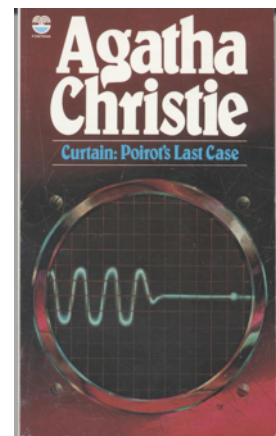
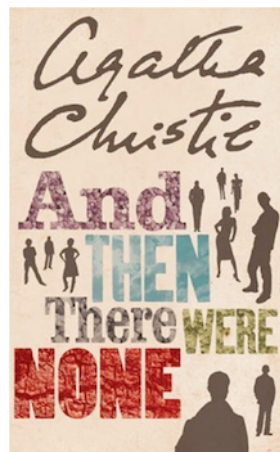
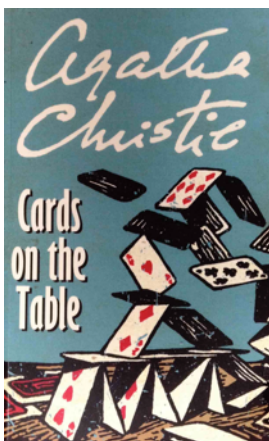


And Then There Were None 1939

[N.B. This review contains PLOT SPOILERS for this novel, but not for other novels]

‘And then, quite suddenly, the idea came to me – started by a chance remark uttered during casual conversation. It was a doctor to whom I was talking – some ordinary undistinguished GP. He mentioned casually how often murder must have been committed which the law was unable to touch.’ These are the words of the perpetrator describing the origin of the idea for his multiple killings. In *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) the motive for murder is revenge on someone who managed to escape the law. Christie went on to play with the idea of killers beyond the reach of the law in three further novels that form a kind of triptych. The first was *Cards on the Table* (1936). In that novel a dilettante, Mr Shaitana, brings together, at a dinner party, a group of killers who will never be convicted. One of those killers murders Mr Shaitana. In the third novel, *Curtain*, written in 1940 although not published until 1975, Poirot is faced with a villain who is responsible for several murders but who has committed no crime. Both these are excellent whodunnits. At the centre of the triptych is *And Then There Were None*. It is reputed to have been Christie’s own favourite amongst her books. It is the best selling of all her novels, and one of the best selling novels of all time, with sales in excess of 100 million copies. It is also highly original.



The problem that Christie set herself was how to construct a novel in which all the central characters die. She wrote in her Autobiography: 'I had written this book because it was so difficult to do that the idea fascinated me. Ten people had to die without it becoming ridiculous or the murderer being obvious. I wrote the book after a tremendous amount of planning...It was well received and reviewed, but the person who was really pleased with it was myself, for I knew better than any critic how difficult it had been.'



The plot outline is simple: ten people are murdered because each was a killer who had evaded the law. But there remained a difficult narrative problem – how to tell the tale so that it is plausible, mysterious and entertaining. Christie had not faced such a tricky narrative problem since *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. She found the solution in a nursery rhyme: *Ten Little Soldier Boys*, as it is now known. In the rhyme the ten soldier boys die in turn and each by a different method. The rhyme ends: 'One little soldier boy left all alone; He went and hanged himself .. And then there were none.' With these ingredients Christie's imagination constructs the bones of the story. Ten killers are brought to an uninhabited island and murdered one by one, each murder related to the mode of death of the relevant soldier boy of the rhyme, and the drama heightened when, after each murder, a china figure soldier is smashed. The nursery rhyme gives the needed structure, and also adds an eerie malevolence, like an evil clown or a blinded teddy bear.

Christie must have liked the dramatic effect of the juxtaposition of murder with nursery rhymes for she went on to use such rhymes in the titles of a further five books even though in these subsequent books the rhymes were not needed to solve any narrative problems.

In *Cards on the Table*, Mr Shaitana decides for one evening to collect murderers rather as he collects exotic objects: 'A murderer can be an artist' he says, and goes on: 'the caught murderer is necessarily one of the failures'. The perpetrator in *And Then There Were None* takes a similar attitude. 'I have wanted ...to commit a murder myself. I recognized this as the desire of the artist to express himself! I was, or could be, an artist in crime!' But whereas Mr Shaitana is foolish, and ends up the victim, the perpetrator in *And Then There Were None* is completely in control. Like Shaitana he admires the criminal who defeats the police. 'It was my ambition' he writes, 'to invent a murder mystery that no one could solve', but he wants others to know how clever he has been and so writes an account of his murders to be found after his death.

In writing *And Then There Were None* Christie is like her perpetrator: she wants to invent a murder mystery 'that no one could solve'? Her aim, I think, was not to construct a genuine whodunnit – a puzzle that is difficult but which can be solved – but instead to write a crime novel that leaves the reader baffled and intrigued – more like a locked-room mystery than a whodunnit? Unlike in the majority of her crime novels there is little attempt to give the reader genuine clues. In the denouement three clues are mentioned, but they are so arcane, and one purely symbolic, that they can hardly be considered proper clues at all. But how about through the novel itself? After the third murder, there is what one might call a Poirot-like moment. Justice Lawrence Wargrave, a retired high court judge, takes charge. The murderer, he tells his six fellow 'guests', must be one of us. 'We all qualify'. He goes on: 'My point is that there can be no exception allowed on the score of character, position, or probability. What we must now examine is the possibility of eliminating one or more persons on the facts'. We are again reminded of Poirot twenty or so pages later when Wargrave replies to Armstrong's question as to whether he knows who the murderer is: 'But it appears to me, reviewing the whole business, that one particular person is sufficiently clearly indicated. Yes, I think so.' Irritatingly, just like Poirot, he does not enlarge on this.

However carefully we read we do not seem to know enough of people's movements at the time of each crime to be able to eliminate anyone as a suspect. There is simply insufficient detail. The doctor, Armstrong, has the best opportunity for the second murder since he gave the victim medication and she is found dead in bed the next morning: 'One overslept himself and then there were eight'. He also has the best opportunity for killing General MacArthur. Neither of these is conclusive, and, it turns out, neither is relevant. There is one potential structural problem with a plot in which ten people are killed, one by one: won't the murderer simply be the last one standing? The story takes us to the final survivor, Vera Claythorpe, committing suicide. She stands on a chair, puts her head in the noose, and kicks the chair away.



And yet, we learn in the epilogue, the police find the chair neatly pushed against the wall of the room. Someone must have still been alive and on the island after Vera died. Christie solves the potential problem by devising a rather clever way for the murderer's death to be faked. Wargrave persuades Dr Armstrong to declare to the others that he is dead after a faked shooting arguing that this will allow him to move about the house and spy, enabling him to identify the murderer. Armstrong falls for this ruse, the trusting camaraderie of professional men, and is the next victim.

We argued that in *Cards on the Table* Christie was exploring the possibility of using psychological clues to solve a whodunnit rather than the kind of objective factual clues that Wargrave suggested should be relied upon. We claimed that Christie's experiments with psychological clues were noble failures. In *And Then There Were None* Christie is not much concerned with clues and yet, paradoxically, the reader might solve the question of who is the murderer using only psychological clues. Not solve with any degree of confidence – psychological clues still seem inadequate in a whodunnit – but tentatively propose what is, in fact, the correct solution. The whole set-up is that of a judge passing sentence (and carrying out the punishment). At the

end of the gramophone record that is played to the victims when they first arrive on the island the mystery voice says: "Prisoners at the bar, have you anything to say in your defence?" After the third murder Wargrave confidently tells the others that what is happening is 'neither more nor less than the execution of justice upon certain individuals for offences which the law cannot touch.' There are a few further hints. Wargrave is the only person whose letter inviting him to the island was not from 'U. N. Owen'. When Vera Claythorne tells her companions that Emily Brent confided in her – telling her the circumstances of the death for which she may have been responsible – Wargrave asks whether Brent appeared troubled 'by a sense of guilt or a feeling of remorse'. This is a question that is likely to be of interest only to the murderer. Wargrave seems to know that there is no place on the island where someone can hide. Since he has not searched the island and says that he 'is unacquainted with this part of the world' how can he possibly know, unless he lied? None of these clues is at all conclusive.

The drama of the novel is brilliantly conceived. The slow attrition – one more victim, one more suspect off the list. The realisation that one of them is the murderer. The linking of the murders to the verses of the nursery rhyme together with the breaking of a china soldier after each death has dramatic brilliance and macabre humour. There are some weaknesses of plot. Perhaps the most significant is that despite the fact that several people carry the supposed corpse of Wargrave up the stairs and into his bedroom, none, apart from the doctor, realises that he is alive. How he was able to suppress his breathing during this time, or suppress any cry as he was hauled up the stairs, is almost beyond belief. And his body was seen again many hours later when the house was being searched and again no one noticed that he was still warm, pink and breathing. Wargrave was very lucky in several other ways. Had the weather remained as it was on the first day, one of the others – Lombard for example – would have swum the mile to shore and got help. Indeed there is a moment before the storm when Lombard or Blore might well have decided to swim for help to the mainland. Several of the deaths, as they occur, seem almost magical – how could they have been carried out without anyone else seeing? And in Wargrave's account of his crimes he seems to do a lot of "slipping in" to places and

carrying out the murders with almost unbelievable deftness especially for a terminally ill old man. The absence of any sound heard when Wargrave was apparently shot deserved more thought than it was given and those left alive failed to consider who could have had the opportunity to shoot him. The murder of Blore would have been difficult to execute. How could Wargrave have ensured that Blore would walk under that specific window and at a time when Wargrave was ready for him, and that the marble clock would hit him so squarely on the head? Finally, Vera Claythorpe's suicide is psychologically unconvincing. But all this is to carp at what is a brilliant and original crime novel.

In many of the Poirot novels there is some discussion of the rights and wrongs of murder. Is murder ever justified? Does justice require murderers to be caught and tried and if guilty to be sentenced to death? Generally Poirot is firmly against murder, and believes murderers should face the full force of the law. In *Appointment with Death* he suggests that the character of the victim is irrelevant to the morality of murder, and yet in *Murder on the Orient Express* and in *Curtain* he seems to think that murder may sometimes be justified. In *And Then There Were None* there is no Poirot to comment on the morality of Wargrave's crimes. In a country in which the death penalty is the mandatory sentence for murder, is it morally permissible for an individual to kill people who have themselves killed but who will escape the law?

In keeping with the justice system in Britain at the time, Wargrave believes that murderers should be killed. He considers that all his victims are murderers, from a moral point of view, even though most have not, from a legal point of view, committed murder. In order for a person to be guilty of murder two criteria normally need to be met. First the person must have acted in such a way as to have caused the victim's death – that is, he must have killed the victim. This is called the *actus reus*. In most situations, failing to save a person's life is not sufficient for murder (unless there was a legal duty to save). Second the person must have intended to kill (or cause serious injury) – the so called *mens rea*. Wargrave's victims were all, to some extent, responsible for the deaths of others, but that is a long way from saying that that they were murderers, either legally or morally. Christie has given us an

interesting variety of ways in which a person can be responsible for a death. Five of Wargrave's victims did not intend the deaths: Dr Armstrong whose incompetent surgery while drunk caused his patient's death; Miss Brent, whose dismissal of a maid is a factor leading to the maid's suicide; Mr Lombard who abandons the men he is leading and takes their food in order to save his own life; Mr Marston who accidentally kills two children whilst driving dangerously; and Mr Morris, who sells illegal drugs leading to the suicide of at least one of the addicts. The other five victims intended, or hoped for, the deaths. Blore by giving false evidence; Claythorne, and Thomas and Ethel Rogers, by failing to save a life; and General MacArthur by deliberately sending a subordinate on a dangerous military mission. In modern law some of Wargrave's victims have committed serious crimes, although not murder. Armstrong might be guilty of criminal negligence or manslaughter – a few doctors had been so charged prior to 1939. Mr Morris is selling illegal drugs. Blore is a bent copper (crooked policeman). General MacArthur may have committed a crime under military law. Marston's dangerous driving might well have been a crime under the Motor Car Act of 1903, and the 1930 Road Traffic Act.

The point is that Wargrave is not fitting his punishments to the crimes. The death penalty, even in 1939, was not the punishment for the crimes that most of his victims had committed. If one lays the law to one side and focuses on moral responsibility again Wargrave's thinking appears sloppy. Emily Brent may be self-righteous and rigid, but dismissing a maid is a long way, morally, from murder. Brent neither intended, nor even hoped for, her maid's death, nor was her act a direct cause of that death. Even the most severe judge can hardly support the death penalty as the appropriate punishment for her morally bad behaviour. There is a wide range in moral culpability of Wargrave's victims – a range that Wargrave ignores. Wargrave's sloppy thinking is also apparent in his disregard for the quality of evidence. He claims that he is justly punishing those who will evade the law. But in many cases his evidence about what his victims have done is hearsay, based on one person's report during a casual conversation. It is not clear from the evidence available to Wargrave that all of his victims are responsible for the deaths at all – not even 'on the balance of probabilities' let alone 'beyond reasonable doubt'. One can

only conclude that what drives Wargrave's murders is that he wishes to commit a series of baffling murders in a dramatically brilliant way. The idea that he is an avenging angel dealing out justice is a fig-leaf to cover his base motives.

Wargrave, although apparently believing that all his victims deserve death writes that he killed Marston and Mrs Rogers first because their guilt was the lightest. In the case of Marston this was not because the deaths were unintended: the same was true of four of Wargrave's other victims. It was because he was "a type born without that feeling of moral responsibility which most of us have". His very lack of remorse for what he had done lessens his guilt, in Wargrave's view. Mrs Rogers' guilt is lessened, according to Wargrave, because she had "no doubt" acted largely under the influence of her husband.

Wargrave may have begun to plan his murders from a misplaced sense of justice – stepping in where the law cannot reach – but he carried on, and was carried away by the desire to be "an artist in crime". In her construction and execution of *And Then There Were None* Christie shows, perhaps more than in any other novel, just what an artist she was in crime fiction.



Burgh Island

Illustrations

From the 1945 film: yet another of the soldier boys (North American 'Indians' in this case) has been smashed. [<http://kellyriggsmysteries.com/2012/05/and-then-there-were-ten-little-indians/>]

Vera contemplates suicide. From the 1945 film.

[<http://oldhollywood.tumblr.com/post/7784360063/june-duprez-in-and-then-there-were-none-1945>]

Burgh Island, on Devon's South coast between Plymouth and Torbay – the inspiration for Soldier Island. In fact only a couple of hundred yards from the mainland.

[TH]