

Response Sheet #6

Title: The Real Inspector Hound

Composer: Tom Stoppard

Date Composed: 1968

Setting: Place and time

The story is set in Muldoon Manor, a lavish manor surrounded by “desolate marshes” and “treacherous swamps.” It is a direct parody of Agatha Christie’s ‘closed’ settings.

The manor itself is described as having French windows and a large settee.

The play is set, as spoken by Mrs Drudge, in the “drawing room of Lady Muldoon’s country residence one morning in early spring.”

In essence, the entire setting is a parody of Christie’s cosy settings and this particular setting has had comparisons drawn between it and *The Mousetrap*.

Context & Values: Cultural and societal influences

The play was written in the 1960’s in a time when values were beginning to change. Many countries around the world had embarked in women’s liberation movements and this signalled a change in thinking.

Many suppressed social groups, women, people from other races and homosexuals, were beginning to become recognised and this signalled the rise of the underdogs.

In regards to the stage of crime fiction, the play was written at the beginning of the refinement stage. The society of the time had grown weary of Christie’s cosy crimes that were inevitably solved, and were beginning to realise that crimes did not occur quite as formulaically as often portrayed in golden age films. This is one societal influence that had a huge bearing on the way in which Stoppard constructed *The Hound*, as a tongue-in-cheek parody that laughs at the cosy conventions of earlier crime fiction texts.

Form, Purpose and Audience:

The text is designed to be performed in the form of a play. Its purpose was to tell an entertaining story but also become a vehicle for Stoppard’s views on the

formulas of crime fiction. Stoppard intended *The Hound* to be an attack on the cosy conventions of Christie's works.

The intended audience of the piece is one of two things. The first of these intended audiences are those who have been fans of crime fiction texts in the past, but grew tired of the formulaic plots, and will be encouraged to re-join the genre in this new age. The other possible audience is for a whole new generation of crime fiction followers. There would have been many people who stayed away from crime fiction because it was too formulaic but the change in style and subversion of conventions enticed them to become crime fiction fans.

Mystery:

There are a number of mysteries through *The Hound*. The first of these is evident right from the beginning, and that is the mystery of who is the dead body on the stage? This is eventually solved and the body revealed to be Higgs.

The second mystery evident in the play is the identity of the mysterious man in the midst of Muldoon Manor. From the moment the radio tells of a lunatic roaming around the coast, the audience is intrigued to find the identity of this mysterious lunatic.

As the play continues, the mystery amongst it becomes deeper and more convoluted. The audience begins to wonder who is the real Inspector Hound? Who is the identity of the murderer? And who is actually masquerading as who?

Conventions:

This text was written at the beginning of the refinement stage of crime fiction. For that reason, many conventions have been altered but many remain constant.

For one, the text contains crime. There is the murder of Higgs, Simon Gascoyne, Birdboot and Moon that occur throughout the play but it is revealed that they are all, in fact, killed by the same person, Puckeridge.

The text therefore contains a criminal, another convention of crime fiction.

The text also has an element of mystery and danger, with all the characters on edge expecting another murder at any stage. This danger however, is rather satirised as Mrs Drudge refers to the manor as being swept up by a "deadly fog."

Sleuths: Appearance, location, methods, traits, flaws

There are effectively three sleuths in *The Hound*, Inspector Hound, Moon & Birdboot.

The first of these, Inspector Hound, is the official detective in the play but ironically, is the one who plays the smallest role. He arrives at the manor wearing "swamp boots" and carrying a foghorn. He is effectively a parody of Arthur Conan Doyle's famous sleuth, Sherlock Holmes. He is very precise in his manner, just

as Holmes was, but is sent up by Stoppard as his Holmes-like deductions are way off the mark. Upon spotting the body, he declares he has found Lady Muldoon's missing husband, Albert. Despite repeated attempts by Cynthia to assure him otherwise, he is firm before finally conceding "are you sure?" Upon entering the manor, he makes a very Holmes-like statement as he asks Cynthia to take her time, "begin at the beginning and don't leave anything out," despite the fact that nothing has happened that would warrant such a statement. He is once again another way that Stoppard sends up the cosy conventions of crime fiction.

The second sleuth is very much an impromptu one. Birdboot is a play critic who is sitting in the audience watching the play just like everyone else. He is, however, called up on stage by a mysterious phone call. Somehow, in the middle of it all, he takes up Simon Gascoyne role and fills in his lines with surgical precision. This is but another way in which Stoppard sends up the conventions of the genre, highlighting the fact that the crimes are so formulaic, anyone could simply slip straight into them and nothing would change. It is Birdboot, who, after observing the action from his more hands-on role, realises that the body belongs to Higgs. He also discovers who killed Higgs but just before he can reveal it he is shot dead. Birdboot is a notorious womanizer, which is quite an alteration to Christie's sleuths, who would not become involved with other characters.

The third sleuth in the play, Moon, who is also a play critic, races up on stage when Birdboot is shot. He inadvertently has taken on the role of Inspector Hound. When he realises this and goes to sit back down, Simon Gascoyne and Hound are sitting where he and Birdboot once sat. Moon is a second string critic to Higgs, and is very fond of using fancy language. He too becomes an impromptu sleuth and also ends up dead.

Suspects or Criminals: crime, appearance, traits and methods

The criminal in the text is Puckeridge, the third string critic to Higgs and Moon. He is described by Moon as "bitter."

He is very sneaky in his methods and uses disguises and aliases to trick Birdboot and Moon up on stage before killing them. During the play he goes under the names of Inspector Hound, Major Magnus and Albert Muldoon.

We do not get to see much of Puckeridge as himself and only really can judge him based on his performances as other characters.

Issues:

The play was written in the 1960's, a time when marginalised groups were beginning to gain rights. This becomes a major issue in the play as Stoppard gives a voice to marginalised groups and Puckeridge becomes representational of these groups. Stoppard supports the rise of the underdogs such as women, homosexuals and ethnic groups.

Stoppard's send up of hierarchies is evident in the extended quote by Moon when he states that he dreams of the day when "troupes of actors are slaughtered by their understudies, magicians sawn in half by indefatigably smiling glamour girls, cricket teams wiped out by marauding bands of twelfth men."

He also goes on to talk about "an army of assistants and deputies, the seconds-in-command, the runners up, the right-hand men storming palace gates..."

Alterations to Generic Conventions:

This was the beginning of the refinement age, and Stoppard is also quite deliberately sending up the cosy conventions. For that reason, there are a number of alterations to generic conventions.

The first and most obvious of these is the fact that the criminal, Puckeridge, gets away with the crime. In traditional texts, the crime would have been solved by the intellectually superior sleuth. In *The Hound*, however, the detectives do not solve the case and are not intellectually superior. Inspector Hound, who is a parody of Sherlock Holmes, is very precise in all his methods; it's just that those methods are all wrong.

Also, of the three detectives in the play, two are killed and the other disappears from the action seamlessly. The very fact that there are three detectives is a subversion of the conventions of crime fiction, in which there would be one detective who may or may not be aided by an assistant.

Moon and Birdboot start off in the audience, and yet by the end of the play find themselves amongst the action itself. This is also a subversion as, traditionally, the audience would find themselves totally removed from the action.

Another way the conventions have been altered is the way the body is integrated into the storyline. In a conventional crime fiction text, a dead body would be the centre of attention but in *The Hound*, it remains undiscovered for a vast majority of the play.

Language Features: Include quotes

- Repetition. The line "where's Higgs?" is repeated on numerous occasions to get the comedic angle of the play established very early on and also has a foreboding effect on the audience as they too wonder where's Higgs?
- Metaphor. Moon continually uses various types of metaphors to make himself sound learned. He is a second string critic who uses language in flourishes. "The ocean will fall into the sky and the trees will hang with fishes." He also uses the metaphor "these crustaceans in the rock pool of society."

- Parody. Stoppard has created an entire play that parodies every aspect of Christie and Conan Doyle's works. Birdboot highlights this right from the beginning when he states that the play is a "who killed thing? No one will leave the house."

Also, Moon states that while at first the play seems convoluted, he feels that few will doubt the author's "ability to solve it with a startling denouement."

- Clichés. Stoppard uses well known crime fiction clichés to help send up Christie's settings and plots. These include "a murderer in our midst" and "the killer will strike again."
- Exaggeration and sensationalism. These are used once again to further parody and send up Christie's works. In particular, Stoppard is having a shot at the way in which critics lapped up Christie's works despite them being exceedingly predictable. Moon states, in reference to the play, that "large as it is, it is a small masterpiece – I would go so far as to say – kinetic without being pop."
- Foreshadowing. This is done most deliberately by Stoppard to further send up the predictable nature of Christie's stories by allowing certain characters to predict exactly what is going to happen. Mrs Drudge states that "this is all very mysterious and I'm sure it's leading up to something." Moon also foreshadows his own death when talking about Puckeridge, "does he wait for Higgs and I to write each other's obituary – does he dream."
- Comedy. This teams well with parody, particularly of Inspector Hound's character, who is a parody of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. When a madman is loose in the vicinity of Muldoon Manor, a police bulletin on the radio states that "Inspector Hound, who is masterminding the operation, is not available for comment but it is widely believed he has a secret plan."

Following his entrance to Muldoon Manor, Hound states that "now is the time to speak." When Cynthia tries to speak, he abruptly replies with "don't interrupt."

- Dramatic Irony. The body is left lying in the middle of the stage, completely visible to the audience but unseen by the characters in the play.
- Dialogue and tone. The dialogue given to the characters is specifically designed to parody traditional crime fiction texts and the tone used by the characters is very stereotypical. This is evident in Mrs Drudge's character, who is a common maid and therefore does not speak quite as sophisticatedly as Cynthia, Felicity or Simon.
- Repetition. "A man of my scrupulous integrity." This is continually repeated by Birdboot despite it being a total lie.
- Irony. It is quite ironic that Moon dreams of the day when second-in-commands rule the world when he is killed by his reserve, Puckeridge.

Contrast/Comparison with *The Big Sleep*:

Comparison:

- Both texts have numerous murders committed.
- Both texts have convoluted plots in which murder and disappearances are commonplace.
- Both texts contain beautiful women that the respective sleuths become involved with. In the case of *The Hound*, this is Birdboot and Felicity.

Contrast:

- In *The Hound*, there are three sleuths whilst in *The Sleep* there is only one, Marlowe. Two of the three detectives in *The Hound* die, a fate that would never happen to Marlowe.
- *The Big Sleep* is set in 1940's Los Angeles whilst *The Hound* is set in a Christie-like cosy setting of Muldoon Manor.
- *The Hound* is a refinement crime fiction text whilst *The Big Sleep* is a golden age text.
- *The Big Sleep* is a film whilst *The Hound* is a play.
- In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe catches the criminals and solves the crime but in *The Real Inspector Hound*, all three detectives are incapable of solving a jigsaw puzzle and the criminal gets away with the crime.

Personal Response:

I thoroughly enjoyed the play for its cleverness. I felt that the reason why it has been valued for so long is the way it sends up the conventions from prior texts.

I felt that the play's subtleties were not lost and that is always a good feeling when one can deconstruct a text, extrapolating the various aspects of it that may go unnoticed to those not looking for them.

The subtle and not-so-subtle references to Holmes, Christie, *The Mousetrap* and crime fiction conventions in general make it a thoroughly enjoyable read.