

Murder on the Orient Express

Adapted by Ken Ludwig from the book by Agatha Christie

***Especially for Grades 7 and up**

Barter Theatre's Gilliam Stage – Fall, 2022

(NOTE: standards included for reading *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie, seeing a performance of the play, and completing the study guide.)

Virginia SOLs

English – 7.1, 7.4, 7.5, 7.7, 7.9, 8.2, 8.4, 8.5, 8.7, 8.9, 9.1, 9.3, 9.4, 9.6, 9.8, 10.3, 10.4, 10.6, 10.8, 11.3, 11.6, 11.8, 12.1, 12.3, 12.4, 12.6

Theatre Arts – 7.6, 7.18, 7.20, 8.5, 8.12, 8.18, 8.22, TI.10, TI.11, TI.13, TI.17, TII.6, TII.9, TII.12, TII.15, TII.17, TIII.11, TIII.12, TIV.12, TIV.13

Tennessee/North Carolina Common Core State Standards

English Language Arts – Reading Literacy: 7.1, 7.4, 7.7, 7.10, 8.1, 8.4, 8.6, 8.7, 8.10, 9-10.1, 9-10.4, 9-10.6, 9-10.9, 9-10.10, 11-12.1, 11-12.4, 11-12.7, 11-12.10

English Language Arts – Writing: 7.1, 7.7, 7.8, 7.9, 8.1, 8.7, 8.8, 8.9, 9-10.1, 9-10.7, 9-10.8, 9-10.9, 11-12.1, 11-12.7, 11-12.8, 11-12.9

Tennessee Fine Arts Curriculum Standards

Theatre -HS1.T.PT, HS1.Cr1.B, HS1.T.R1, HS1.T.R3, HS2.T.PT, HS2.Cr1.B, HS2.T.R1, HS3.T.PT, HS3.Cr1.B, HS4.T.PT, HS4.Cr1.B

North Carolina Essential Standards

Theatre Arts – B.A.1, B.AE.1, B.CU.2, I.C.1, I.A.1, I.AE.1, I.CU.2, P.C.1, P.A.1, P.AE.1, A.A.1, A.AE.1

Setting

A hotel in Istanbul and various railroad cars on the Orient Express



Characters

Hercule Poirot – a detective from Belgium

Monsieur Bouc – Poirot's friend, runs the Wagon-Lit

Mary Debenham – English governess

Col. Arbuthnot – Scottish, Mary's lover

Samuel Ratchett – American businessman

Hector MacQueen – American, Ratchett's secretary

Michel – the train's conductor

Helen Hubbard – rich American

Princess Dragomiroff – exiled Russian

Greta Ohlsson – Swedish, Dragomiroff's companion

Countess Andrenyi – Hungarian, a doctor

Headwaiter – Turkish, works at the Tokatlian Hotel



Vocabulary Words

primal

revenge

odyssey

deception

modesty

exotic

enormity

observations

passport

concierge

convention

gesture

edible

missionary

compartment

reputation

discount

impressive

longevity

exchange

tension

succumb

proposition

grovel

thug

phantom

escort

impression

accord

assailant

conceal

exile

extinguished

implicate

disoriented

punctual

methodical

tunic

communist

indulge

provisions

interrogate

obstructing

fidelity

fabrication

Define the vocabulary words above then write sentences using them. Remember: anyone reading your sentence should be able to understand the word from the context in which it is used.

Synopsis

Famous detective Hercule Poirot is called back from Istanbul to London on urgent business. He intends to book a first-class compartment on the Orient Express, run by his friend, Monsieur Bouc. The train is surprisingly full, but Bouc manages to secure Poirot a spot in the first-class cabin. While aboard the Orient Express, Poirot meets a host of peculiar characters: the Princess Dragomiroff, an aging Russian princess; her Swedish companion Greta Ohlsson; a beautiful Hungarian named Countess Andrenyi; a wealthy Minnesota housewife named Helen Hubbard; Colonel Arbuthnot, a Scottish military man; an English governess named Mary Debenham; Michel, the French conductor; Samuel Ratchett, a disagreeable American businessman, and his anxious secretary Hector MacQueen. After boarding the train, Ratchett corners Poirot and demands Poirot investigate a series of ominous letters that have been sent to Ratchett, threatening his life. Poirot refuses. Ratchett then attempts to hot on the attractive Countess Andrenyi, and earns a slap on the face for his efforts.



Later that night, as a heavy snow falls, we see 3 train compartments – one belonging to Poirot, one belonging to Mrs. Hubbard, and the third – in between the other two – belonging to Samuel Ratchett. Although the hour is late, Mrs. Hubbard turns on the radio and sings loudly to the music, annoying her neighbor Ratchett. Bouc tries to calm Ratchett down, but Hubbard enters Ratchett's compartment through the adjoining door and confronts him, exacerbating the situation. Bouc finally convinces her to leave, but much to everyone's chagrin, the singing continues.



Meanwhile, on the observation deck, Mary Debenham and Colonel Arbuthnot meet and we discover they are lovers. Their rendezvous is interrupted by the arrival of Hector MacQueen. Suddenly there is a screech as the train hits a snowdrift and plows to a stop. The Orient Express is stuck in the snow.

Synopsis (cont.)

Back inside the train, we hear a woman's scream. Bouc investigates and discovers Mrs. Hubbard in the hallway outside her compartment, complaining that she woke up to a man standing over her – a man in a conductor's uniform. Bouc believes she dreamed it all up – Michel, the train conductor, is nowhere in the vicinity - but he agrees to look into it. The next morning, Hector MacQueen is bringing Ratchett's breakfast tray to his compartment. He runs into the Princess and Greta in the hallway. He knocks on the door but Ratchett doesn't respond. Bouc and Poirot appear, and the three men break into Ratchett's room and discover that Ratchett has been murdered in his bed, stabbed eight times. Various clues abound: a dropped handkerchief with the letter "H" embroidered on it, Ratchett's pocket watch with the face smashed in at 1:15 a.m., the smell of almonds from the wine glass. But the most telling of all – a burnt scrap of paper found in the ashtray on which Poirot could still make out the words "Remember little Daisy Armstrong."



Poirot realizes that Samuel Ratchett is in reality Bruno Cassetti, the man responsible for the murder of 5-year-old Daisy Armstrong in America four years ago. Although Cassetti was brought to trial, his ties to organized crime help destroy the evidence so he walked away from it. Bouc insists that Poirot solve the crime of Cassetti's murder before the police get involved. Poirot agrees.

Poirot begins to interview the passengers. All of them have an alibi for the alleged time of death. Upon learning of Ratchett's true identity, Princess Dragomiroff rejoices in his death – her best friend, it turns out, is Daisy's grandmother, the great actress Linda Arden. She also reveals that 4 other people died as a result of Daisy's death. Daisy's mother, who was pregnant, went into labor early and died in childbirth, as did the baby. Daisy's father, Charles Armstrong, killed himself rather than live with his grief, and an innocent French maid who was implicated in the crime killed herself as well. Hector MacQueen admits that his father was prosecuting attorney on the Cassetti murder case but that he had no idea Ratchett was the same man. Hector MacQueen also mentions having seen a second "conductor" in the hallway, but no other conductor exists on the Orient Express. Mrs. Hubbard presents a conductor's uniform button she found on the floor of her bedroom, proving that a man had been in her room the night before. Suddenly we hear a scream and a shot. All rush to Ratchett's compartment, where Mary Debenham lies bleeding on the floor, shot in the arm.

Synopsis (cont.)

While the Countess, a trained physician, binds Mary's wounds, Mary relates how she, too, encountered a second conductor after she wandered into Ratchett's room by mistake, and that this "conductor" shot her. Upon questioning Mary alone, Poirot reveals to Bouc that she is lying about her relationship with Arbuthnot, which she claims is platonic.

When Michel is questioned, he reveals that both Greta Ohlsson and the Princess mentioned to him that they, too, saw a second conductor. Upon searching Greta's suitcase, he finds the uniform with one of its buttons missing. Greta is distraught and proclaims her innocence. The Princess escorts her back to her room.



Poirot interviews the Countess and forces her to reveal her true identity – an American who is, in fact, the aunt of Daisy Armstrong. The Countess, like Greta before her, claims her innocence. Finally Poirot interviews Col. Arbuthnot, forcing him to admit the truth about his relationship with Mary, which he wanted to keep secret until he had secured his divorce from his wife. When asked about his friendship with Charles Armstrong, Daisy's father, Arbuthnot denies it at first but finally admits that they were best friends. Poirot deduces that the others were involved with the Daisy Armstrong case as well – Mary Debenham was her governess, Greta Ohlsson was her baby nurse, Michel is the father of the French maid who killed herself, and Mrs. Hubbard is, in fact, Daisy's grandmother – the actress Linda Arden. He reveals his solution – that all of them murdered Samuel Ratchett in a plot concocted by Linda Arden. They try to convince Poirot that their actions were justified. Linda Arden/Mrs. Hubbard pleads their case eloquently, telling Poirot that he has another solution if he would use it – that an unknown assailant dressed as a conductor snuck on the train, murdered Ratchett, and disappeared. She reminds Poirot of the pain they've all been through and how unjust it would be to have to go through that suffering again. Poirot is torn and asks Bouc's opinion. Bouc agrees with the others, and Poirot sets them free, only to be haunted by his decision the rest of his life.

Biography of author Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie (Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller) was born in the southwest of England on September 15, 1890. As a child, she was encouraged to write by her mother. In 1914, she wed Colonel Archibald Christie, a Royal Flying Corps pilot. She published her first book, The Mysterious Affair at Styles, in 1920; the story introduced one of her most famous characters—Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. In 1930, she released Murder at the Vicarage, which introduced readers to Miss Jane Marple.

Christie wrote more than 70 detective novels in her life, which earned her the title the "Queen of Crime." She was a renowned playwright as well. Her play The Mousetrap opened in 1952 at the Ambassador Theatre in London and ran continuously until 2020 when it was shut down for COVID. It reopened again in 2021.

Agatha Christie died on January 12, 1976.



Biography of playwright Ken Ludwig

Ken Ludwig was born in York, PA on March 15, 1950. His father was a doctor and his mother a former Broadway chorus girl. He received degrees from Haverford



College, Harvard University, Harvard Law School, and Cambridge University. His first Broadway play, *Lend Me A Tenor*, was produced in 1989 and won three Tony Awards. He followed that play with *Crazy for You* (another Tony award winner) in 1992, *Moon Over Buffalo* (1995), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (2001), *Shakespeare in Hollywood* (2003), *Twentieth Century* (2004), *Leading Ladies* (2004), *Be My Baby* (2005), *The Three Musketeers* (2006), *Treasure Island* (2007),

The Gershwins' An American in Paris (2008), *Fox on the Fairway* (2010), *The Game's Afoot* (2011), *'Twas the Night Before Christmas* (2011), *Baskerville: A Sherlock Holmes Mystery* (2015), *A Comedy of Tenors* (2015), *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017), *Sherwood: The Adventures of Robin Hood* (2018), and *Dear Jack, Dear Louise* (2019).



A Brief History

Barter Theatre was founded during the Great Depression by Robert Porterfield, an enterprising young actor. He and his fellow actors found themselves out of work and hungry in New York City. Porterfield contrasted that to the abundance of food, but lack of live theatre, around his home region in Southwest Virginia. He returned to Washington County with an extraordinary proposition: bartering produce from the farms and gardens of the area to gain admission to see a play.

Barter Theatre opened its doors on June 10, 1933 proclaiming, “With vegetables you cannot sell, you can buy a good laugh.” The price of admission was 40 cents or the equivalent in produce, the concept of trading “ham for Hamlet” caught on quickly. At the end of the first season, the Barter Company cleared \$4.35 in cash, two barrels of jelly and enjoyed a collective weight gain of over 300 pounds.

Playwrights including Noel Coward, Tennessee Williams and Thornton Wilder accepted Virginia ham as payment for royalties. An exception was George Bernard Shaw, a vegetarian, who bartered the rights to his plays for spinach.

Today, Barter Theatre has a reputation as a theatre where many actors performed before going on to achieve fame and fortune. The most recognized of these alumni include Gregory Peck, Patricia Neal, Ernest Borgnine, Hume Cronyn, Ned Beatty, Gary Collins, Larry Linville and Frances Fisher. The list also included James Burrows, creator of *Cheers*, Barry Corbin, and the late Jim Varney.

Robert Porterfield passed away in 1971. His successor, Rex Partington, had been at Barter in the 1950s as an actor and in the 1970s as stage manager. Rex returned as chief administrator from 1972 until his retirement in 1992. In March 2006, he passed away.

Richard Rose was named the Producing Artistic Director in October 1992. During his tenure, attendance grew from 42,000 to more than 163,000 annual patrons. Significant capital improvements were also made, including renovation of the main stage (now Gilliam Stage) in 1995 and the 2006 addition of The Barter Café at Stage II (now the Smith Theatre). Rose retired in December of 2019 and Katy Brown, who had been at Barter since 1998 as the Director of the Barter Players and as an Associate Artistic Director, was named the fourth Producing Artistic Director – and is the first woman to hold the position.

Barter represents two distinct venues of live theatre: Barter Theatre’s Gilliam Stage, and Barter’s Smith Theatre. Gilliam Stage, with over 500 seats, features traditional theatre in a luxurious setting. Barter’s Smith Theatre offers seating for 167 around a thrust stage in an intimate setting and is perfect for more adventurous productions. Barter Theatre is also home to The Barter Players, a talented ensemble of actors who produce plays for young audiences throughout the year.

History is always in the making at Barter Theatre, building on legends of the past; Barter looks forward to the challenge of growth in the future.

Word Search

Find the following words in the puzzle below:

Orient Express, Hercule Poirot, detective, train, conductor, Bouc, Daisy Armstrong, murder, clue, hatbox, justice, Hector MacQueen, Helen Hubbard, snowdrift, Istanbul, governess, nanny

G	M	F	E	N	M	V	A	I	U	U	K	O	D	H
Q	E	L	A	U	B	S	E	S	M	K	R	M	A	U
A	M	N	R	R	D	Y	D	T	O	I	V	R	I	N
X	N	D	L	T	R	G	H	A	E	X	O	M	S	I
Y	E	B	O	U	C	O	N	N	T	T	N	L	Y	A
R	Z	V	D	O	I	V	T	B	C	T	E	Z	A	R
T	O	R	I	O	P	E	L	U	C	R	E	H	R	T
X	F	C	S	T	X	R	D	L	J	X	C	P	M	F
C	O	I	K	P	C	N	E	U	L	C	I	C	S	I
L	P	B	R	F	O	E	F	F	B	N	T	G	T	R
V	X	E	T	C	A	S	T	Y	B	U	S	C	R	D
V	S	W	U	A	G	S	S	E	M	R	U	Z	O	W
S	I	L	I	H	H	R	K	M	D	X	J	J	N	O
D	R	A	B	B	U	H	N	E	L	E	H	J	G	N
H	E	C	T	O	R	M	A	C	Q	U	E	E	N	S

True and False

Write **T** if the statement is **True** and **F** if the statement is **False**.

1. ____ Agatha Christie wrote *Murder on the Orient Express*.
2. ____ This play is mostly set in the Yorkshire Dales in England.
3. ____ The train is stopped when it hits a snow drift.
4. ____ Hercule Poirot is a French Detective.
5. ____ Monsieur Bouc is the person murdered on the Orient Express.
6. ____ Mrs. Hubbard is in reality the actress Linda Arden.
7. ____ Michel is the conductor on the Orient Express.
8. ____ Samuel Ratchett and the Countess Andrenyi are secret lovers.
9. ____ The second conductor's uniform was found in Greta's suitcase.
10. ____ Mary Debenham is really little Daisy Armstrong's aunt.
11. ____ Samuel Ratchett was stabbed 10 times in the chest.
12. ____ Hercule Poirot was unable to solve this case.
13. ____ Princess Dragomiroff is really little Daisy Armstrong's grandmother.
14. ____ Colonel Arbuthnot was great friends with Daisy Armstrong's father.

Matching

Draw a line connecting the noun in the 1st column with its corresponding description in the 2nd.

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Greta Ohlsson | a. Poirot's trusted friend |
| 2. Samuel Ratchett | b. Queen of Crime |
| 3. Monsieur Bouc | c. train conductor |
| 4. Countess Andrenyi | d. missionary in Africa |
| 5. Agatha Christie | e. English governess |
| 6. Mary Debenham | f. a trained physician |
| 7. Michel | g. Linda Arden |
| 8. Helen Hubbard | h. Bruno Cassetti |

Questions/Activities

1. The Orient Express is an actual train that today travels several different routes. However, the original route – which is the one they take in the play – ran from Istanbul to Paris. **Using the Internet, research the history of the Orient Express.** When was it built? Why did it travel that specific route? How long did it normally take? What countries did it pass through. What sort of people travel by train today? **Present your findings to the class.**

2. Hercule Poirot is a man who believes that justice is reflected in the letter of the law. How is his belief system challenged after he solves the case? Do you agree with the decision he made at the end of the play regarding the status of the killers? Do you think the killers were justified in their actions? What is the difference between revenge and justice? Poirot's decision haunted him for the rest of his life; do you think the killers suffered the same qualms? **Discuss.**



3. Using pictures from magazines or newspapers, construct a collage representing one of the characters from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Display the collages around the room and see if the other students are able to match the collage to the character.

4. Read the book *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie, then **write a paper comparing and contrasting** it to the play. Which did you like better? Why?

5. This majority of this play is set in a train stuck in a Yugoslavian blizzard during the winter of 1934. **How does time and place affect this story?** Would the story be the same if it was set in summer and the train had kept moving, stopping at different cities? How would today's technology (cell phones, Internet, social media) change the story? **Discuss.**

6. Playwright Ken Ludwig is known for writing comedies, and his adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express* is no exception. Did you feel that the combination of comedy and murder-mystery worked well together? What did he do with the characters from the book that allowed so much humor into the story? **Discuss.**

7. Almost the entire play takes place in two train cars. There are many things a set designer needs to consider in order to serve this play: how to transition smoothly between locations, sightlines for the audience, etc. Below is a picture of the set design for the dining car by Barter's Resident Scenic Designer Derek Smith:



Pick a scene from your favorite story and **design a set for it**. Keep in mind the actors' entrances and exits, what information the audience needs to follow the story, the year the story is set, etc. Create a rendering and **present it to your class**.

8. **Write a critique** of Barter's production of *Murder on the Orient Express*. Include the production values (set, costumes, lights, props, sound, etc.), each actor's performance and the script. What did you like? How would you have designed/directed/acted it differently?

9. In 1929, the Orient Express was on its way to Istanbul when it was stopped by a blizzard. **Using the Internet, research the details of that incident**. How does it compare to the situation faced by the characters in the play? **Present your findings to the class**.

10. Agatha Christie based parts of this story on the real life kidnapping case of Charles Lindbergh's daughter. Research the Lindbergh kidnapping case and prepare a presentation that highlights the similarities and differences between the Lindbergh case and the fictionalized Armstrong case. **Present your findings to the class**.

Comedy vs. Tragedy



comedy: a dramatic work that is light and often humorous or satirical in tone and that usually contains a happy resolution of the thematic conflict.

tragedy: A drama or literary work in which the main character is brought to ruin or suffers extreme sorrow, especially as a consequence of a tragic flaw, moral weakness, or inability to cope with unfavorable circumstances.

Given these definitions, would you categorize *Murder on the Orient Express* as a comedy or a tragedy? **Cite three samples from the play to support your position.** Does a character's point-of-view influence your findings? **Discuss.**

Select your favorite character from the play, pick an important day in their life that influences this play then write a journal entry about that day as that character. For example, you might pick the character of Mary Debenham and write about the day you met Colonel Arbuthnot, or you might pick the character of Helen Hubbard and write about the day you hatched the idea for the murder of Samuel Ratchett. Be as specific as possible and write as that character would.



11. In the play, the actress Linda Arden masquerades as Mrs. Hubbard in order to take revenge on Samuel Ratchett. She concocts an elaborate backstory before boarding the train and introduces herself to Poirot and the rest of the passengers as a housewife from Minnesota. Create an alter ego or alias for yourself and **write a monologue explaining how you ended up at your school**. Perform the monologue as if you were introducing yourself to the class.

Suggested Further Reading/Links

Orient Express : The Life and Times of the World's Most Famous Train by E.H. Cookridge

Books by Agatha Christie:

Hercule Poirot Novels:

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd
The ABC Murders
Evil Under the Sun
Five Little Pigs

Miss Marple Novels:

The Murder at the Vicarage
The Moving Finger
The Body in the Library
A Pocket Full of Rye

Books written about Agatha Christie:

An Autobiography by Agatha Christie
Agatha Christie: an Elusive Woman by Lucy Worsley
Agatha Christie by Laura Thompson

To find out more about Agatha Christie, check out the links below:

Agatha Christie – the Official Website – <http://www.agathachristie.com>

Agatha Christie Quotes –

<https://parade.com/422725/alison-abbey/15-agatha-christie-quotes-to-celebrate-the-authors-125th-birthday/>