

LEARNING GUIDE



Agatha Christie®

DEATH on the NILE

ADAPTED FOR
THE STAGE BY KEN LUDWIG



DIRECTED BY HANA S. SHARIF

ON THE FICHANDLER STAGE
NOVEMBER 30 – DECEMBER 29, 2024

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"...In the end, when our lives are over, someone somewhere will weigh our hearts against the weight of a feather, and only then will we end up where we deserve."

— Hercule Poirot, *Death on the Nile*

THE PLAY

Picture this: a luxurious cruise down the Nile River aboard the steamship Karnak, offering breathtaking views of ancient pyramids. The eleven passengers are returning a priceless artifact—an ancient Egyptian sarcophagus—to its rightful place in a grand ceremony. The exhibit's curator is eager to celebrate the statue's return at a museum in Wadi Halfa, marking a significant moment in Egypt's cultural history.

But amid the elegance of the voyage, disaster strikes. A murder shatters the peace, and the once-glamorous cruise becomes a tense battleground of secrets and suspicion. Every passenger seems to have something to hide, and danger looms as the tension intensifies. Enter detective **Hercule Poirot**, who must quickly unravel the mystery and catch the killer before they strike again.

Katie Kleiger (Jacqueline de Bellefort), Travis Van Winkle (Simon Doyle), and Olivia Cygan (Linnet Ridgeway) for *Death on the Nile*. Photo by Tony Powell.

ALL ABOARD!

These eleven passengers board the Karnak. Not all will survive the trip.

Hercule Poirot

The meticulous Belgian detective, known for his sharp intellect and keen observation skills

Simon Doyle

A charming young man who wants more in life

Jacqueline de Bellefort

A woman deeply in love

Linnet Ridgeway

A wealthy heiress full of grace and sophistication

Colonel Race

Poirot's good friend, known for his charisma and likeability

Sir Septimus Troy

An actor of great renown

Rosalie Otterbourne

The daughter of Salomé, exudes a sunny disposition

Ramses Praed

Atticus's son, a newly minted doctor with a caring nature

Salomé Otterbourne

A flamboyant former author and aspiring actress

Annabelle Pennington

Linnet's Canadian trustee, vibrant and confident

Atticus Praed

Curator of the Egyptian Collection at the British Museum

MEET THE AUTHOR AGATHA CHRISTIE



The novel *Death on the Nile* was written by Agatha Christie in 1937. Born in 1890 in the seaside town of Torquay, Devon, she became one of the most famous authors in Britain. Often called the “Queen of Mystery,” Christie’s stories—whether you’re solving puzzles in her novels or watching their adaptations—are sure to keep you guessing until the very end.

Christie’s journey into the world of storytelling started early. Homeschooled by her mother, she learned to read by the age of four. At 18, she wrote her first novel, but it wasn’t until 1920 at the age of 30 that she released her first big hit, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

During World War I, Christie worked as a nurse and in an apothecary (a place that dispenses medicines). This experience gave her a unique edge in her writing—there, she learned about poisons, a crucial element in many of her stories.

Over her career, Christie wrote over 66 detective novels featuring beloved recurring characters like Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot. She also penned numerous short stories and plays. Her works are some of the best-selling fiction of all time.

In 1971, Christie was awarded the title of Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, the female equivalent of a knighthood, in recognition of her contributions to literature. She died in 1976, but her legacy continues through her work and her many fans worldwide.



MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT KEN LUDWIG

Ken Ludwig discovered his love for theater at a young age. He has gone on to become one of the most-performed playwrights of our time with six Broadway shows, eight West End productions, and a total of 34 plays and musicals being staged around the globe. Ludwig’s first major hit, *Lend Me a Tenor*, won two Tony Awards and was hailed as “one of the classic comedies of the 20th century” by *The Washington Post*. *Crazy For You* also won a Tony Award for Best Musical, showcasing Ludwig’s knack for creating entertaining and memorable shows.

In 2022, at the request of Agatha Christie’s family, Ludwig adapted the Christie classic *Murder on the Orient Express* for the stage. His other plays include *Moon Over Buffalo* and *Leading Ladies*. His plays *Dear Jack*, *Dear Louise*; *Baskerville: A Sherlock Holmes Mystery*; and *Shakespeare in Hollywood* premiered at Arena Stage. He is known for plays filled with humor, heart, and clever twists.

He has received two Olivier Awards, two Helen Hayes Awards, and the Edgar Award for Best Mystery. He was nominated for an Emmy Award for his writing for The Kennedy Center Honors.

— Ken Ludwig
Source: www.KenLudwig.com

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK

"Agatha Christie's mysteries have a keen ability to pull us out of our day-to-day and unlock a deep sense of wonder, and it is a gift to share this story with a playwright whose enthusiasm for digging into the mysteries of our shared humanity matches my own...I could not be more thrilled to mark my Arena Stage directorial debut with Ken Ludwig's glamorous adaptation..."

"Through the lens of Agatha Christie's iconic detective Hercule Poirot, we embark on a journey across continents and a complex web of intersecting threads of passion, hope, lust, betrayal, financial ruin, malfeasance, love, and rage."

"At the heart of this work is a profound exploration of love and humanity. Embodied in this play is Agatha Christie's belief that seemingly ordinary people can be driven to the depths of extraordinary acts under the right series of circumstances. Love in its many faces and phases are revealed, and in the wake of unspeakable violence, we are left to grapple with the great cost of emotional recklessness. This play serves as a powerful reminder to honor and uplift the fundamental humanity of one another."

– Hana S. Sharif, Director of *Death on the Nile* and Artistic Director of Arena Stage



WHILE YOU WATCH...

Mood words are descriptive terms that convey the emotional tone or feeling of a show. In design, these words help guide the creative choices for elements like set, costumes, lighting, sound, and props to express the intended mood and atmosphere. As you watch, pay attention to how the design brings these mood words to life, shaping the overall feel of the production.

Original music by Charles Coes and Nathan A. Roberts helps tell the story by heightening the drama and supporting the action throughout the play. Notice how the overture, which plays at the beginning, introduces the key musical themes. Listen for any music that repeats or changes.

Stage violence is carefully choreographed for safety. Fake guns and other weapons, clearly marked as props, are inspected and handled by trained crew and actors. Stage combat rehearsals focus on timing and control, ensuring realistic yet safe action on stage.

All these elements—design, music, and controlled violence—work together to create the immersive world of the play.





FROM PAGE TO STAGE

Transforming a well-known novel into a live stage performance can be a challenge.

This process involves:

- Ensuring legal rights are secured to adapt the book for the stage.
- Balancing staying true to the book with adding new creative ideas.
- Choosing key scenes and condensing the story to fit the limitations of live theater (i.e. time constraints, changes in setting and scene transitions, cast size, physical limitations, etc).
- Turning characters' inner thoughts into dialogue and actions that can be performed on stage.
- Reworking timelines and keeping the audience engaged by building dramatic tension.
- Collaborating with directors, designers, and actors to bring the story to life.
- Going through workshopping and revisions to refine the play.

At its best, this process results in a new work that not only respects its literary roots but also stands on its own. Through this transformation, the adaptation can resonate with audiences in fresh ways, inviting them to experience the story anew.

— The writer sits at a desk amongst his work in progress.

Source: Tima Miroshnichenko (pexels.com, royalty-free)

> WHODUNIT!?

ELEMENTS OF THE DETECTIVE MYSTERY

Agatha Christie earned the title of “Queen of Mystery” by skillfully using literary devices that keep readers engaged and guessing. Some notable elements you can expect in her work include:

The “Fair Play” Mystery: Readers should be able to solve the mystery alongside the detective, with all essential clues included in the narrative. The solution should be logical and fair.

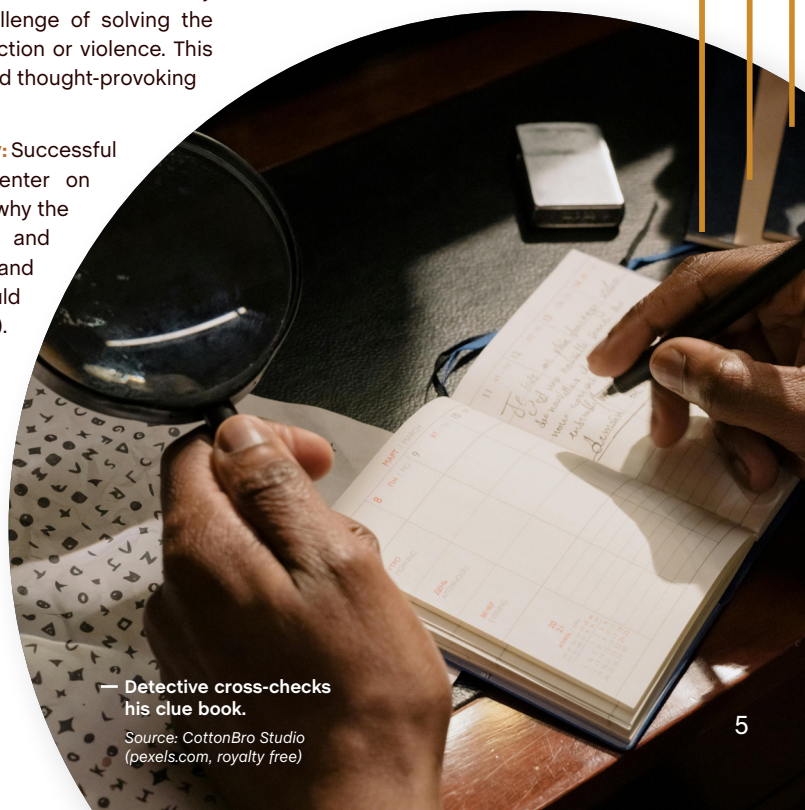
The Brilliant Detective: The protagonist is typically a brilliant and eccentric detective who uses their intellect and creativity to solve the crime, often outsmarting other characters in the process.

Country House Murders: Mysteries often take place in secluded settings like country houses, creating a small pool of suspects and an enclosed environment for the investigation.

Red Herrings: Authors frequently introduce false clues or misleading information, known as “red herrings,” to divert readers and the detective from the true solution.

The Puzzle Element: The focus is heavily on the intellectual challenge of solving the crime, rather than on action or violence. This creates an engaging and thought-provoking experience for readers.

Motive and Opportunity: Successful detective mysteries center on identifying the motive (why the crime was committed) and the opportunity (how and when the crime could have been carried out). These elements are key to narrowing down suspects and building the logical path to the solution.



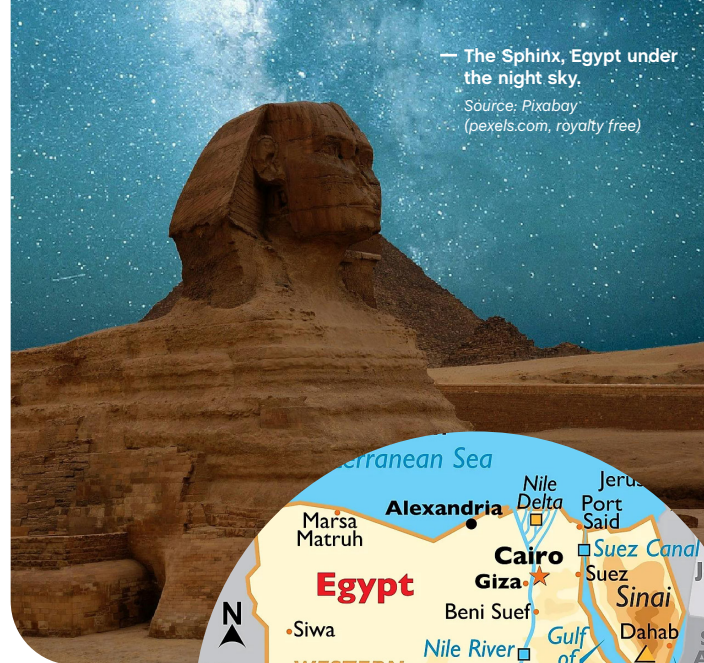
— Detective cross-checks his clue book.

Source: CottonBro Studio (pexels.com, royalty free)

EGYPT SETTING & ATMOSPHERE

The characters embark on a holiday to Egypt, eager to bask in the beauty and allure of the land. While stories from this era often romanticized such travels to Egypt, they rarely captured the true social and political dynamics of Egypt as a modern country. Here are a few facts about Egypt in the 1930s:

- The 1930s saw the rise of nationalist movements in Egypt, particularly led by the Wafd Party, which sought to end British occupation and gain independence.
- The Great Depression had a profound impact on Egypt's economy, leading to high unemployment rates, economic hardship, and heightened discontent among the population.
- Poor living conditions contributed to public health issues, including widespread malnutrition and diseases like malaria and tuberculosis, which disproportionately affected the lower classes.
- The government censored political dissent and restricted cultural expression, stifling intellectual and artistic movements that sought to address social issues and advocate for change.
- While some progress was made in women's education and activism, many women faced significant social and legal barriers, limiting their rights and opportunities.



— The Sphinx, Egypt under the night sky.

Source: Pixabay (pexels.com, royalty free)



— Map of Egypt. The Karnak is traveling up the Nile River to Aswan.

Source: www.worldatlas.com/maps/egypt

THE OPENING STAGE DIRECTION OF ACT I, SCENE TWO OF AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *DEATH ON THE NILE* ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY KEN LUDWIG

(The famous Gallery 4 of the British Museum, which houses one of the greatest collections of Egyptian artwork in the world.)

(The room is filled with statues, coffins and images of ancient Egyptians gods, such as Osiris, God of the Underworld, Khnum, the ram-headed god of the Nile, the lioness goddess Sekhment and the jackal-headed Anubis, god of judgment.)

The second scene of the play is at a lavish event in the Egyptian Wing of the British Museum, described in the stage direction above. We are ushered into the space by Atticus Praed, the curator of this exhibit and an Egyptologist. Egyptology, the formal study of ancient Egyptian civilization, grew from a fascination with Egypt's monumental architecture and mysterious artifacts. Key discoveries, such as the tomb of Tutankhamun (King Tut) in 1922, captivated scholars and the public alike. The British Museum played a pivotal role in amassing one of the largest Egyptian collections outside of Egypt, featuring mummies, sarcophagi (mummy cases), and everyday objects that reveal the civilization's rich history.

THE BRITISH-EGYPTIAN CONNECTION AND MUSEUM ARTIFACTS

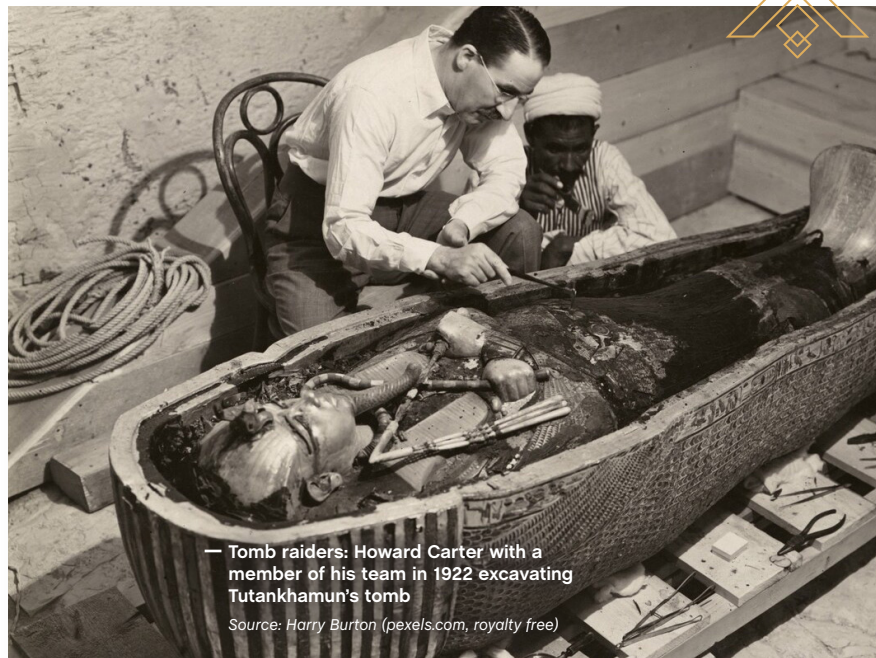


(Atticus whips the crimson drape from the sarcophagus, and there it is: a life-sized gold-covered coffin. It dates from the 19th Dynasty, circa 1250 BCE. It is magnificent.)

(The guests ooh and ahh and applaud.)

As awareness grew about the ethics of colonial acquisitions, Britain faced increasing pressure to return Egyptian artifacts to their rightful place. In the play, Atticus accompanies the golden sarcophagus back to Egypt, reflecting ongoing discussions about cultural heritage and the importance of reparations. Reparations are acts of restoring or compensating for harm done, often in the form of returning cultural treasures or offering compensation to rectify historical injustices, particularly related to colonization or systemic exploitation.

Today, institutions like the British Museum are now reassessing their collections and collaborating with Egyptian authorities to address these concerns.



— Tomb raiders: Howard Carter with a member of his team in 1922 excavating Tutankhamun's tomb

Source: Harry Burton (pexels.com, royalty free)

ANUBIS, LORD OF THE UNDERWORLD

FROM ACT I SCENE TWO OF AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *DEATH ON THE NILE* ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY KEN LUWIG

"...Anubis, will become the major symbol of the play. He is depicted by the Egyptians as a man with the head of a jackal. He held a number of roles for the Egyptians, as the protector of graves, the lord of the underworld, and, most importantly, as the god who attended to the weighing of the heart, in which it was determined whether a soul would be allowed to enter the realm of the dead. In this role, he weighed the heart of the departed on a two-sided scale of justice, comparing the weight of the heart to the weight of a feather. If the heart was heavier than the feather, the soul was damned. Thus, Anubis was the ultimate god of judgment.

In this last role, he is not unlike Hercule Poirot, who every day must determine who is guilty and who is innocent, who will live and who will die, and how they will be judged for eternity."

— Anubis, Lord of the Underworld

Source: pixabay.com/photos/

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What makes a good mystery?

2

What can we learn about responsibility and accountability from the play?

3

How might personal motivations blur the line between right and wrong?

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience.

To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- **Arrive early.**
- **Visit the restroom before the show starts.**
- **Sit in the seat indicated on your ticket.**
- **Ushers are there to help you!**
- **Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms, and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.**
- **Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games, pictures, or recording.**
- **Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry, and gasp. However, don't distract the performers onstage.**
- **There is no food allowed in the theater.**
- **Intermission is the best time to discuss the show and visit the restroom.**
- **If you must leave during the show, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.**
- **Be sure to applaud at the end! During a musical, audiences sometimes clap after a song or dance. If you love the show or a performer, you can give a standing ovation. The actors bow to thank you.**

CREDITS

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Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.

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Armando Durán (Hercule Poirot) and Jamil A.C. Mangan (Colonel Race) for *Death on the Nile*. Photo by Tony Powell.

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