Stories of Detection and Mystery

Agatha Christie and Others

About the authors

All seven authors are British. Agatha Christie is probably the most famous of them. Born in England in 1890, she worked in a hospital during the First World War and acquired a knowledge of poisons, which she later made good use of in her novels. Agatha Christie’s first detective story, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, written in 1920, introduced the Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, who was to appear in many of her subsequent novels. Agatha Christie wrote about 67 detective stories and became hugely popular all over the world for the way in which her ingenious plots keep the reader guessing right until the end of the story. She died in 1976.

The multi-talented G. K. Chesterton was a poet, essayist, novelist and journalist. He was born in London in 1874 and died in 1936. He is best remembered for his poems, several of which are very famous, and also for his short stories featuring Father Brown, an innocent-looking priest with a wonderful ability to solve crimes.

Cyril Hare was the pseudonym of Alfred Alexander Gordon Clark. He was the son of a Surrey wine merchant and lived from 1900 to 1958. Hare was a mystery writer, lawyer and county judge. He wrote a number of excellent mystery stories and is most famous for *Tragedy at Law* (1942), a classic in the detective story genre, and for which he drew on his experience as a judge’s marshal.

Elliot O’Donnell was a writer of non-fiction books on the supernatural. He also wrote a novel and a collection of short stories about the supernatural.

Montague Rhodes James was a distinguished scholar who became Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University. His ghost stories, which he started writing in 1904, strongly influenced other writers in that genre.

Margery Allingham (1904–1966) was a successful writer of detective fiction, noted for her ability to create real characters and for her eye for detail.

Finally, Dennis Wheatley (1897–1977) wrote extremely popular thrillers and ‘satanic’ stories about the occult. Wheatley was a prolific writer and sometimes produced several novels a year. In the 1950s and 1960s he was one of the best-selling authors in the world. His most famous story is probably *The Devil Rides Out* (1935), which was made into a film by Hammer in 1968.

Summary

This book contains eight gripping stories, written by seven different authors, among them the internationally renowned detective writer Agatha Christie, the much-loved British writer, G. K. Chesterton, and Dennis Wheatley, famous for his stories of the supernatural.

*The Blue Cross*

In *The Blue Cross*, written by G. K. Chesterton, Valentin, a famous Parisian detective, comes to London, on the trail of an equally-famous French thief, Flambeau. Valentin has a very keen eye for detail and he has the extraordinary ability to place himself in the shoes of the criminal he is hunting down. Thanks to his keen eye, Valentin manages to follow Flambeau’s trail around London by noticing a series of very strange clues left behind by a couple old priests. Sitting in a quiet restaurant, and finding salt in the sugar bowl, he is told by the waiter of the visit of the two old priests earlier in the day. Valentin continues to follow their trail via a market stall with switched price labels and a restaurant with a broken window. Eventually he is led to Hampstead Heath where it is revealed that a simple-looking priest holds all the answers to the mystery.

*Philomel Cottage*

In *Philomel Cottage*, by Agatha Christie, a young unmarried woman inherits some money from her cousin and soon falls in love and marries a man she has only recently met. Another man, who has been in love with her for years, is very angry and warns her that she knows nothing about her new husband. At first she is very happy with her new husband, and she agrees to finance the purchase of a house for them both to live in. But before long she has a strange dream in which she imagines her husband is dead and that she is glad that he is dead. Not long after she has had the strange dream, she is driven by a feeling of unease and jealousy to look through her...
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husband’s papers and she finds out that he has changed his identity and that he is in fact suspected of having married and then killed several women in the United States. It dawns on her that her life is in grave danger. She tries to escape, but her husband comes home sooner than she expected. She manages to call her old friend to help her. But while she is waiting for her friend to arrive she has to think fast in order to keep her husband from killing her. Will her friend arrive in time?

**An Unpleasant Man**

*An Unpleasant Man* by Cyril Hare is set in an English village which is close to an American Airbase. It is clear that Sergeant Place, who has been sent to investigate a murder, disapproves of so many Americans being in the area and he is relieved when the door is answered by the dead man’s English servant, Thomas Wilson. Place asks Wilson many questions about the events which lead up to his discovering the body earlier that morning. The servant tells him that while he was drinking in a local pub, he was given a mysterious message to give to his employer by an American soldier from the nearby airfield. Mr Wilson gave the message to his employer later that evening and the following morning, when he went to take Mr Harris a cup of tea, he found him dead in his bed. It looks like a clear case of suicide; however, the astute detective sergeant solves the mystery when the murderer betrays himself through his use of an American expression.

**The Unlucky Theatre**

*The Unlucky Theatre* by Elliot O’Donnell is an eerie ghost story in which a man spends a night in an abandoned old theatre. During the night, the theatre comes briefly back to life and the man is forced to leave. He later finds out the story behind the mystery from the owner of the theatre.

**The Mezzotint**

In the highly original *The Mezzotint*, by M. R. James, a picture keeps changing, revealing details of a terrible crime that is either about to be committed or which has already been committed. The man who buys the picture shows it to a number of his colleagues and they all realize that something very strange is happening. When the mystery is finally revealed, the picture stops changing.

**Family Affair**

In *Family Affair*, by Margery Allingham, a young couple disappear from their house in the middle of breakfast, just before 7.30 in the morning. The case is reminiscent of that of the Marie-Celeste – the ship found on 24th November 1872 drifting without a soul on board. The ship was almost undamaged and the captain’s log indicated that the ship must have sailed itself for hundreds of miles! The missing pair seem to have been a very normal couple, living a normal life in a normal house, surrounded by friends and relatives, and so the mystery appears complete. But perhaps their relatives were just that little bit too close?

**The Invisible Man**

*The Invisible Man*, by G. K. Chesterton, is about how we do not notice ordinary people. But in this case, the ordinary person is a murderer. A young man asks a young woman to marry him and is told that he has two rather strange rivals. One of the rivals turns up to claim his bride and he immediately receives threatening notes. Where are the notes coming from? Nobody seems to have seen anybody – until Father Brown becomes involved in the case.

**The Case of the Thing that Whimpered**

In the last story, *The Case of the Thing that Whimpered*, by Dennis Wheatley, a ghost-hunter is invited to spend a few days at the house of the director of one of the biggest stores in New York. The director tells him of a succession of mystifying attacks on night watchmen that have taken place in his company’s storehouse. The only clue appears to be that the attacks are preceded by a strange whimpering sound. The ghost-hunter and the director’s nephew offer to spend the night in the storehouse in order to find out what has been happening. At first it appears as if the murders are the work of some sort of ghostly *Ab-human*, but the end of the story reveals a surprising twist.

**Background and themes**

As the title of the book, *Stories of Detection and Mystery* indicates, the stories fall into two categories – detective stories and tales of the supernatural. Stories of the supernatural have always been with us – there are ghost stories that are thousands of years old – but detective stories are a much more recent genre. It is generally agreed that the first full-length detective story was *The Moonstone*, written in 1868 by the English author, Wilkie Collins (also published in this series at Level 6).
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The success of the Sherlock Holmes stories inspired other writers to write a series of stories involving one detective. G. K. Chesterton started writing his Father Brown stories in 1911 and they became very popular. People were amused by the idea of the simple-looking priest who was so clever at solving difficult crimes.

The ‘puzzle’ element: The element that the public most enjoy in detective fiction is, most probably, the ‘puzzle’ element. The detective story sets out to challenge and surprise the reader. With the clues available in the story, can the reader solve the puzzle and work out who has committed the crime? Who is going to get to the answer first, the reader or the novelist?

Agatha Christie was master of the ‘twist in the tail’, the unexpected ending that makes a story so good. *Philoelm Cottage*, first published in 1924, is an excellent example of this. In the story the main character has deduced that her husband is going to murder her. Terror and tension mount and there seems to be no escape for the victim. But then – just when the reader has given up all hope for her – comes the twist! You can only admire the inventiveness of the author.

G. K. Chesterton’s *The Blue Cross* (published in 1911) and Cyril Hare’s *An Unpleasant Man* are other stories in this collection that end with an ingenious twist. The other two detective stories, *Family Affair* (1969) and *The Invisible Man* (1911), are rather more straightforward, but still contain a strong element of the ‘puzzle’ that makes this genre so enjoyable to read.

The two stories of the supernatural are quite different. *The Unlucky Theatre* is an atmospheric ghost story. *The Mezzotint* (published in 1904) is a tale that will send shivers down your back for quite a long time afterwards. Its basic idea – that of a picture which keeps changing – is not a new one. The novelist and playwright, Oscar Wilde, wrote a famous novel on this theme called *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. But in *The Mezzotint*, the changing picture depicts a crime.

Dennis Wheatley was a master of the supernatural tale. However, the story in this collection, *The Case of the Thing that Whimpered*, first published in 1943, is not one of these tales. The writer succeeds in convincing the reader that the supernatural is at work – but in the end we discover that a crime has been committed!

### Discussion activities

#### Before reading

1. **Pair work:** Write the following question and list on the board: *Have you ever read the following types of book?*

   - detective stories
   - romantic stories
   - ghost stories
   - adventure stories
   - thrillers
   - historical novels

   Working individually, the students write down the types of book that they have read and then they put them in order of preference. Now put the students into pairs and ask them to compare their lists. They should ask each other questions about their preferences and ask their partner for examples of the books they have read. After a few minutes, ask each pair to present each other’s preferences to the rest of the class.

2. **Discuss:** Write the word ‘mystery’ on the board. In two minutes, each student writes down as many words as they can that the word ‘mystery’ brings to mind. Then put the students into groups of four and have them compare their lists of words. They should explain to each other why they thought of the words they did. Each group counts how many different words they have found. Finally, do a class survey and find out which group has the most words.

#### After reading

3. **Discuss:** Tell the students to re-read the descriptions of Flambeau’s crimes on page 2. Then put them into groups of three or four and ask them to discuss the following questions: *Which of the three crimes mentioned do you think is the worst and why? What do you think would be a suitable punishment for each of these crimes?* Give the students fifteen minutes or so to discuss their answers and then call upon each group to present their opinions to the rest of the class.

4. **Guess:** Tell the students to re-read the episode in the first restaurant on pages 4–6. Working in pairs, the students try to come up with an explanation for the priests’ behaviour – *Why did they put salt in the sugar bowl? Why did one of them throw soup at the wall?* After a few minutes the pairs tell the rest of the class about their ideas.

5. **Guess:** Tell the students to re-read the episode in the second restaurant on pages 9–10. Still working in pairs, the students try to come up with an explanation for this latest example of the priests’ strange behaviour – *Who are these priests? Why did one of them say ‘Sorry to confuse your accounts, but it’ll pay for the window’?* After a few minutes the pairs share their ideas with the rest of the class.
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Pages 10–18

After reading

6 Role play: Put the students into pairs. Tell them to imagine they are television journalists. They are going to interview either Father Brown or Valentin after Flambeau has been arrested. They can ask a maximum of eight questions. Tell the students to prepare a list of questions they would like to ask. After a few minutes, get the students to act out the interview – with one member of each pair playing the journalist and the other playing either Father Brown or Valentin. Tell them to practise it a few times and then to switch roles. Finally ask different pairs to perform their interview in front of the whole class.

7 Discuss: Ask the students to write down one or two sentences describing their opinion of the story – Did you find the story interesting / boring / difficult / complicated / obvious etc? Why? After five or ten minutes, ask one of the students to read out one of their sentences. Then ask another student to react to their opinion. Keep the debate going around the class for as long as the students are interested.

Philomel Cottage

After reading

8 Role play: Put the students into pairs. Ask them to re-read the conversation between Dick and Alix on page 20 after Alix tells him that she is going to marry Gerald Martin. Tell them to imagine how the conversation continues. The students practise their dialogues in pairs until they have memorized them. Then ask some of the pairs to act out the scene in front of the rest of the class.

9 Discuss: How important are dreams? Write the following question on the board: Have you ever been influenced by a dream or had a dream which came true? Give the students five minutes to jot down their answers. Then put the students into groups of four and have them compare their answers. This may be broadened out to a whole-class discussion, depending on the level of interest of the students.

10 Pair work: On page 26, Alix finally decides not to tell her husband that Dick has telephoned her. Working individually, students answer the following question: What would you have done in Alix’s place? Then put the students into pairs and ask them to exchange their views on the question. Finally, call upon some or all of the pairs to present their views to the whole class.

Pages 26–29

After reading

11 Read carefully: Tell the students to re-read pages 26–29, paying particular attention to the things that Gerald says. Then, working in groups of three or four, the students try to come up with an explanation for his behaviour. They should consider the following questions – What was Gerald planning to do at 9 o’clock? Why is he so angry with the gardener? Why does he change his mind about doing photography that evening? After ten or fifteen minutes, each group elects a spokesperson to present their theory to the rest of the class.

Pages 29–42

After reading

12 Role play: Put the students into groups of three. Tell them they are going to act out the story from the point at which Alix and Gerald have coffee to the point at which Dick Windyford arrives on the scene. Two of the students act out the scene, the third acts as director. The actors should not look at their books, but should try to improvise and use their own words. When they have had enough time to practise, call upon the groups to act out the scene in front of the whole class.

An Unpleasant Man

After reading

13 Pair work: Write the following line of dialogue from the story on the board: Didn’t I say he was an unpleasant man? Divide the class into two equally-sized groups. Ask one half of the class to imagine why Joe Spencer says this at the end of the story. What do you think was Harris’s role in the murder of the bank guard? Ask the other half to think of questions that Place might want to ask Spencer about Harris. After five or ten minutes, put the students into pairs so that each pair contains one student from each of the groups. Working in these pairs, the students now act out the conversation. Call upon some of the pairs to act out their conversation in front of the whole class.

14 Write: Working in groups of three or four, students imagine they have to write a short newspaper article about Wilson’s murder. Their article should cover the following questions – Who was the victim? Who was the murderer? Where did the murder take place? When did it take place? How did it happen? Why did they do it? How did the police catch the murderer? When they have written their articles, ask for volunteers to read their work out loud to the rest of the class.

The Unlucky Theatre

After reading

15 Discuss: Tell the students to re-read the first three paragraphs of the story carefully. Working with the whole class, ask the students to write down an answer to the following question: Why do you think the owner of the theatre didn’t want Fernaghan to tell the newspapers about his wish to spend the night in the theatre? After a few minutes, ask individual students to read out their answers. Write the key points up on the board. Keep the discussion going for as long as the students’ interest remains high.
16 Role play: Put the students into pairs. Ask them to imagine that, contrary to the wishes of the owner of the theatre, Fernaghan agrees to sell his story to a newspaper in return for a high fee. Tell them to imagine the questions that the journalist would ask him before he goes to stay the night in the theatre. You might need to prompt them by making a few suggestions such as Who is Fernaghan? Where is he from? Has he done this sort of thing before? etc. After a few minutes, get the pairs to act out the interview. Invite one or two pairs to perform their interview in front of the whole class.

17 Pair work: Tell the students to look again at page 56 at the point where Fernaghan leaves the theatre. Working in pairs, tell them to imagine the conversation between Fernaghan and Peter Lindsey in which Fernaghan gives his account of his ghostly experiences and the theatre owner tells him about the theatre's history. After ten or fifteen minutes, get the pairs to practise their dialogues out loud until they know them off by heart. Then ask some of the pairs to perform the dialogue in front of the whole class.

### The Mezzotint

**After reading**

18 Draw: Working individually, the students make a sketch of the mezzotint according to one of the five descriptions that are given in the story. When they have finished, put the students into pairs and get them to discuss the differences between their sketches. Finally, ask each student to present his or her partner's sketch to the rest of the class.

19 Role play: Write the following question on the board: Do you think that Mr Britnell knew about the strange properties of the mezzotint? Working with the whole class, conduct a short discussion around this question. Write up some of the students’ suggestions. After five or ten minutes, put the students into pairs. Student A takes the role of Mr Williams, Student B takes the role of Mr Britnell. Tell the students to imagine that Mr Williams goes to visit Mr Britnell some time after the end of the story. He wants to tell Mr Britnell about what happened and to find out more about the mezzotint’s history. In their pairs, the students write a dialogue and then practise it. Finally, invite some of the pairs to perform their dialogue in front of the whole class.

### Family Affair

**After reading**

20 Discuss: Working individually, the students think about what they would do if they won one million pounds in the lottery. Ask them to consider the following questions: Would you like to change your life completely? Would you move house? Would you tell your friends or family? After a few minutes, put the students in groups of three or four. Tell them to imagine they are a family group and that they have won the lottery together and that they must make a collective decision about what to do with the money. After fifteen minutes, each group elects a spokesperson to present their decisions and their reasoning to the rest of the class.

### The Invisible Man

**After reading**

21 Pair work: Put the students into pairs. Ask them to practise reading out loud the conversation on pages 83 and 84 which takes place between John Turnbull Angus and the young lady in the cake shop. They should begin with ‘Could I have one halfpenny cake and a small cup of black coffee, please?’ and end with ‘In that case, I would suggest that you bring me another cake.’ Make sure the students pay careful attention to pronunciation and intonation.

22 Debate: The intrigue of this story revolves around people's appearance and dress. Divide the class into two equally-sized groups. Tell them that they are going to have a debate on the issue of personal appearance and standards of dress. Write the following statement on the board: This house believes that a person should never be judged by their appearance. Regardless of their personal views, allocate to one half of the class the role of arguing in favour of the proposition, and to the other half, allocate the role of arguing against the proposition. Give the groups enough time to prepare their arguments and to elect two spokespersons. Then proceed with the debate, with the two speakers in favour going first. At the end of the debate have the class vote on the question.

### The Case of the Thing that Whimpered

**After reading**

23 Discuss: In the story Orsen says, ‘What people believe to be ghosts are nearly always the working of the imagination or tricks which have been played for a special purpose.’ Put the students into small groups. Ask them to answer the following question: Do you agree with Orsen’s statement? Justify your opinion. After the group discussions, you may want to broaden the discussion into a whole class activity with each group presenting its opinions to the rest of the class.

24 Role play: Put the students into groups of three. Ask them to imagine that Orsen and Bruce are to be interviewed on television about how they found little Angela Morgenfeld. Tell them to imagine the questions that the journalist would ask them. After a few minutes, get the groups to act out the interview. Invite one or two of the groups to perform their interview in front of the whole class.

### Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.