

THE ISSUE OF JUSTICE

in "And Then There Were None"

BY AGATHA CHRISTIE



ABOUT THE BOOK

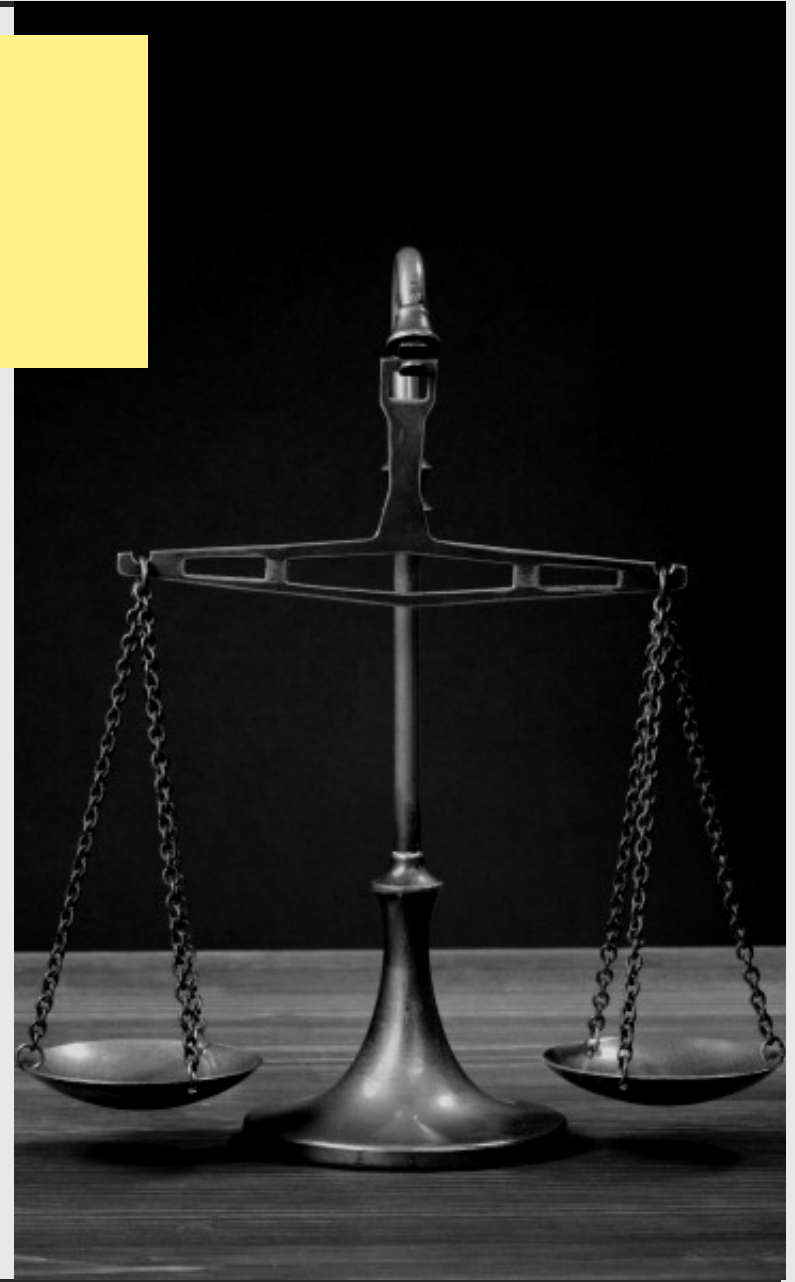
"And Then There Were None" is one of the most well-known detective stories and one of the best examples of this genre. This mystery novel was written by Agatha Christie, who is regarded as "The Queen of Crime," and first published in the United Kingdom in 1939 under the title *Ten Little Niggers*. The American retitled edition followed the same year.

Although detective fiction, just as any other type of genre literature, is often referred to as a superfluous style for entertainment only, in fact, it is not always so. "And Then There Were None" is a profound text with many motifs masterly entwined within; the most crucial being the issue of justice.

JUSTICE IN DETECTIVE FICTION

The preoccupation with the topic of justice is typical for detective fiction as a genre. Detective fiction developed in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries and reflected the main challenges of modernity.

According to Symons, "In a social sense the detective story expresses in an extreme form the desire of the middle and upper classes in British society for a firm, almost hierarchical, social order, and for an efficient police force."





The 1920s and 1930s are known as the Golden Age of detective stories. Especially in the United States, these were harsh times of staggering social inequality and economic hardship. Nonetheless, crime stories seldom mentioned such difficulties, concentrating instead on the life of the elites (Grella, 30-48). The social order in detective fiction is threatened; nonetheless, it would be restored by the detective or police, who act as the agents of law and justice.

The form in which the detective story is written is also crucial from this perspective. The narrative always follows a particular set of rules: there is a crime, a mystery, which will be resolved in the end of the story. All of these laws of the genre also reinforce the reader's feelings of order.

With its craving for retribution, crime fiction is deeply rooted in the Christian system of ethics. When the offender murders the innocent victim, he or she commits the crime not only against humanity, but also against God (Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage").

In detective fiction, there are only three alternatives for the murderers: madness, suicide, or execution (incarceration). Without such atonement, they cannot be forgiven by the society.



Classic Detective Fiction

JUSTICE IN "AND THEN THERE WERE NONE"

Justice can be described as the central theme of And Then There Were None. The plot revolves around a set of complex moral dilemmas:

DO THOSE WHO HAVE MURDERED
DESERVE TO BE MURDERED THEMSELVES?

CAN A MURDER EVER BE JUSTIFIED?

IS THERE STILL VALUE IN THE LIFE OF A
PERSON WHO COMMITTED A MURDER?

DOES CAUSING DEATH INDIRECTLY
EQUATE TO A MURDER?

CAN ONE BE BOTH AN OFFENDER AND AN
ACTOR OF JUSTICE?



SYMBOLS & MOTIFS

The theme of justice in the novel is developed through various symbols and motifs.

One of the symbols is the mark on the forehead of judge Wargrave. This mark, which looked like a fire shot, is an example of intertextuality in the book, as it reminds us of the mark that was placed on Cain's head by God. Through such an allusion, Christie draws a parallel between the judge and Cain, both of whom are guilty in murder, as well as the universality of Wargrave's crime.



The storm is another powerful symbol used in the novel. In the beginning of the story, the mentioning of the squall beforehand by the old man in the train serves as the first sign of the forthcoming retribution:

“Watch and pray,” he [the old man] said. “Watch and pray. The day of judgment is at hand.”

He collapsed through the doorway onto the platform. From a recumbent position he looked up at Mr. Blore and said with immense dignity: "I'm talking to you, young man. The day of judgment is very close at hand."

Subsiding onto his seat Mr. Blore thought to himself: "He's nearer the day of judgment than I am!" But there, as it happens, he was wrong. . .
(Christie, 15)



The motif of retribution and punishment for sin manifests itself in the book from the very beginning of the novel:

In her bedroom, Emily Brent, dressed in black silk ready for dinner, was reading her Bible. Her lips moved as she followed the words:

"The heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made: in the net which they hid is their own foot taken.

The Lord is known by the judgment which he executeth: the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands. The wicked shall be turned into hell."
(Christie, 29)



THE CENTRAL MOTIVE OF THE NOVEL

TEN LITTLE INDIANS POEM

Ten little Indian boys went out to dine;
One choked his little self and then there
were nine.

Nine little Indian boys sat up very late;
One overslept himself and then there were
eight.

Eight little Indian boys travelling in Devon;
One said he'd stay there and then there
were seven.

Seven little Indian boys chopping up sticks;
One chopped himself in halves and then
there were six.

Six little Indian boys playing with a hive;
A bumblebee stung one and then there
were five.

Five little Indian boys going in for law;
One got in Chancery and then there were
four.

Four little Indian boys going out to sea;
A red herring swallowed one and then there
were three.

Three little Indian boys walking in the Zoo;
A big bear hugged one and then there were
two.

Two little Indian boys sitting in the sun;
One got frizzled up and then there was one.

One little Indian boy left all alone;
He went and hanged himself and then there
were none.

"AND THEN THERE WERE NONE"

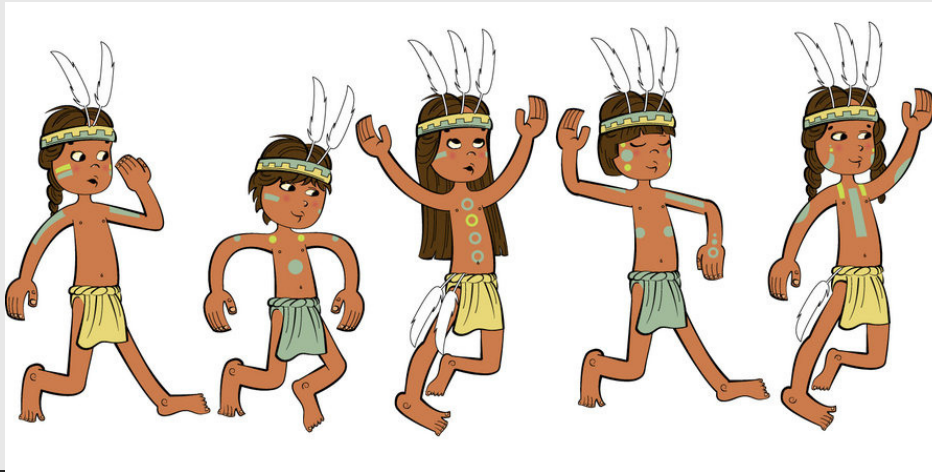


Each of the characters in the novel have unique life experiences, and therefore, views on such notions as morality, ethics, guilt, responsibility, crime, and justice.

Some of the characters admit committing crimes, but they do not feel guilty. For example, Tony Marston and Lombard do not seem to feel ashamed for what they have done.

The lack of remorse stems from the powerful class and racial distinctions that predominated the Western World in the beginning of the twentieth century. Although Lombard killed 21 people, he is not upset from this fact because they were Africans. Similarly, other characters are not upset by killing the children of the city poor. Such details introduce us to the specific social setting of Great Britain in the first half of the twentieth century and to power relations in the country at that time.

The views of two characters on justice are of special interest—
Judge Wargrave and Miss Brent.



JUDGE WARGRAVE

Judge Wargrave is a central, and also the most complex, character of the novel. Unlike in traditional crime fiction, in "And Then There Were None," the character who resembles a detective the most is at the same time a murderer. On the one hand, Wargrave is the one who organized the whole affair on the island and planned the crime. Therefore, he is an offender. On the other hand, he is also quite a respectable figure among the visitors of the island, and tries to find the murderer.

What is more, the entirety of Wargrave's crime can be seen as an attempt to establish justice and to punish the sinners for their crimes.



The moral complexities of Wargrave's position concerning crime and justice, as well as their psychological background, can be seen in the epilogue:

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"I was born with other traits besides my romantic fancy. I have a definite sadistic delight in seeing or causing death. I remember experiments with wasps - with various garden pests. . . . From an early age I knew very strongly the lust to kill.

But side by side with this went a contradictory trait - a strong sense of justice. It is abhorrent to me that an innocent person or creature should suffer or die by any act of mine. I have always felt strongly that right should prevail.

It may be understood - I think a psychologist would understand that with my mental makeup being what it was, I adopted the law as a profession. The legal profession satisfied nearly all my instincts." (Christie, 246)"

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The character of Wargrave demonstrates how lust for crime and justice, two seemingly opposite things, are related. Violence appears to be simply another side of justice, which is inherent to its existence. Judge Wargrave shows the obscure nature of the wish to punish sinners.

In fact, the wish to play a role of God and to deliver retribution upon the sinners is exactly as violent as the wish to kill the innocents. Hence, the moral reasoning that Wargrave introduced is simply the way to justify his actions.

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“It was my ambition to invent a murder mystery that no one could solve. But no artist, I now realize, can be satisfied with art alone. There is a natural craving for recognition which cannot be gainsaid. I have, let me confess it in all humility, a pitiful human wish that someone should know just how clever I have been” (Christie, 257).

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MISS BRENT

Miss Brent represents the cruel side of justice. She is a religious fundamentalist who believes that following the ethical guidelines of the Christian faith is the moral duty of everyone.

She is preoccupied with the notion of sin and tries to lead a virtuous and stainless life.



Miss Brent asserts that every sinner will be punished by God and that such punishment is rightful. When the characters muse on the reasons behind Ethel Roger's death, she says that the guilty conscience is the most important one. What is more, she claims that Mrs. Roger's death was an "Act of God." Other characters do not believe in such statements, which makes Brent exclaim indignantly:

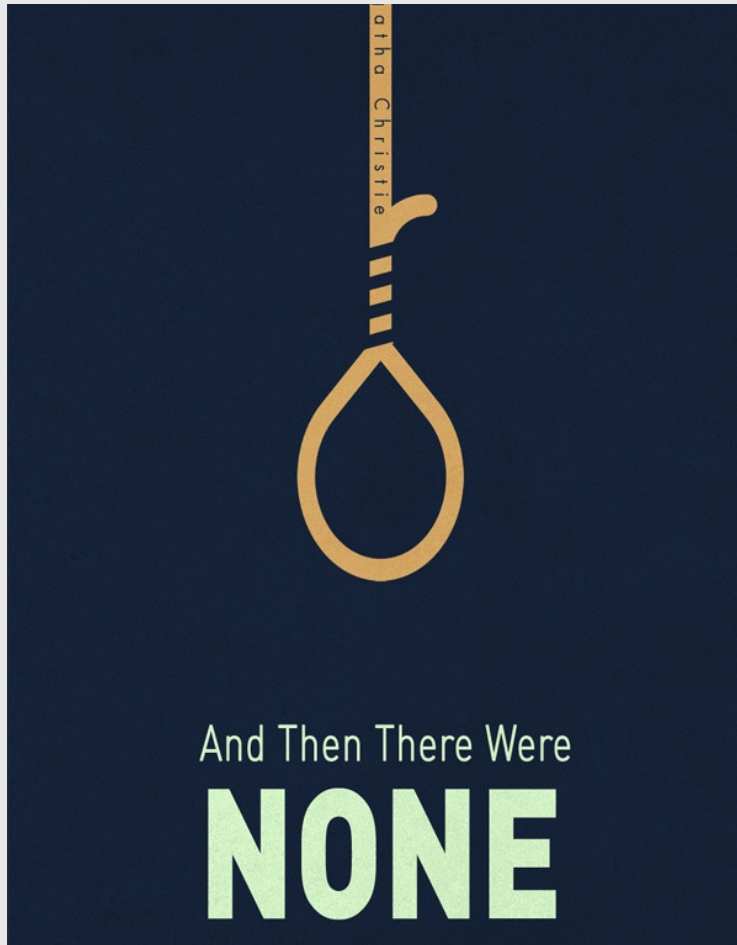
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“You regard it as impossible that a sinner should be struck down by the wrath of God! I do not!” (Christie, 85)

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Brent's ethical code falls in line with the Old Testament's "eye for an eye" principle, as Brent does not forgive people their sins. This fact becomes apparent in the seventh chapter of the book, when the story of the murder that Brent committed is revealed.

Although Brent did not kill anyone directly, she caused the death of her maid, Beatrice Taylor. When the latter became pregnant, Brent fired her, which resulted in the suicide of the maid, who drowned herself in the sea.



CONCLUSION

To sum up, although "And Then There Were None" is considered as genre fiction and has entertainment as its primary role, the book also introduces the readers to the moral complexities of justice and crime.

Through the characters of judge Wargrave and miss Brent, it constitutes important ethical dilemmas, which are not resolved in the book, and leaves the choice to the readers.



THANK YOU!

AND THEN THERE WERE NONE • AGATHA CHRISTIE

BOOK ANALYSIS

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