

## STYLE

*The Mousetrap* is a two-act play written in the mystery genre. The play employs a remote, isolated location in which a group of suspicious people have gathered. It becomes readily apparent that some are not who they seem to be and that most have something they are hiding.

### **Act**

A major division in a drama. In Greek plays the sections of the drama were signified by the appearance of the chorus and were usually divided into five acts. This is the formula for most serious drama from the Greeks to Elizabethan playwrights like William Shakespeare. The five acts denote the structure of dramatic action. They are exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. The five-act structure was followed until the nineteenth century, when Ibsen combined some of the acts. *The Mousetrap* is a two-act play. The exposition, complication, and climax are combined in the first act with the story of the child's murder and the murder in London and in the final minutes of act one when Mrs. Boyle is murdered. The falling action and catastrophe are combined in the second act with the realization that a murderer is in the house and that Trotter is Georgie.

## **Catharsis**

Catharsis is the release of emotions, usually fear and pity. The term was first used by Aristotle in his *Poetics* to refer to the desired effect of tragedy on the audience. Many critics cite *The Mousetrap* as cathartic because Christie subverts the mystery genre by making the detective the murderer. The unexpected ending provides an exciting release for the audience, who think they have the murders solved only to discover how wrong they have been,

## **Character**

A character is a person in a dramatic work. The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual's morality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multi-faceted ones. Characters may also be defined by personality traits, such as the rogue or the damsel in distress. "Characterization" is the process of creating a lifelike person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who she will be and how she will behave in a given situation. For instance, Trotter is likable and represents authority. But in the play's conclusion the audience learns that Trotter does not represent authority—he represents insanity.

## **Genre**

Genre is a term for the categorization of literature. Genre is a French word that means “kind” or “type.” Genre can refer to both the content of literary work—such as tragedy, comedy, or pastoral—and to the forms of literature, such as drama, novel, or short story. This term can also refer to types of literature such as mystery, science fiction, or romance. *The Mousetrap* is a drama, but it is also a mystery.

## **Plot**

The pattern of events in a narrative. Generally plots should have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, but they may also sometimes be a series of episodes connected together. Basically, the plot provides the author with the means to explore primary themes. Students are often confused between the two terms; but themes explore ideas, and plots simply relate what happens in a very obvious manner. Thus the plot of *The Mousetrap* is a snow storm that isolates a group of people, one of whom is a murderer. But the themes are those of insanity and revenge.

## **Scene**

Scenes are subdivisions of an act. A scene may change when all of the main characters either enter or exit the

stage. But a change of scene may also indicate a change of time. In *The Mousetrap*, the second scene of Act I occurs the next afternoon and thus indicates the passage of time in the play.

## **Setting**

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The location for *The Mousetrap* is Monkswell Manor, a small guest house thirty miles from London. The action begins in the late afternoon and concludes the following afternoon; both acts take place in the Great Hall of the Manor.

## **Suspense**

Quite simply, suspense is the anticipation of an action occurring. It is a major device in mystery since suspense is what keeps the audience interested in the resolution of the action. In a play such as *The Mousetrap*, suspense is more than curiosity, since members of the audience may already be familiar with the play's resolution. Suspense heightens the audience's reaction to characters, either sympathetic or not. It also provides the audience with an opportunity to prove their analytical skills superior to the

author's. Dissecting the clues is an important ritual for theatre-goers for whom solving the mystery is the whole purpose of seeing the play.