

Agatha Christie

MURDER
ON THE
ORIENT
EXPRESS

ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY
KEN LUDWIG

DIRECTED BY
EMILY MANN

STUDY GUIDE

STUDY GUIDE OBJECTIVES

This study guide serves as a classroom tool for teachers and students, and addresses the following standards:

COMMON CORE STANDARDS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Reading Literature: *Key Ideas and Details*

- **Grades 9-10: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **Grades 9-10: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.
- **Grades 9-10: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.6** Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

Reading Literature: *Integration of Knowledge and Ideas*

- **Grades 9-10: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.7** Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment (e.g., Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*).

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS FOR THEATRE

Theatre/Creating

- **TH:Cr1.1.HSII-b.** Investigate the collaborative nature of the actor, director, playwright, and designers and explore their interdependent roles in a drama/theatre work.

Theatre/Responding

- **TH:Re7.1.HSI-a.** Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-a.** Analyze and compare artistic choices developed from personal experiences in multiple drama/theatre works.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-b.** Identify and compare cultural perspectives and contexts that may influence the evaluation of a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-c.** Justify personal aesthetics, preferences, and beliefs through participation in and observation of a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSIII-b.** Use new understandings of cultures and contexts to shape personal responses to drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re9.1.HSI-b.** Consider the aesthetics of the production elements in a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re9.1.HSI-c.** Formulate a deeper understanding and appreciation of a drama/theatre work by considering its specific purpose or intended audience.

Theatre/Connecting

- **TH:Cn10.1.HSI-a.** Investigate how cultural perspectives, community ideas and personal beliefs impact a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Cn11.2.HSI-b.** Use basic theatre research methods to better understand the social and cultural background of a drama/theatre work.

GUIDELINES FOR ATTENDING THE THEATRE

Attending live theatre is a unique experience with many valuable educational and social benefits. To ensure that all audience members are able to enjoy the performance, please take a few minutes to discuss the following audience etiquette topics with your students before you come to Hartford Stage.

- How is attending the theatre similar to and different from going to the movies? What behaviors are and are not appropriate when seeing a play? Why?
 - › Remind students that because the performance is live, the audience affects the performance. No two audiences are exactly the same and no two performances are exactly the same—this is part of what makes theatre so special!
- Theatre should be an enjoyable experience for the audience. Audience members are more than welcome to applaud when appropriate and laugh at the funny moments. Talking and calling out during the performance, however, are not allowed. Why might this be?
 - › Be sure to mention that not only would the people seated around them be able to hear their conversation, but the actors on stage could hear them, too. Theatres are constructed to carry sound efficiently!
- Any noise or light can be a distraction, so please remind students to make sure their cell phones are turned off. Texting, photography, and video recording are prohibited. Food and gum should not be taken into the theatre.
- Students should sit with their group as seated by the Front of House staff and should not leave their seats once the performance has begun.

Who Was Agatha Christie?

By Sara Berliner

Dame Agatha Christie is one of the most famous mystery writers in the English-speaking world. Also known as Mary Westmacott (her romance novel pseudonym), she is credited with being the best-selling novelist of all time and having written the world's longest-running play. Over the course of her life, she wrote 66 novels, 14 short story collections, and numerous scripts.

Christie was born in England in 1890 as Agatha Miller. Although she never went to school due to her mother's unconventional theories about education, Christie taught herself to read by age five and spent her childhood writing short stories. Her first published piece was a poem she wrote at age 11, which appeared in a local newspaper. Her first detective story was written at age 18 as the result of a challenge from her sister. In 1914, she married Archibald Christie and gained the surname by which she is known.

Throughout World War I, Christie kept writing while serving as a nurse and pharmacist, giving her experience with poisons that would become the murder method of choice in many of her novels. Finally, in 1919, her first novel was accepted after numerous rejections. This year saw both the birth of her child, Rosalind, and one of her most famous characters, detective Hercule Poirot. After being given that first opportunity, she was contracted for five more books, and spent her time travelling and writing.



Agatha Christie in 1922. © The Christie Archive Trust.

In December of 1926, Agatha Christie disappeared. For eleven days, a frantic search was conducted amid a frenzy of international media coverage. Theorists speculated that it was a publicity stunt or that her husband had murdered her. She was finally found in a spa, checked in under the name of her husband's mistress, and with no memory. Doctors diagnosed her with amnesia; to this day, writers and doctors alike debate what really happened. Christie, already a private person, rarely spoke of it. What is certain is that she divorced her husband not long after. Struggling with divorce, her mother's death, and raising a daughter, Christie relied on writing for financial stability.

In 1928, Christie's travels led her to Baghdad, where she met archeologist Max Malloway. The two married in 1930 and Agatha became passionately involved in her husband's work, dividing her time between travelling to dig sites and producing two to three new books annually.

With the outbreak of World War II, Christie returned to serving at a hospital dispensary in England and wrote her first spy novel. She also spent time with her grandson, who was born in 1943. Her grandson would later state that she was "very much a part of [his] life as a small boy," and recalled her as "a good listener...a keen observer of human life and what makes people do extraordinary things" (Barnett).

At the end of the war, Christie's secret identity as romance writer Mary Westmacott was revealed. She was disappointed about losing the freedom of writing without being recognized, and began to tire of her usual formula in books. Subsequently, she devoted more time to theatre and slowed the pace at which she produced novels. Textual analysis of her last books reveals a loss in vocabulary and an increase in the use of indefinite words like "something" or "a thing." This evidence, combined with critics' complaints of repetitive

plots and anecdotes about her confusion and temper, lead some to conclude that she was suffering from undiagnosed Alzheimer's (Abumrad and Krulwich). Even if this was the case, she continued to lead an active and happy life. Many movies based on her stories were produced; her last public appearance was made at the premiere of a Poirot film. She died in January of 1976, survived by her family, the billions of copies produced of her books, and the production of her play *The Mousetrap*, which has been continuously running since 1953 with over 27,000 performances.

HER BOOKS

In a 1956 interview with LIFE, Agatha Christie described herself as a specialist "in murders of quiet, domestic interest," a sub-genre now labelled "cosy crime." She is associated with what Barnett describes in "Agatha Christie: Why We Still Love Her..." as the "country house mystery, the landed gentry and Jazz Age good-time boys and girls whose ordered, privileged world is suddenly thrown into disarray by the...corpse found in the library, or on the croquet lawn."

To reduce her to only this trope, however, over-simplifies an enormous body of work. Christie's influences evolved constantly. Mark Aldridge, author of *Agatha Christie Onscreen*, remarks that her settings range from "village greens and country houses" to "ships steaming up the Nile. Christie...was very well travelled and used a lot of exotic locations she had actually visited" (Barnett). She wrote for decades between the 1920s and the 1960s, and her stories reflected the changing world.

Christie's books often featured altered versions of her own real-life experiences and acquaintances. For example, a trip on the Orient Express when she was stuck by heavy rains and flooding inspired the blizzard that traps her characters in *Murder on the Orient Express*. Contemporary news also influenced Christie's writing. The kidnapping of young Daisy Armstrong that begins *Murder on the Orient Express* bears some similarities to the 1932 kidnapping of aviator Charles Lindbergh's son, which was considered the crime of the century in the United States.

HERCULE POIROT

The character Hercule Poirot is a retired policeman who left Belgium for England around the time of World War I, as many real refugees did. Meticulous and particular, he takes great care in both his personal appearance and his crime-solving. He is most often described as having an egg-shaped head, cat-like eyes, and a large, fastidiously groomed moustache. Although Poirot's appearance is one of his most distinguishing characteristics, Christie refused to have any depiction of him appear on her book jackets.

The detective's methods evolve over the 33 novels in which he appears, but he generally relies on logic and psychology, entering into the mind of the killer. He refers to his brain as his "little gray cells," and credits them with his inevitable success. By the end of each story, Poirot has unraveled the mystery and gathers the cast together for the reveal of the killer's identity. Along the way, many characters doubt Poirot's abilities due to his vanity and eccentricities, which include requiring symmetry and order in every aspect of his life. This characteristic has led some to speculate that the character would be diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (Luzmore).

Towards the end of Christie's career, she had grown tired of the character and began to



Agatha Christie with Max Malloway in Tell Halaf, 1930s.
Public Domain.

write him out when adapting the novels into plays. He continued to feature in new stories, however, because she knew he was popular and considered it her duty to give the public what they wanted. Eventually, Poirot appeared in his final novel, *Curtain*. It had been written in the 1940s but was not published until 1975. After its publication, Poirot became the first fictional character to have an obituary in the *New York Times*, as well as the first to receive front page coverage.

Who Brought This Story to the Stage?

By Julia Paolino

KEN LUDWIG: PLAYWRIGHT

Ken Ludwig is a renowned playwright whose plays are produced around the world every night of the year. Born in York, Pennsylvania, Ludwig saw his first play at six years old and immediately knew he wanted to work in the theatre. However, at the suggestion of his father, he instead began his career as a Harvard-educated lawyer in Washington, D.C., waking at 4 a.m. every morning to write for a few hours before heading to work. He ultimately took a leave of absence to bring his play *Lend Me a Tenor* to Broadway, where it later won two Tony Awards. He now has 25 published plays and musicals performed in over thirty countries and more than 20 languages. Six of his plays have become Broadway productions and seven have been performed in London's West End. In addition, his works are produced constantly by regional theatres, community theatres, and high schools. In 2016, Samuel French announced that Ludwig had the year's second most produced repertoire among living playwrights. Meanwhile, Ludwig also found the time to write a book entitled *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare*, which won the Falstaff Award for Best Shakespeare Book of the Year. He has always been a passionate Shakespeare fan, specifically noting his love of the comedies. Since writing the book, Ludwig has continued to use his blog to offer advice to parents and educators. Longtime collaborator Emily Mann has described Ken Ludwig as "a young spirit" (Grode 2017), so perhaps it is unsurprising that his work is already beginning to inspire the next generation of theatre makers.

EMILY MANN: DIRECTOR

Emily Mann is a director and playwright who has served as the Artistic Director of the renowned McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, New Jersey since 1990. She began pursuing theatre as a teenager in Chicago where she worked as a props intern for a summer Shakespeare production. She went on to receive her BA in English literature from Radcliffe College (now Harvard University) and her MFA in directing from the University of Minnesota. During her time at Radcliffe, she took numerous theatre classes at the Loeb Drama Center, including William Alfred's famous playwriting seminar. At 22 years old, Mann was granted a directing fellowship at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, MN, and became the first woman to direct on their main stage. She continued writing and directing for major regional theatres across the country before being offered the position of Artistic Director at McCarter. She was considered a bold choice at the time: not only was Mann a woman, but she was a woman who was not afraid to push political boundaries. During her first season at the McCarter, she set the tone for her tenure with the world premiere of an original rhythm and blues musical, *Betsey Brown* by Ntozake Shange, which tells the story of an African-American student coming of age during the Civil Rights Movement. This production made it clear to the public that Emily Mann's McCarter would serve more than the just the white academics and conservatives of Princeton. In her 26 seasons as Artistic Director, nearly half of the McCarter's productions have been written or directed by women and people of

color. Additionally, she led the theatre to receive the 1994 Regional Theatre Tony Award. She has received a Princeton University Honorary Doctorate of Arts, the 2015 Helen Merrill Distinguished Playwrights' Award, and the 2015 Margo Jones Award given to a "citizen-of-the-theatre who has demonstrated a lifetime commitment to the encouragement of the living theatre everywhere."

Train of Thought: The Simplon Orient Express

By Krista DeVellis

The first railway locomotive train as we know it today was built in the United Kingdom in 1804. In the early 1800s in Europe, trains were dirty and crowded. They were made for transport of goods and lower class passengers, not for comfort. In America, however, George Pullman designed his train cars for long distance travel. Pullman cars had the style of a hotel with beds and staff members to cater to passengers' needs. While visiting America, the wealthy Belgian Georges Nagelmackers was inspired by the luxury of these trains, and decided that he would create an even more glamorous train experience in Europe.

Nagelmackers dreamed of a luxury train that would travel throughout Europe without stopping at borders. Winning over King Leopold II of Belgium was key to Nagelmacker's success, as the king had ties to many of Europe's royal families and could ensure that the trains would cross through countries without any border delays. Fortunately, King Leopold II shared Nagelmacker's fascination for railroads, and the Simplon Orient Express made its inaugural run in 1883.

After a few years of trial and error, Nagelmacker's company, La Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits et des Grands Express Européens, was up and running. Through the years the company expanded and changed train routes. The routes took passengers to many European cities like London, Venice, Munich, Vienna, Bucharest, Milan, Budapest, and Belgrade. The line featured in *Murder on the Orient Express* is the Simplon Orient Express, which ran from Paris to Istanbul (then Constantinople). With the exception of interruptions caused by World War I and World War II, the train's service ran through 1977.



A poster created by Jules Chéret in 1888, advertising the Orient Express train. Public Domain.

Travelling on the Simplon Orient Express was a privilege of the rich; a single ticket to ride the train would cost the equivalent of a few thousand dollars today. Once aboard, passengers were surrounded by expensive furnishings and all of the comforts of a five-star hotel. The walls were lined with gleaming mahogany panels, the chairs were plush and upholstered with soft leather, the bed sheets were silk, and oriental rugs adorned the floors. The train included cars for sleeping, dining, smoking cigars, dressing, and viewing the countryside. The menu in the dining car included delicacies such as champagne, oysters, and caviar. In addition to its sheer extravagance, the Simplon Orient Express was one of the fastest ways to travel across Europe. Thanks to these factors, it attracted much attention in its day from royalty, celebrities, and famous writers.

Agatha Christie herself was drawn to the glamorous train. "All my life I had wanted to go on the Orient Express," Christie wrote in her autobiography. "When I had travelled

to France or Spain or Italy, the Orient Express had often been standing at Calais and I had longed to climb up into it.” She traveled on the train many times, and even brought her typewriter with her to write. In 1931, she was on one such ride when the train was stopped due to flooding from a massive thunderstorm. The train’s arrival was delayed two days as a result of this emergency, but the event served as inspiration for the setting of *Murder on the Orient Express*. The travel mishap did not curb her fondness for the train, however, and she traveled on it many times after.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do people travel today? What advances have been made in transportation technology?
2. What are some symbols of status today? How do they compare to those of the early 1900s?
3. If you lived in the early 1900s, would you want to travel on the Simplon Orient Express? What are the benefits of travelling this way? What are the drawbacks?



Interior details of the train compartment.
Scenic design by Beowulf Boritt.

Europe in 1934: The World Outside the Train

By Sara Berliner

Murder on the Orient Express was originally published on January 1, 1934. Agatha Christie had written it over the course of the previous year without knowing what 1934 would hold for her or for Europe, but the events that unfold in the following months provide an important backdrop for Ken Ludwig’s adaptation.

In 1934, the Orient Express has been continuously running for 16 years after stopping its operations during World War I. However, unbeknownst to its crew and passengers, the train is only five years away from being forced to suspend services again by the onset of World War II. Although Hercule Poirot and his traveling companions are not aware of this, they realize that Europe is in a period of dramatic change and the future is increasingly uncertain.

After starting in the United States in 1929, the Great Depression has affected countries around the globe. Massive banks shut down and businesses close, causing unemployment to skyrocket. In Belgium, Poirot’s home country, the unemployment rate reaches 20%. They are lucky compared to Germany, which experiences 26% unemployment. In an effort to keep money in the country, many governments restrict international trade, but this causes further damage to economies that rely on the import and export of goods. Almost all European nations are still rebuilding after the last war and don’t have an adequate safety net to support citizens through the crisis. This economic uncertainty leads to political instability, and nationalistic fascist movements gain popularity across Europe. The fascists campaign in support of dictatorships, aggressive military forces, and fear and hatred of anyone perceived as different.

Unfortunately, such movements experience success across the continent. In Turkey, where the Orient Express line begins its journey, new legislation has banned the usage of non-Turkish languages and forced resettlement of non-Turks and non-Muslims. Facing increasing persecution, thousands of Jewish residents flee to Istanbul to escape assault and property destruction. In France, where the Orient Express line ends, a number of scandals have revealed the involvement of government officials in fraud and embezzlement. Disillusioned,

the population turns to rioting. The bloodiest of these demonstrations takes place when six fascist leagues march to the National Assembly in Paris on February 6; most of them have the goal of overthrowing the government. A clash with police forces results in 15 deaths and numerous injuries. Soon after the Prime Minister resigns. The Great Depression reaches England later than other countries, protecting Agatha Christie from feeling its effects, but English fascists still march, led by former Member of Parliament Oswald Mosley. A June rally attended by thousands of his supporters and opponents ends in violence and chaos. Finland and Belgium resort to banning the wearing of political emblems and uniforms in an attempt to curb the popularity of extremist political organizations.

Elsewhere in Europe, governments are explicit in their ties to fascism and remove any opposing parties. Elections in Italy and Portugal are designed so that the National Fascist Party and New State, respectively, continue their control. Austria calls for the dissolution of all political parties except the fascist Fatherland Front, which then rewrites the constitution. Latvia, Estonia, and Bulgaria follow suit and become virtual dictatorships. In Yugoslavia, King Alexander institutes many of the mechanisms necessary for a dictatorship before being assassinated. He is then succeeded by his 11-year-old son. Dictatorships are not limited to fascist governments. In the Soviet Union, which has been officially communist since the 1917 Russian Revolution, state-sanctioned violence has become the norm.

This level of brutal leadership is also seen in Germany. In a single day, Chancellor Adolf Hitler has 77 of his rivals and allies assassinated in order to consolidate power. The first concentration camps are already active, as is a secret court trying only treason cases. Laws have been enacted to forcibly sterilize disabled people and to ban Jewish people from owning property, being part of trade unions, possessing health insurance, becoming lawyers, or editing newspapers. Book burnings and boycotts of businesses owned by Jewish people are common. In August, when the German president dies, Hitler combines that position with his own office and becomes Fuhrer. Now a dictator with absolute power, he prepares to expand the military and revoke the rights of all non-Aryans in the next year.

In *Murder on the Orient Express*, Poirot exclaims, "It is 1934, Europe is changing and there will be chaos!" He does not know that international war will break out in 1939, or that billions will be killed under the orders of Hitler and Russian dictator Joseph Stalin, or that modern warfare will be changed forever by the United States' use of nuclear weapons to kill hundreds of thousands in Japan. But he recognizes that the times are marked by scarcity, confusion, and violence, and that all three are being leveraged politically in dangerous ways, requiring people either to ignore injustice or embrace extremism. This was true also in 1933, when Christie wrote the novel.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Compare and contrast what you know about 1934 and 2018. What similarities or differences do you notice in the economy and social movements?
2. How does this background impact Poirot's final decision?
3. Consider the murder and its motivation. Could you see this case arising in a different time period, or does it depend on this context?

Making a Murder Mystery

By Sara Berliner

Edgar Allen Poe is credited with inventing the modern detective story when he created the character Auguste Dupin in the 1840s. The format he pioneered was then used by many writers, but Arthur Conan Doyle became the most famous with his Sherlock Holmes stories spanning from 1887 to 1927. By the time Agatha Christie began to write, the genre's rules were well-established. A classic detective had to be eccentric and solve the crime using logic and reasoning. Poe called it "ratiocination," Holmes is well-known for his deductions, and Poirot credits his "little gray cells," but regardless of the language used, the classic murder mystery detective works rationally and methodically to sort through the available evidence and solve the seemingly unsolvable crime (Acocella). This formula has remained popular. In "The Strange Case of Hercule Poirot," PD James theorizes that we enjoy these stories because "readers seek not only relief from the traumas and anxieties of their everyday lives, but an affirmation in their belief that we live in a moral, rational and comprehensible universe and that even death is a mystery that can be solved." So how does a detective go about solving the mystery?



Julie Halston and Maboud Ebrahimzadeh in the McCarter Theatre production of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017). Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

SUSPECTS AND MOTIVE: WHO AND WHY?

When a body is discovered, the first step is often to identify the **suspects**, the people most likely to have committed the murder. Every suspect has a reason to want the victim dead. Did they need to get a relative out of the way to inherit a fortune, or did they want revenge on an ex-lover? These possible inducements to kill are **motives**, and as Poirot says in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, "there is no murder without a motive." Martin Doyle argues in "Agatha Christie: Genius or Hack?" that the ideal motive is one which makes the reader think, "Well, although I would never commit murder for this reason, I can absolutely understand why this character did—it makes perfect sense because of their unique personality/predicament combination." If we think the motivation is silly, we lose engagement in the story.

MEANS AND OPPORTUNITY: WHEN, WHERE, AND HOW?

So, the detective now has multiple suspects, each with a motive. These are narrowed down to the most likely by figuring out who had the **opportunity** to commit the crime. Everyone must provide an **alibi**, an explanation of where they were when the murder took place. If a suspect wants their alibi to be believable, they must have someone else who can corroborate it. If they have no alibi, or no one else to confirm it, they immediately look suspicious. A suspect's **means** are also considered. Who could have bought the poison or concealed the gun?

GATHERING CLUES

Clues, like objects left behind at the crime scene or a whispered conversation overheard by the detective, are pieces of evidence that lead the way to discovering the killer. But not all clues are reliable. A **red herring** is a clue that misleads or distracts the detective. English writer and politician William Cobbett is credited with popularizing the term when he used it to describe the practice of using herring to distract hunting hounds that are after a scent. A

murderer will sometimes deliberately plant a red herring to confuse the detective, or a writer will introduce one to point readers in the wrong direction.

THE SOLUTION

Finally, the detective gathers everyone together and explains their theory of what happened. With very few exceptions, the detective is right, and the killer confesses.

Detective Poirot's Moral Philosophy

By Julia Paolino

POIROT

The man was guilty, that was certain. It was a crime of honor, no one was hurt. And yet, because honor was involved—and perhaps because I pressed the man too hard to admit his guilt...

[The man raises a pistol to his temple and fires. BANG! The noise is startling. The man collapses and fades away.]

It was unfortunate in the extreme. And yet I believe I did nothing wrong.

BOUC

Of course you did nothing wrong. If you break the law you must pay the price. That is what you have told me.

POIROT

It is what I live by.

At the start of *Murder on the Orient Express*, private detective Hercules Poirot makes it clear that he is bound by a strict and unyielding moral code: “If you break the law, you must pay the price.” From a philosophical perspective, it can be argued that Poirot begins the play as a moral generalist bound by absolute principles. Morality is a highly complex and widely debated branch of philosophy that deals primarily with ethical decision-making, or the concepts of “right” and “wrong” (Singer 2017). Though the fun of a mystery often comes in solving the crime, Poirot’s own journey regarding the meaning of justice can be just as enthralling.

A moral generalist is someone who believes all ethical decisions should be guided by strict principles (Dancy 2017). Though moral generalism has no one single founder, the main ideas can be linked closely to those of Immanuel Kant, who strongly emphasized the use of moral laws and principles. These moral principles can be applied across all different situations and thus generalists use simple if/then logic to determine the morality of a situation. If the moral principle is broken, the action is morally wrong; if the moral principle is upheld, the action is morally right (Khazaei 2011). For example, Poirot lives by the principle that it is wrong to break the law and right to follow it, no matter the circumstances. The decisions that he makes both personally and professionally are guided by this principle.

There is an additional level of complexity when it comes to these moral principles. It is largely agreed that there are two main types of moral generalism: absolute and contributory. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “the ‘absolute’ conception takes a moral principle to be a universal claim to the effect that all actions of a certain type are overall wrong (or right)” (Dancy 2017). So, if Poirot’s guiding principle is that it is wrong to break the law, then every single time a person breaks any law, it is a morally wrong action. It does not matter what the law is, who created it, or why the individual disobeyed it; the principle is absolute, so the action is wrong. Conversely, contributory principles allow for

more flexibility. A single action may have more than one moral principle applied to it for better or for worse, functioning almost like a positive and negative point system (Dancy 2017). Using this understanding, an action that includes breaking the law gets negative points against it. Yet, if this action also saved someone's life, for instance, then it would gain positive points. The overall qualification of right and wrong is determined through the balance of all these partial principles. Based on Poirot's first conversation with Bouc, it is arguable that Poirot himself subscribes to absolute principles. He describes his most recent case in which the guilty man committed a crime of honor that did not hurt anyone, yet Poirot insists that he did nothing wrong by pushing him for a confession. At the end of the day, the man broke the law and his reasons do not make a difference to Poirot.

The opposite of moral generalism is moral particularism. Aristotle is often considered the founding father of this movement, having been one of the first to put strong emphasis on the unique context of every moral situation (Ridge & McKeever 2016). More currently, British philosopher Jonathan Dancy has emerged as the modern leader and advocate of this philosophy (Jackson 2016). A moral particularist completely dismisses the use of any type of moral principles in decision-making (Dancy 2017). Instead, they prefer to evaluate morality on a case-by-case basis due to the unique context of each situation. The Stanford Encyclopedia explains, "The core of particularism is its insistence on variability...A feature can make one moral difference in one case and a different difference in another. Features have, as we might put it, variable relevance" (Dancy 2017). For example, breaking the law in one example may indeed make the action morally wrong; however, breaking the law in another case may actually help to make the action right. And still in another case, breaking the law could make no difference at all. Dancy uses an example regarding the action of causing pain, which would generally be considered wrong. However, if he needs to remove a sea urchin's pin from his child's foot, it will likely cause her pain but it would not be considered morally wrong (Jackson 2016). There are enough examples of these types of inconsistencies that particularists argue against the existence of universal moral principles, so individual case study becomes the best method of moral reasoning (Khazaei 2011).

For most people, moral philosophy is a personal code that guides individual decisions. However, a person in a position of power makes decisions with impact far beyond the individual. In this way, one's moral philosophy becomes far more significant. As a detective, Poirot has the power to decide the fate of his suspects in each case. For a moral generalist with absolute principles, the decision is simple: those who break the law must be punished. Yet, as the details in the case of *Murder on the Orient Express* unfold, Poirot's own moral philosophy is challenged and the fate of the others involved rests on the eccentric detective's personal understanding of right and wrong.



Evan Zes in the McCarter Theatre production of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017). Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

MORAL GENERALISM

The view that all ethical decisions are guided by moral principles.

ABSOLUTE PRINCIPLE

A universal moral belief that automatically defines a situation as ethically right or wrong, regardless of other factors.

CONTRIBUTORY PRINCIPLE

A moral belief that can be applied partially to a situation and work in conjunction with other beliefs to determine if an action is right or wrong.

MORAL PARTICULARISM

The view that there are no moral principles; right and wrong can only be determined on a case-by-case basis.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

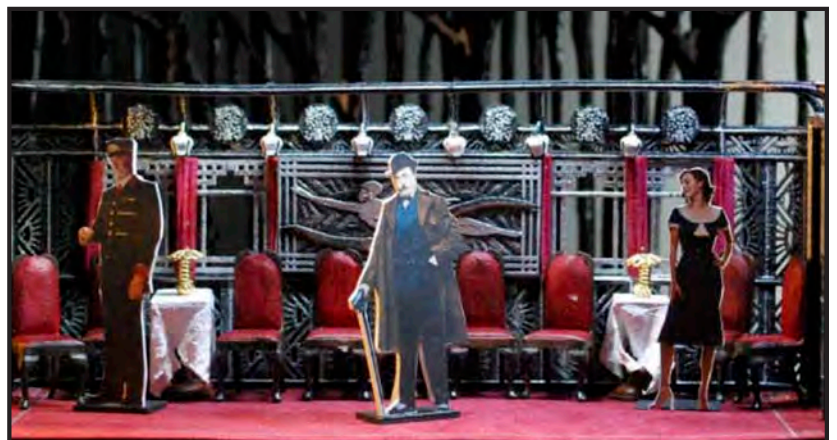
1. How does Poirot's philosophy change or stay the same by the end of the play?
2. Do you agree with his final decision? Why, or why not?
3. Where do you think you fall on the scale of particularism or generalism? Has there ever been a particular event or interaction that has caused you to question your own moral beliefs?
4. Can you think of a practical example to argue either philosophy? How do you think these questions of morality apply to our lives today?

All Aboard! Adaptations of *Murder on the Orient Express*

By Julia Paolino

The detective novel *Murder on the Orient Express*, by Agatha Christie, was first published in 1934. It was the eighth novel of 33 that followed the fictional Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. Since then, the story has been adapted numerous times across various forms including film, television, radio, and now, the stage. The Oxford English Dictionary defines adaptation as “an altered or amended version of a text, musical composition, etc...” In most adaptations, the central plot and types of characters stay the same, but other details may change to better suit its audience or the form of media the adapter has chosen.

The first adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express* was a 1974 film directed by Sidney Lumet. It was a major blockbuster hit and is considered to be one of the better adaptations of the story (“Murder on the Orient Express’ tops US charts”). It starred Albert Finney as Poirot and Ingrid Bergman, who won the Academy Award for her performance, as Greta. This version stayed very close to the original novel; the only changes were some names and countries of origins of the train passengers. In 1992, Michael Blackwell wrote a five-part radio adaptation of the story that played on BBC Radio, directed by Enyd Williams and starring John Moffatt as Poirot. A made-for-TV movie version premiered in 2001 on CBS with Alfred Molina as Poirot. In addition to changing some names and eliminating some characters, this adaptation also featured a younger and less eccentric Poirot, a romantic subplot, and a contemporary setting. ITV Studios and WGBH co-produced a series entitled *Agatha Christie's Poirot* which featured an 80-minute episode adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express* starring David Suchet as Poirot. This version was written by Stewart Harcourt and eliminated one of the suspect characters from the plot. Writers in Japan created a two-night special adaptation of the novel in 2015, using the same storyline but setting all the action in Japan and changing the characters to reflect that setting. Tom Conti played Poirot in a 2017 radio-style play released on the streaming service Audible. Most recently, Kenneth Branagh directed and starred in the 2017 film adaptation alongside Judi Dench, Michelle Pfeiffer, Johnny Depp, Penelope Cruz, Josh Gad, and Leslie Odom, Jr. This version combined some characters and changed names and origins.



Scale model of the dining car. Scenic design by Beowulf Boritt.

Ken Ludwig's adaptation of this famous story is the first to be created for the stage. Agatha Christie's estate specifically requested Ludwig to write a stage adaptation of one of her novels and he immediately chose *Murder on the Orient Express*. Ludwig felt that "the unusual setting, the striking characters, and dramatic story" made it a great fit for the stage (Weisfeld 2017). The new work first premiered at the McCarter Theatre Center in New Jersey in March 2017. Now, one year later, the play takes the stage again in Hartford. Ludwig's adaptation eliminates four of the original murder suspects from Christie's novel, narrowing it from twelve to eight, in order to make staging more practical for the director. Additionally, he does not shy away from adding some moments of humor into the dramatic mystery. Ludwig explained to New York Times reporter Eric Grode, "I think the genres of comedy and mystery have a lot in common. Both start with the puzzle assembled, and suddenly the pieces are taken apart and thrown into the air. And then they finally come down, and all is well" (Grode 2017).

Although *Murder on the Orient Express* is over 80 years old, its reinvention through various media forms has allowed the story to remain exciting and impactful for generations of audiences. Even those who know the outcome of the mystery are entertained time and time again because of the artistic and creative choices of the adapters.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Ken Ludwig mentions that some of his decisions, such as writing fewer suspects, were specifically made to better fit the form of a stage play. What are some other ways you think the form of media can impact how a text is adapted?
2. Brainstorm texts that you have seen adapted in multiple forms: books, movies, plays, TV shows. What changes do you notice from version to version? Do you agree or disagree with these changes? Why?
3. What book or movie do you think could be adapted well into a stage play? What sorts of changes would you make to the original text? What aspects do you think would be difficult to achieve on stage?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Pantomime Crime

Ken Ludwig included many pieces of classical music into his adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express*. Split the class into groups of 4-6 and give each group a different instrumental piece of music. Have each group develop a short and simple mystery story based on the energy of the music. The challenge is that the piece must be performed completely in pantomime: no words, just movement. How does the music influence the story each group tells?

- *The Dance of the Knights* from Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet*
- Second Movement of Mahler's Symphony Number One
- Rachmaninoff's *The Flight of the Bumblebee*
- Samuel Barber's *Overture to The School for Scandal*, Opus 5
- *Stuermisch Bewegt* from Mahler's Fifth Symphony
- First Movement of Bach's Cello Suite No. 2 in D Minor
- Allegro movement of Haydn's String Quartet in D Minor, Opus 76, No. 2

Motive Monologue

After watching the play or reading the book, choose one of the suspects and write a monologue exploring his/her potential motive for committing the murder. Before writing, consider the character's audience: Is he/she confessing to Poirot? Confiding in a friend? Writing in a diary? Use what you have learned about the characters' pasts and relationships in order to examine the circumstances that could lead them to such drastic measures.

Searching for Clues

In the story, detective Hercule Poirot needs to be extremely observant and think quickly. Have one student exit the room. While the "detective" is out, change five things in the room (for example: have two students switch seats, lower the blinds slightly, write a new fake homework assignment on the board). When the student enters the room again, set a timer and give them one minute to find all of the changes.

Improvised Interrogation

Choose one student to play the suspect and two students to play the detectives. Ask the suspect to leave the room. As a class, decide what crime the suspect is being accused of in the scene. It should be something silly—eating Grandma's birthday cake, throwing water balloons at the principal, etc. Once a crime is decided, bring the suspect back into the room to begin the interrogation. Without actually revealing the crime, the detectives' goal is to get the suspect to confess. The student playing the suspect must use the hints the detectives give in order to figure out the crime. In order to complete the scene, the suspect must correctly confess to the crime that the class has picked.

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