARY EASTWOOD: A guest
HELEN TRENT: Crosby's daughter
BRADISH TRENT: Her husband
HOWARD STANDISH: A lawyer
PHILIP MASON: An artist
ELIZABETH ERSKINE: A guest
GRACE STANDISH: Howard's sister
FOLLOCK: The butler
MADAME ROSALIE LA GRANGE: A medium
TIM DONOHUE: The police inspector
Sergeant Dunn: His assistant
DOOLAN: Another policeman

ACT I. The Italian Room in Roscoe Crosby's house. Evening.

At a dinner at the Crosby home, Will expresses his love for Helen O'Neill. Receiving the approval of Will's parents, the lovers plan to be married, although Helen expresses doubts of her being good enough for Will. Edward Wales (one of the guests) has provided the entertainment for the evening: a medium, Rosalie La Grange, whom he
hopes will help him solve the stabbing murder of an old friend. Soon after the medium's arrival it becomes clear that she is actually Helen's mother, a fact that the two women conceal from the others. In order to guard against trickery during a seance, Rosalie allows herself to be searched and tied. The doors of the room are then locked from the outside by the butler. Then the seance begins. Rosalie speaks as Wales's dead friend, but she cannot bring herself to say the murderer's name. The lights are turned on and Wales's body is discovered. Like his friend, he too has been stabbed in the back. The knife is missing.

ACT II. The same. Ten minutes later.

Inspector Donohue and Dunn (his assistant) arrive and conduct the investigation. Donohue reveals that Wales had been working with the police to catch the murderer of the old friend. Wales thought he had uncovered the murderer, a woman named Helen. He had then engaged Rosalie to give the name Helen during the seance, as if the victim were accusing his murderer from beyond the grave. Donohue, who was well-informed of the plan, is momentarily confused because both Mrs. Trent (Croby's daughter) and Miss O'Neill are named Helen. He soon learns that Miss O'Neill is Rosalie's daughter. Donohue suspects that the medium tried to protect her daughter by not giving the name as agreed upon. The policeman is convinced that Helen O'Neill is a murderer.

ACT III. The same. A half an hour later.

Rosalie prays for a sign of the killer, and the police search for the missing murder weapon. Evidence continues to mount against Helen O'Neill. Donohue grants Rosalie ten minutes in which to discover the murderer before he takes Helen to jail. First, Rosalie finds the knife, which is stuck in the ceiling. She then calls all suspects and Donohue into the room. The spirits come to her aid as lights go out and the knife falls to the table below, thus frightening the murderer, Mason (an artist), into a confession.
CHAPTER SEVEN: COMIC MYSTERIES

ARSENIC AND OLD LACE

by Joseph Kesselring

New York: Fulton Theatre, January 10, 1941—1,444 performances
London: Strand Theatre, December 23, 1942—1,337 performances

ABBY BREWSTER: An eccentric spinster
REV. DOCTOR HARPER: A local minister
TEDDY BREWSTER: Abby's insane nephew
OFFICER BROPHY: A policeman
OFFICER KLEIN: Another policeman
MARSHA BREWSTER: Abby's sister
ELAINE HARPER: The minister's daughter
MORTIMER BREWSTER: Teddy's brother, the drama critic
MR. GIBBS: An old man
JONATHAN BREWSTER: Mortimer's evil brother
DOCTOR EINSTEIN: Jonathan's associate
OFFICER O'HARA: A policeman who aspires to be a playwright
LIEUTENANT ROONEY: Another policeman
MR. WITHERSPOON: The head of an asylum for the insane

ACT I. The living room of the Brewster home in Brooklyn, 1941. An afternoon in September.

Martha and Abby Brewster are helping lonely old men find peace by poisoning them with elderberry wine laced with arsenic. Their nephew Teddy, who believes himself to be Teddy Roosevelt, helps by digging the graves. The latest victim has not yet been buried because of visits from a minister and the friendly local policemen. Until the opportunity for the funeral presents itself, the sisters are concealing the corpse in a window box. Teddy's brother Mortimer (a drama critic) drops by the house on his way to pick up Elaine (his girl friend), who lives next door. Mortimer discovers the body and soon learns of his aunts' hobby. After he manages to drive away another potential victim, Mortimer goes to the theatre. Shortly after the spinsters go upstairs to dress for the funeral, two
strangers break into the house. They are Jonathan (Mortimer's evil brother) and Dr. Einstein (a similarly despicable individual). The two plan to take over the Brewster home and make it headquarters for their illegal operations. Jonathan also needs to find a place to dispose of a body that is presently in his car.

**ACT II.** The same. That same night.

Jonathan and Einstein discover Teddy's grave-shaped hole in the cellar and decide to dispose of their corpse in it. Just as Teddy moves the first body from the window box to the cellar, the evil men enter with their body. They are interrupted by Elaine, however, and are forced to put their body in the window box. Suspicious of Elaine, Jonathan begins to treat her roughly. Mortimer then arrives, rescues his girlfriend, and sends her home. Before long he discovers the new body and realizes that it is Jonathan's handiwork. When Officer O'Hara stops to see why lights are on so late at night, Mortimer uses the presence of the police to force Jonathan to leave. As the evil man and his partner are about to depart, Einstein discovers the body in the cellar. Jonathan then uses this information to force Mortimer to get the policeman out of the house. The elderly aunts tell their story of multiple murders to their evil nephew. When Einstein notes that Jonathan and the old ladies are tied in the number of people they have killed, the nephew decides to become the family murder champion by disposing of Mortimer.

**ACT III.** The same.

**Scene 1.** Later that night. While Mortimer prepares the commitment papers for Teddy, Jonathan and Einstein bury the bodies. They then tie Mortimer to a chair and prepare to torture him. Officer O'Hara interrupts them, however. When the policeman, who is a would-be playwright, sees Mortimer, he decides to take the opportunity of a captive audience to describe his ideas for a drama to the theatre critic.

**Scene 2.** Early the next morning. O'Hara is still talking about his play when more police arrive because of complaints about noise in the house. When one officer recognizes Jonathan as an escapee from an insane asylum, the rotten nephew is arrested. The police ignore his ridiculous assertion that thirteen bodies are buried in the cellar. Elaine arrives with Mr. Witherspoon (the head of the asylum to which Teddy is being sent). When Abby and Martha hear that Teddy is leaving, they insist on committing themselves in order to be with him. While alone with Mortimer and Elaine, the aunts reveal that their sane nephew is not actually a Brewster. Mortimer, who has had second thoughts about marrying Elaine because of his insane bloodlines,
is overjoyed at the news. As Jonathan goes with the police, he re­
minds the old women that they are all tied at twelve bodies. Martha
and Abby proceed to break the deadlock by offering Mr. Witherspoon a
glass of elderberry wine.

THE GORILLA

by Ralph Spence

New York: Selwyn Theatre, April 28, 1925--251 performances

London: New Oxford Theatre, June 30, 1925--134 performances

JEFFERSON LEE: A southern Negro butler
CYRUS STEVENS: A retired businessman
ALICE DENBY: Marsden's girl friend
ARTHUR MARSDEN: A mystery playwright
MR. MULLIGAN: A detective
MR. GARRITY: Mulligan's partner
SIMMONS: A reporter
THE STRANGER
THE SAILOR: First-class seaman, U.S.N.
FOE: A gorilla
DR. WILNER: A small-town physician

ACT I. Living room of Cyrus Stevens's home on Long Island. About
11:20 at night.

Arthur Marsden is a dramatist specializing in mystery plays. His sweetheart, Alice Denby, living with her uncle in an old house, thinks Mr. Stevens (the uncle) might back a play if he were to become interested in it. Arthur starts to read the play to him. At the men­
tion of the title, The Gorilla, Mr. Stevens talks of his problems with
the real criminal, The Gorilla, on whose exploits the play is based.
The elder man explains that the master criminal has threatened to kill
him tonight. Moments later, two stupid policemen, Mulligan and Gar­
rity, arrive to protect Stevens. They are followed by Simmons (a re­
porter). As the inept policemen prepare to capture The Gorilla, the
lights are turned out. In the confusion that follows, Stevens is kid­
napped, a stranger is substituted for him briefly, and Garrity is
handcuffed. The officers then let the stranger escape and fail to
find Stevens. They do, however, discover an unconscious sailor in a
closet. The police next ask Alice to open a locked trunk. When she
sees what is inside, she screams in horror.
ACT II. The same. Ten minutes later.

The trunk is actually a door leading to a dungeon below. In that cellar room Alice saw a gorilla, which made her scream. Marsden keeps searching for his girl friend's missing uncle, while the police become more confused by the exceedingly strange events. People keep seeing the mysterious gorilla. Hairy hands, gorilla heads, skeletons, battle axes, and swords pop out of secret recesses in the walls. Various characters disappear despite the watchfulness of the police. Just when it appears that Marsden is The Gorilla and is using the Stevens home as his headquarters, he learns that Alice has also disappeared. He is then forced to reveal himself to the police and reporter as Van Cleave (a special detective on loan from Scotland Yard). As Van Cleave leads the band of searchers to look for the missing girl, a gorilla emerges with Alice in his arms. He takes her into the dungeon.

ACT III. The same. Fifteen minutes later.

After yet more disappearances, the murder of the butler, the capture of The Gorilla's men (one of whom is the stranger from Act I), and the rescue of Alice, Van Cleave uncovers the truth. The sailor is merely trying to catch his escaped pet, a gorilla. Van Cleave then sets a trap to catch the criminal, The Gorilla. The plan works and Stevens is revealed to be the villain. In a last attempt to escape, he turns out the lights. Stevens is killed when he falls into the dungeon and the pet gorilla runs amuck in the audience.

As the story of The Gorilla comes to an end, Marsden and Stevens are shown reading the manuscript. The strange events were actually only enactments of Marsden's play. Stevens agrees to produce the show.

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

by Owen Davis

New York: George M. Cohan Theatre, September 2, 1924—103 performances

MORGAN: A tramp
EMILY: The bride
JACK: The groom
THOMAS: A chauffeur
DUNCAN: An author
HELEN: His wife
ISABEL: The other woman
EZRA: A constable
ED: A milkman
GROGAN: A detective
EVANS: Emily's father

ACT I. Interior of a summer cottage at Cedar Bluff, New York. Sunset.

Emily and Jack are planning to spend their honeymoon in seclusion at the cottage owned by the bride's father, Mr. Evans. Thomas (the chauffeur) tries to convince the couple not to remain in the house. Evans had instructed Thomas to do so, because the bride's father believes the house to be haunted. Despite the warning and the strange noises in the house, the couple is adamant about staying. Thomas departs, but the newlyweds never have the cottage to themselves: a tramp, Morgan, is hidden in the house. Also on hand are Isabel (one of Jack's old girl friends), Ezra (the local constable), Ed (the milkman), and the neighbors, Duncan and Helen. In the confusion caused by the presence of these people and by the cottage's lighting, which fails periodically, shots are fired. Duncan decides to play detective and begins to investigate. Finding a great deal of blood by Isabel's car, he concludes that she has been murdered even though the body is missing. The constable apprehends the tramp, who seems the most likely killer, but guilt shifts from one person to another as Duncan evaluates the evidence with his faulty reasoning. Suddenly, Grogan (a New York detective) appears to take charge of the case. Before he can reach a conclusion, all the people are frightened by what seem to be the antics of a ghost in the house.

ACT II. The same. Midnight.

Jack is about to be arrested for the murder when Emily confesses. Realizing that she is lying to protect him, Jack confesses also. He decides to turn detective himself in an effort to clear both himself and his bride. Suspicion then falls on Helen, Duncan, Ed, and Morgan. Finally, Duncan proposes a seance to get at the culprit. His efforts do not get a confession from the killer, but he manages to conjure up two ghosts, one of which is Isabel.

ACT III. The same. Sunrise.

Evans and the chauffeur, Thomas, are added to the people at the honeymoon cottage. A quick investigation reveals that Evans has been there all night. In a last desperate attempt to find the killer, Duncan gives the suspects a truth serum. Evans confesses when confronted with the facts of the case. He tells how he posed as the ghost in order to keep his daughter out of the house that he truly
believed was haunted. During a moment of confusion when he heard a shot fired, Evans thought Jack had been killed. From an upstairs window the old man had fired at a dim form he presumed to be Jack's murderer. Just as the case appears to be solved, Isabel enters, quite alive and healthy. She has been sleeping under a tree. The copious blood found at the murder scene must belong to something, and an explanation is soon provided. The victim was the milkman's best cow.

RAMSHACKLE INN
by George Batson

New York: Royale Theatre, January 5, 1924—215 performances

PATTON: The desk clerk
ARBUTHNOT: A guest
JOYCE ROGERS: Another guest
MAME PHILLIPS: The owner
CONSTABLE SMALL: The local policeman
BELINDA FRYDE: The new owner
COMMODORE LUCIUS TOWSER: Her business associate
DOCTOR RUSSELL: A physician
GAIL RUSSELL: His wife
ALICE FISHER: His sister
BILL PHILLIPS: The owner's son
MR. TEMPE: A banker
MARY TEMPE: His niece and Bill's fiancée
GILHOOLEY: Small's assistant
FRED PORTER: A man from the Coast Guard

ACT I. The interior of the Ye Olde Colonial Inn, not far from Gloucester, Massachusetts, 7:00 p.m.

It is a busy night at Ye Olde Colonial Inn. Mane (the owner) awaits the arrival both of the new owner of her hotel and of her son Bill, who has just been released from prison after serving his term for a crime he did not commit. Patton (the desk clerk) is also busy; he murders one guest, Mr. Arbuthnot, and hides the body in the hotel safe. Joyce Rogers (Arbuthnot's friend) becomes suspicious at the man's sudden disappearance. Before Patton can dispose of the body, visitors and guests begin to arrive at the hotel. Mr. Small (the local constable) makes a brief appearance. Belinda Pryde (the new owner) then enters with her partner, Commodore Towser. Moments later a Dr. Russell appears and asks for rooms for himself, his wife, and his sister. Bill Phillips (the newly released felon) arrives at the hotel
only moments before his fiancee Mary and Mr. Temple (her uncle). It
soon becomes apparent that Patton, Russell, and Temple are partners in
crime. The latter seems reluctant to engage in any further chicanery,
but he allows himself to be intimidated by the other men. As Bill and
Mary plan their wedding, Temple overhears and swears to stop them. The
lights suddenly go out. When they come on again, Temple’s body lies
on the floor.

ACT II. The same. One hour later.

Constable Small arrests Bill for the murder, but before he can
take the young man to jail, Belinda and Mame help him escape. As Small
runs after the fugitive, Belinda decides to play detective. She un­
covers several startling facts. She not only learns that Russell is
keeping his sister Alice a prisoner, but she also realizes that Patton,
too, is involved. After learning that the cellar is full of illegal
liquor, she discovers a body (Arbuthnot). When she manages to get
Gilhooley (Small’s assistant) to look at the body, he sees nothing be­
cause the criminals have moved it. Bill sneaks back into the house and
plans with Mary and Belinda to catch the murderer; however, Small
catches him before his plan can be fully formulated. Just as things
look bleakest for Bill, Belinda produces the mysterious body and claims
to be Federal Bureau of Investigation agent Matilda Janeway. Small
then believes her claim that Bill is innocent, and he releases the
young man. Patton and Russell enter and cover all the others with guns.
Paton admits to being both a smuggler and a killer. He reveals that
he wants to avenge his brother’s death, which he blames on federal
agent Janeway. Belinda escapes momentarily during a blackout, but the
two villains discover her hiding place.

ACT III. The same. A few minutes later.

Russell and Patton lock all their prisoners in the cellar ex­
cept for Belinda, whom they tie to a chair, and Joyce, who is still on
the loose. While the villains are out of the room, Joyce appears, un­
ties Belinda, and reveals herself to be the real Janeway. Joyce is soon
captured, however. Belinda then takes control herself. She signals for
the Coast Guard and gets the villains to distrust each other. Patton
eventually shoots Russell, but Belinda manages to knock the murderous
man unconscious. As all prisoners are released from the cellar, Jan­
eway and Belinda await the arrival of the head of the smuggling ring.
Instead, a man from the Coast Guard appears. He fools everyone except
Belinda, who realizes that he is the ringleader. She knocks him un­
conscious and begins to think of how she will spend the reward money.
SEVEN KEYS TO BALDPATE

by George M. Cohan

New York: Astor Theatre, September 22, 1913—328 performances

London: Apollo Theatre, September 12, 1914—57 performances

ELIJAH QUIMBY: The caretaker of Baldpate Inn
MRS. QUIMBY: The caretaker's wife
WILLIAM HALLOWELL MAGEE: The novelist
JOHN BLAND: The millionaire's right-hand man
MARY NORTON: The newspaper reporter
MRS. RHODES: The charming widow
PETERS: The hermit of Baldpate
MYRA THORNHILL: The blackmailer
LOU MAX: The mayor's man Friday
JIM CARGAN: The crooked Mayor of Reuton
THOMAS HAYDEN: The president of the R. and A. Suburban Railroad
JIGGS KENNEDY: The Chief of Police of Asquewan Falls
FIRST POLICEMAN
SECOND POLICEMAN
HAL BENTLEY: The owner of Baldpate Inn

PROLOGUE, Office of Baldpate Inn, Winter, 11:00 p.m.

Mr. and Mrs. Quimby (the caretakers of Baldpate Inn) prepare the summer resort for an unexpected winter guest. The visitor soon arrives. He is a mystery novelist, William Hallowell Magee. He has bet Hal Bentley (the owner of Baldpate) that he can write a novel in twenty-four hours. Since Magee needs absolute quiet and solitude for his work, Bentley has sent him to the desolate inn to write the novel. The Quimbys leave after assuring the writer that he will not be disturbed since he has the only key to Baldpate.

ACT I, The same, Midnight.

Magee seems to be making satisfactory progress when he is suddenly interrupted by a series of visitors, most of them criminals, whose presence threatens Magee's chances of winning his bet. Among the many unwelcome arrivals, most of whom have "the only key to Baldpate," are a gangster with a gun and a bundle of two hundred thousand dollars, corrupt city officials, a hermit who poses as a ghost, and assorted screaming females. One of the women, Mary, is a newspaper reporter. Magee falls in love with her at first sight. Mary tells Magee that they have stumbled upon a city scandal. If she can get the
story to her paper, she will further her career as a reporter. Magee helps her obtain some evidence, graft money that the man with a gun had hidden in the safe. Mary leaves to turn in the evidence, and Magee remains behind to guard a roomful of people. He covers the assortment of evildoers with the gun he has taken from the gangster. All await Mary’s call, which will let Magee know she has arrived safely at her newspaper's headquarters with the evidence.

ACT II. The same. 2:00 a. m.

The criminals get angry as they realize they were double-crossing one another. Despite his care in guarding the villains, Magee is overcome and the gun is taken away from him. Soon after the criminals take charge, one of them murders another. The criminals then plan to frame Magee for the killing. Unexpectedly the chief of police arrives with a large number of assistants. Before the entire matter is settled, the murder victim's body disappears, Mary returns without the money, the money reappears, the missing corpse walks along the balcony, and the police chief tries to steal the money. An explanation comes only when the owner of Baldpate arrives. He tells Magee that all the night's fantastic events were staged by actors as a means of retarding the writing of the novel. The bet is called off, but Magee wins Mary anyhow.

EPILOGUE. The same. Midnight. The next night.

All of the activities in acts I and II are shown to be the novel Magee was writing. He turns the manuscript of Seven Keys to Baldpate over to Quimby and prepares to collect his winnings.

THE TAVERN

by George M. Cohan

New York: George M. Cohan Theatre, September 27, 1920—252 performances

ZACH: The tavern keeper's son
SALLY: The hired girl
FREEMAN: The tavern keeper
WILLUM: The hired man
THE VAGABOND: A stranger
VIOLET: A mysterious woman
LAMSON: The governor
MRS. LAMSON: The governor's wife
VIRGINIA: The governor's daughter
TOM ALLEN: Virginia's fiancé
THE SHERIFF
EZRA: The sheriff's man
JOSHUA: The sheriff's other man
TONY: The sheriff's third man
STEVEN: An attendant

ACT I. The interior of Freeman's Tavern. Midnight.

Zach (the tavern keeper's son) has been frightened by something he saw outside. He tells Sally (his girl friend) of his encounter. Freeman (the tavern keeper) sneaks into the room and finds his son with the girl he has forbidden Zach to associate with. When he learns of a stranger outside, Freeman goes to investigate. Shots are fired, but the tavern keeper returns unharmed. Moments later a stranger, the Vagabond, enters and surrenders a gun to Freeman. The stranger says he took it from a woman outside who shot at Freeman. The tavern keeper brings the woman inside. The delirious female, Violet, claims that she shot the gun while dreaming. Her disjointed story makes it seem she is traveling to the capital to assassinate the governor. After putting the woman to bed, Freeman sends his hired man, William, to fetch the sheriff. Before the tavern keeper can pry an explanation from the Vagabond, more strangers appear. They are the governor, his wife, his daughter, and the girl's fiancé. Before the distinguished guests go to bed, they let slip the information that they were robbed along the highway. Freeman sends all to their rooms except Zach, who must wait outside to head off William and the sheriff. Not wanting to upset the governor, Freeman thinks it best that the law officer stay in the barn until the government official has departed.

ACT II. The same. An hour or two later.

No one seems able to sleep. The Vagabond and Virginia (the governor's daughter) meet. He rashly tells her to leave her fiancé in favor of himself. When the man in question, Tom Allen, appears, he accuses Virginia of being too flirtatious. Then the hysterical Violet comes into the room. Upon seeing Allen, she accuses him of ruining her life, and she threatens to tell all to the governor. When the governor himself enters and gives Violet the chance to present her case, she faints. Allen runs out into the storm. The Vagabond seems overjoyed with the turn of events. The governor then tries to decipher the strange occurrences, but he becomes frustrated at the Vagabond's reluctance to give a sane response to questions. Zach then returns with William, who informs Freeman that the sheriff was not at home. After the tavern keeper and the governor go to question Violet, the sheriff and his men suddenly appear and take command. They have with them the unconscious Mr. Allen. Violet makes a brief appearance.
to denounce Allen, who then escapes once more. He is soon subdued, however, and returned to the tavern. The governor's wife and daughter recognize the sheriff as the man who robbed them on the highway. The governor and the Vagabond then manage to capture the villain, who readily confesses. Violet seems grief-stricken because the sheriff is her only friend in the world. She next accuses both Willum and Allen of ruining her life. Willum bolts from the house, but he is shot dead by the sheriff's men, who themselves are slain by a new arrival, Stevens, in self-defense. Stevens proves to be an attendant from the local insane asylum who has come to retrieve an escaped patient, Violet. He tells the people in the tavern about a man who escaped years before. It is obvious to all but Stevens that the Vagabond is the former resident of the asylum. With the governor's approval, the Vagabond departs into the storm.
Glossary

Bafflement. That quality in a mystery that arises when the characters (chiefly the detective) are unable to explain logically the puzzling occurrences and clues.

Collective-Detective Mystery. A confined-mystery sub-formula in which the detective function shifts constantly from one character to another.

Comic Mystery. A confined-mystery sub-formula that parodies the devices of other mystery formulas.

Confined Mystery. A drama in which a group of characters is detained primarily in a single locale until a crime is solved.

Detective. The character who solves the mystery question; sometimes called the "functional detective" to differentiate him from the "nominal detective," who is merely a police officer.

Environmental Mystery. A confined-mystery sub-formula that employs the entire theatre-building as an integral part of its setting and assigns an active role of participation to the audience.

Fear. The emotion aroused in melodrama by placing a sympathetic character in a threatening, imminently dangerous situation.

Formula. A prescription or recipe for the arrangement of the various ingredients of a play to achieve a predetermined end effect.

Ghost Drama. A confined-mystery sub-formula that dwells upon supernatural ingredients and often employs occult forces in the solution of its mystery question.

"Had I But Known" (HIBK). A minor confined-mystery formula in which a woman who possesses some weakness becomes the unwitting prey of a villain as a result of that weakness.

Hate. The emotion aroused against the villain in a melodrama as a result of his placing a sympathetic character in a perilous situation.
**Inverted Mystery:** A minor confined-mystery formula that transposes the revelation of the villain's identity from the end to the beginning of the play; also known as "unorthodox mystery" and "inside-out crime story."

**Murder-House Mystery:** A major confined-mystery formula that involves an ongoing series of murders among a group of people who are confined in a secluded house or apartment; also known as "pistol and panel play" and "fright-wig melodrama."

**Mystery:** A melodramatic story (in narrative or dramatic form) that conceals the solution to a crime until the denouement.

**Mystery Question:** The central crime-related concern of a mystery stated as a question; usually "Who done it?"

**Parody:** A humorous imitation of a serious writing that changes sense to nonsense or seriousness to ludicrousness.

**Police Procedural:** A major confined-mystery formula in which police officers conduct an official investigation at the scene of a crime.

**Propagandistic Detective Drama:** A confined-mystery sub-formula in which extraneous, politically related thought is imposed upon a basic mystery formula.

**Psychological Thriller:** A major confined-mystery formula in which a detailed portrayal of a character's mental collapse, which is precipitated by the commission of a crime, dominates the concern for a solution to that crime.

**Red Herring:** A false or misleading clue.

**Suspense:** An emotional byproduct of fear that results from a delay of the anticipated dangerous outcome of a fearful situation.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Plays


305


Books, Periodicals, Newspapers, Theses, and Dissertations


---


---


---


Cohan, George M. *Twenty Years on Broadway and the Years It Took to Get There: The True Story of a Troupe's Life from the Cradle to the "Closed Shop."* New York: Harper, 1925.


---


"Old Fashioned Melodrama." The Times (London), 10 Feb. 1962, p. 4.


"Owen Davis Solves a Mystery." New York Times, 30 June 1919, p. 16.


