

**Study Guide**  
for  
**THE UNEXPECTED GUEST**  
by Agatha Christie

GREETINGS from the National Historic Landmark Fulton Theatre! Our goal is that your visit is as memorable one and that this Study Guide supports your curriculum in the classroom. Background information about the play can also be found in our *Understudy* publication that is available on the Fulton's website.

This Study Guide will provide you with ideas to challenge and explore:

Application of vocabulary  
Comprehension of creative process  
Synthesis of ideas

with connections to Pennsylvania Department of Education Academic Standards.

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## About The Play



*The Unexpected Guest* had its premiere in 1958. It was one of more than a dozen plays that Agatha Christie penned in her long and prolific career as one of the world's foremost mystery writers. Another of these, *The Mousetrap*, holds the record of being the longest-running play in the world, and was performed on the Fulton stage a year ago to much acclaim. In *The Unexpected Guest*, on a foggy night in Wales, Michael Starkwedder's car runs into a ditch on a lonely road. When he enters a house through the French windows of its study to seek

help, he finds an invalid who has been shot dead in his wheelchair and a woman, who turns out to be the victim's wife, standing nearby and holding a gun. Apparently on impulse, Starkwedder decides to help the woman hide her crime. These two, along with a very interesting array of other characters from the murdered man's mother to a Chief Inspector, bring constantly new and shifting perspectives on the crime, proving that the obvious isn't always so obvious.

## Application Of Vocabulary

Most of your students have at least a passing acquaintance with the mystery genre, whether it be from *The Hardy Boys*, *Nancy Drew*, *Encyclopedia Brown*, or "*Sherlock Holmes*." These stories share many of the same elements with the work of Agatha Christie. We have suspicious characters, inclement weather, small clues that lead us to drawing conclusions, and a sense of danger or peril. In a play, these elements are squeezed into the characters' dialogue, dramatic action, and technical production elements.

### Dramatic Terms relevant to a mystery play

**PLOT** – The arrangement of incidents or the story of the play's actions.

**SUBTEXT** – The real, often hidden, meaning behind the words spoken.

**EXPOSITION** – The part of the play that reveals what has happened before it has begun, exposing previous events and helping to identify the characters.

**CLIMAX** – The culminating of events, the point of highest dramatic tension.

**CRISIS** – A crucial situation whose outcomes decide which consequences will follow.

DENOUEMENT – The unraveling of the main dramatic complication of the plot, producing the final outcome.

FORESHADOWING – A prediction of future outcomes often provided through Symbolic objectives, actions, or dialogue.

SYMBOLISM – Investing objects with non-intrinsic meanings.

RED HERRING – Something that distracts from the real issue.

In reviewing these terms, have students find examples from movies or books they know. Then, after seeing the *The Unexpected Guest*, ask them to match the vocabulary above with occurrences in the play.

The above addresses:

Standard 9.3 A: *Recognize, identify and explain the critical processes used in the examination of a work of art.*

Standard 9.3 D: *Evaluate works in the arts and humanities using a complex vocabulary.*

## Comprehension of the Creative Process



Most of Agatha Christie's works are "whodunits," focusing on the English middle and upper classes. Usually, the detective either stumbles across the murder or is called upon by an old acquaintance, who is somehow involved. Gradually, the detective interrogates each suspect, examines the scene of the crime, and makes a note of each clue, so readers or audiences can analyze it and be allowed a fair chance of solving the mystery themselves. Then, about halfway through, or sometimes even during the

final act, one of the suspects usually dies, often because he or she has inadvertently deduced the killer's identity and must be silenced. Ultimately, the detective organizes a gathering of all the suspects and slowly reveals the culprit, while exposing several secrets along the way. Often the action takes place in a single room, with characters coming and going, and there are plenty of twists and turns in the plot, sometimes involving disguises and/or mistaken identities. The murders themselves are often extremely ingenious involving some convoluted deception, and sometimes there are multiple victims. In four of Christie's works, the murderer is allowed to escape justice. Much of the above can be

described as a “formula” from which Agatha Christie and other mystery writers shape their creations.

Have your class read and discuss two short mystery stories, preferably by two different writers other than Agatha Christie. Compare and contrast the formulaic elements noted above. And once they have seen *The Unexpected Guest*, ask them cite examples of how the play fit the formula and where it varied from it.

The above addresses:

Standard 9.2: *Identify, explain and analyze common themes, forms and techniques from works of art.*

Standard 9.3.8 B: *Analyze and interpret specific characteristics of works in the arts.*

## **SYNTHESIS OF IDEA**

Games are a great way to demonstrate how people notice and remember things differently. Below are two “mystery” games that can readily be played in class and exercise cognitive skills.

***Who’s The Stranger?*** Everyone writes a one paragraph “biography” of a fictional character that they will assume. One then volunteers to leave the room, chooses a few simple costume pieces from a provided selection that are appropriate for his or her character, and returns “in costume” to answer just a few questions about their new identity posed by classmates. Afterwards, all the students write down what they specifically saw and what the “stranger” specifically said. After collectively “collecting clues,” what can they determine about the “stranger?” What about his or her background? Where was he or she going after leaving the room? Who is able to provide the most accurate and complete description. Try this with a few different classroom “visitors.” A good warm-up for this is to have students pair off, face each other for a few minutes with the goal of being able to describe their partners thoroughly. Then have each pair face away from one another and make three small adjustments to their appearance. Turning back around, see who can find all three of their partner’s changes.

***Detective Game.*** This is similar to the above warm-up, but involves the whole room. Have everyone walk around the classroom, making a mental note of how everything looks. Then during a lunch time or when the students are in another part of the school, rearrange furniture, desk items, etc. Everyone returns and quietly observes what they see, writing down their observations. The student who notices the most changes wins and should be encouraged to become a Chief Inspector.

***How To Host A Murder Mystery.*** Neal Shusterman developed this popular game, and it is a fun way to engage your students in some dramatics while also applying all the elements of a good mystery. If the class is too large, you have a judge or investigators assigned. Students could even do a variation of *The Unexpected Guest* and portray characters from the play. This game and variations can be downloaded from the web.

Also, *The Puzzle Piece Mystery Project Book* offers students the opportunity to create their own mysteries, using the elements covered in this Study Guide. For students who are visually inclined, it is also an opportunity to be artistic.

One final activity involves a real-life mystery that happened in Agatha Christie's life. On December 3, 1926, the author left her home, leaving behind a letter for her secretary saying that she was going to Yorkshire. She then disappeared. Eleven days later, she was identified as a guest at the Hydropathic Hotel registered under the name of Mrs. Teresa Neele from Cape Town. She never gave an account of her disappearance. Have your students do a little detective work by researching Christie's life, and see if they can come up with some theories as to what might have really happened.

## RESOURCES

### BOOKS:

Barnard, Robert. *A Talent To Deceive – An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*. 1980.

Feinman, Jeffrey. *The Mysterious World of Agatha Christie*. 1975.

Hack, Richard. *Duchess of Death: The Biography of Agatha Christie*. 2009.

Morgan, Janet. *Agatha Christie: A Biography*. 1986.

Robyns, Gwen. *The Mystery of Agatha Christie: An Intimate Biography of the First Lady of Crime*. 1975

Thompson, Laura. *Agatha Christie: An English Mystery*. 2007.

### EXTERNAL LINKS

*All About Agatha Christie: Comprehensive Fan Website*

*Official Agatha Christie Site*

*Agatha Christie profile on PBS.ORG*

*The Disappearance of Agatha Christie in 1926.*

*The Agatha Christie Appreciation League*