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Using *And then there were none* to teach crime

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Abstract

Agatha Christie's *And then there were none* highlights many important issues for crime and justice students. The novel is a strong conduit for discussion on topics including how definitions of crime change over time and the role that morality plays in that evolution. In addition, issues of justice can also be addressed via the popular story. Christie's intriguing, twisted, and engaging novel offers several arenas for discussion and elaboration outside of the traditional textbook.

Introduction

Everyone, including educators, knows that crime is popular. Media represents crime on a regular basis. Popular television shows like *CSI* or *Criminal Minds* are frequently cited by students in my classes as their favorite exposure to issues of crime and justice. However, these media exposures do not have the expectation to educate. Most crime and deviance courses like mine have to overcome the assumptions and incorrect information students have accumulated from the media and other sources. But this does not mean that popular forms of entertainment cannot aid in the education process. Fortunately, for issues of crime and justice, there are numerous options available including one of the most popular fiction genres — the mystery. The core of which is crime, detection, and elements of justice. My own enjoyment of mystery novels sparked the idea that it could be useful in the classroom.

My initial thought was that a popular culture item like the mystery novel could engage students more than a lecture. Then the idea developed into choosing a book that would have the broadest accessibility and provide context for the course material. If chosen correctly, the novel could speak to the criminal justice system but also to the complex nature of crime. When asked to explain crime, I found students relying on what they had seen on television without understanding the fact that criminal justice is a social science issue affecting society and in turn affected by society.

This made me think that there needed to be a way to show students how crime has developed and changed over the years. I had been doing so via the common lecture format, but it seemed that a mystery novel could have the same impact and perhaps do so in a manner that was more thought provoking in the class. With so many choices, it appeared imposing to find one text to use in a course on crime and justice. But my choice was not occurring in a vacuum. Agatha Christie is

renowned for her “popularity in volume and over time” and has been said to have “the greatest success in satisfying her readership” (Singer, 1984: 159) as well as being in the Guinness Book of World Records for being the best-selling novelist of all time (Martell, 2015). Other disciplines already utilize the texts of Christie to help their students fully understand complex issues including those in psychology (Kellogg, 1983), media studies (Fedorov, 2011), chemistry (Yamasaki and Furuhashi, n.d.) and English (Martell, 2015). Adding Christie to the curriculum in crime and justice studies seemed most appropriate.

Agatha Christie was very prodigious during her lengthy career and narrowing down the text to use seemed arduous. However, there is one book that stands out as Christie’s “most famous novel, her greatest technical achievement and the best-selling crime novel of all time” (Curran, 2009: 111). Christie’s *And then there were none* has sold in excess of one hundred million copies since its publication in 1939 (Martell, 2015). This success ranks the novel as the top-selling mystery book in the world (Hack, 2009). Any discussion of the novel risks revealing the solution and characteristic Christie twist. However, some explanation of the novel is necessary to understand its contribution to teaching crime and justice.

And then there were none is at its heart a simple story: “Ten strangers are invited to a weekend on an island off the coast of Devon. Their host fails to appear and a series of deaths among their fellow-guests make them realize that one of them is a killer following the macabre nursery rhyme that hangs in each bedroom” (Curran, 2009: 110). Each guest dies in a manner related to the appropriate verse from the nursery rhyme (Osborne, 1982). In the end a murderer is revealed and a plot so clever that critics hailed it as “one of the very best, most genuinely bewildering Christies yet written” (Osborne, 1982: 171).

Crime and justice

There are of course myriad ways to teach issues of crime and justice, but there are some themes that appear to be common. These themes often are designed to address the misconceptions of crime and justice that students receive from various sources. *And then there were none* is particularly well-suited to address some of these themes. An introduction to crime often begins by discussing the definition of crime as opposed to deviance. Additional elements include the fact that definitions of crime change over time and are subject to cultural differences.

In addition, the fact that seven decades separate the current generation from Agatha Christie allows for analysis of changing morals and its effect on criminal justice. Evolving morality has had an impact on crime and justice for centuries. *And then there were none* includes material for discussion on how morality has changed over the years and the associated expectations on crime.

Definitions of crime

Defining crime is not easy nor is it obvious. To quote another Christie—Nils Christie—“crime does not exist. Only acts exist, acts often given different meanings within various social frameworks” (Christie, 2004: 3). The complexity of defining crime involves changing morality and cultural differences as well as the fact that crime is not static. Crime is dynamic in that it changes and evolves over time (Henry & Lanier, 1998). Today’s criminal activity is tomorrow’s deviance or prank. In using *And then there were none* my goal was to provide students with a concrete resource depicting the changes in crime over time.

Upon beginning the novel, it may appear that all crimes mentioned are serious violations of law. Each guest “has—or so it seems—committed a murder in the past” (Thompson, 2015): Dr. Armstrong “cause[d] the death of Louisa Mary Clees”; Emily Brent is “responsible for the death of Beatrice Taylor”; William Blore “brought about the death of James Landor”; Vera Claythorne “killed Cyril Hamilton”; Philip Lombard is “guilty of the death of twenty-one men”; General Macarthur “deliberately sent [his] wife’s lover to his death”; Anthony Marston is “guilty of the murder of John and Lucy Combes”; Thomas and Ethel Rogers “brought about the death of Jennifer Brady”; and Judge Wargrave is “guilty of the murder of Edward Seton” (Christie, [1939] 1991: 30-31).

Though these appear to be simple accusations of murder, the truth hides much more complex definitions of the crime of homicide. As the novel proceeds, further details emerge about each guest’s brush with death. Judge Wargrave is first to admit to being involved in homicide: the death of Edward Seton. Wargrave informs the party that Seton had been charged with murder, tried, found guilty, and executed. Wargrave was the presiding judge on the case in charge of making the final dispensation of justice. As Wargrave himself says, “I did my duty and nothing more” (Christie, [1939] 1991: 43). Even though later revelations make one wonder whether Wargrave steered the jury toward a guilty verdict, none of his actions would be illegal.

Vera Claythorne also readily admits to being involved in the death of Cyril Hamilton. Claythorne served as a governess to Hamilton and one day while she was distracted he ran into the ocean and drowned. Later doubts emerge over whether Claythorne allowed Cyril to drown with hopes of engaging his father, though it is never confirmed whether this is true or mere speculation. Either way Vera had been cleared by a coroner’s inquest and would not face criminal penalty for her actions.

General Macarthur is revealed to have sent one of his soldiers on a reconnaissance mission where he died. Initially Macarthur denies that he did so on purpose but later he confesses that he did send him to die because the man had had an affair with Macarthur’s wife (Christie, [1939] 1991: 86). While Macarthur admits to sending his wife’s lover to his death, there is little reason to believe that he could be prosecuted for such behavior during war when death was not certain, though hoped for. The same may be said of Philip Lombard who reveals that he abandoned a group of natives in the jungle to die in order to save himself. While perhaps not morally appropriate Lombard is correct when he summarizes his deed, “self-preservation’s a man’s first duty” (Christie, [1939] 1991: 45). This would unlikely result in any criminal charges for Lombard as no man is responsible for saving others.

Anthony Marston rather carelessly reveals that he ran over two children killing them. For this his license was taken for one year which Marston describes as a “bestly nuisance” (Christie, [1939] 1991: 45). This is an example of a crime that would be as true today as in Christie’s time—one of the few actual crimes to carry over. Mr. and Mrs. Rogers are accused of bringing about the death of their employer. The Rogers’s admit that they were unable to secure a doctor for their employer and she ultimately died in their presence. With no further evidence, the success of claiming they brought about her death is tenuous. While allowing her to die may have secured for them some money, it is not clear that there is intent to have done so.

It is revealed that William Blore was a police officer who gave false testimony to convict a defendant who then dies in prison. This revelation of perjury would be criminal today though not considered as serious a crime as murder. Dr. Armstrong, it is discovered, operated on a patient while drunk bringing about her death. This behavior would probably be actionable as criminal but would be easy to hide. Finally, Emily Brent represents Victorian society by her deed. Brent reveals that her service girl became pregnant, whereupon Brent throws her out of the house, and the girl commits suicide. Brent denies any culpability when confronted, "I had nothing with which to reproach myself" (Christie, [1939] 1991: 74).

Discussion of these offenses quickly reveals that the majority of them carry no legal penalty today. This of course does not mean that the actions are not deviant. Many students find that they are in agreement with the disembodied voice who accuses the guests of the aberrant behavior. These discussions reveal the difficulty in defining crime versus deviance. Of the ten guests, only four have committed an offense that would be illegal in today's world. Discussing how Christie portrays these crimes versus how they are seen by the criminal justice system today allows for comparison across time. Even in Christie's time most of these actions would not be criminal, though the moral opprobrium may have been greater. When the issue of morality is raised, especially by Macarthur's deed, discussion transitions to the role of morals in the criminal justice system and how that role has changed.

Morality

The role that morality plays in crime is complex. While in many ways the law reflects the morality of the society, it is not the morality of everyone. It is the morality of "the people who count, and who speak out, in the community" (Freidman, 1993: 125). And the moral sense of the community is not a constant, it changes over the years with rising and falling desires (Friedman, 1993). The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw laws based on strict morals as important to maintaining social order (Friedman, 2005).

The morals of today's society are different from those of Agatha Christie's world. Though interestingly the offenses that she portrayed in her novel tend to carry some moral disdain even seventy years later. My discussion with students reveals that many students dislike what these characters are alleged to have done which speaks to the constant moral judgment over many decades. But it also allows for discussion of the role morality should play in making actions illegal. While students may find the behavior repugnant, never have my students advocated making it illegal. This clear line between morality and criminality is important for students to understand.

The character Emily Brent is very useful for discussions of morality. Brent is accused of bringing about the death of her servant girl, which she admits to in a sense. Brent kicks her servant out of the house when she discovers that the girl is unmarried and pregnant. Brent describes the girl as "loose [] with no morals" and "disgusting!" (Christie, [1939] 1991: 73). Vera Claythorne, many years Brent's junior, represents the post-Victorian moral code. Vera is shocked by what she hears and tells Brent that her hardness drove the girl to kill herself.

Brent, unrepentant, responds that “her own sin — that was what drove her to it. If she had behaved like a decent modest young woman none of this would have happened” (Christie, [1939] 1991: 74). Vera Claythorne, a young woman probably around the same age as the servant girl, is aghast at Brent’s attitude and begins to see her in a different light. Few students tend to sympathize with Ms. Brent and her beliefs. But many can understand the offense taken by Claythorne. Either way the discussion about Ms. Brent and her beliefs tends to engage students in comprehending the changing role of morality. Some relate Ms. Brent to their grandparents and how they can see differences between their own personal beliefs and those of their grandparents. Ms. Brent becomes the grandmotherly character whose beliefs are somewhat dated but understandable because of her generation.

In a similar vein General Macarthur presents his own moral puzzle. Macarthur too feels no responsibility for the death of his wife’s lover. He recognizes that “I suppose, in a way, it was murder” (Christie, [1939] 1991: 86). Though this does not last long when he continues that “I had no regrets. ‘Serves him damned well right!’—that’s what I thought” (Christie, [1939] 1991: 86). For having an affair with Macarthur’s wife, the man was to pay with his life. This interaction has led to discussion of the crime of adultery and how it used to be illegal but is no longer criminal, though frowned upon highlighting the difference between crime and deviance. This does not mean that there are not strong feelings about whether or not the lover deserved to die for his betrayal.

Again few students condone what Macarthur did, but they have been able to understand the motivation. Some students even engage in justification for Macarthur’s actions because it was not a certainty that the lover would die on the mission. This then allows for a discussion of criminal intent; Macarthur clearly wanted the lover to die, but his actions were likely only done with knowledge that death was a near certainty, but not absolute. This fine distinction between levels of intent is well-expressed by Macarthur’s actions which can be coupled with his desires and thoughts at the time of the offense.

Conclusion

Faculty are always looking for new ways to engage students with course material. For students being exposed to crime and deviance in an academic setting, as opposed to on television and movies, they may be surprised at how much they don’t know. A simple, straight-forward, yet engaging, activity with crime at its center has served to awaken students to the complex nature of criminal justice as a social science.

And then there were none walks students through several key aspects of crime and deviance including what is criminal. Theoretical discussions may not be as clear as concrete examples and ten dead bodies on Soldier Island. In terms of morality, Christie forces the reader to go beyond ‘good guy, bad guy’ thinking and develop an understanding of how morals do effect crime in a broader context. While many times faculty are desperately trying to get students away from false representations of crime and justice in the media, we should not fear popular culture when it can be of assistance.

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