

SLEUTH STUDY NOTES:

SLEUTH

by Anthony Shaffer

I. THE PLAYWRIGHT

"Anthony Shaffer was born in Liverpool, England. . . . He is the twin brother of dramatist Peter Shaffer, author of . . . Equus (1973), and Amadeus (1979). . . . When the family settled in London in 1942, after frequent moves about the country, Anthony entered St. Paul's school. From 1944 to 1947 he served a period of conscription as a coal miner in Kent and Yorkshire. Following that obligation, he entered Trinity College, Cambridge where he was editor of the literary magazine, Granta. Shaffer believes that a man should be able to change his life about every five years, and he pursued in turn, after graduation from Trinity in 1950, careers as a barrister, a journalist, an advertising man, and a television producer. During the 1950s, he wrote three mystery novels with his brother, Peter. . . . The novels use many of the conventions Shaffer purports to parody in Sleuth. The detectives are amateurs and dilettantes more intelligent than the diligent but plodding police. . . . [One of the novels] contains a staged murder, as in Sleuth. . . and all the novels contain references to the theater. . . .

"In 1963, apparently at the urging of his brother, Anthony wrote his first play, The Savage Parade, which deals with the secret trial in Israel of Rudolph Bauer, a former SS officer and mass murderer of Jews. Almost as in a mystery tale, suspicion falls successively on three men until Bauer is unmasked despite his new identity and his earlier attempts to avoid capture. Although the play received a brief but favorable review in the London Times, it closed after only one Sunday evening performance.

"That single-night run was thoroughly compensated for by Sleuth's London run of 2,359 performances and its 1,222 performances on Broadway. Sleuth won the Antoinette Perry Award as best play of 1971. T.E. Kalem, in his Time review, declared that if Sleuth 'is not the best play of its genre ever, it is neck and neck with the best.' Shaffer subsequently wrote the screenplay for the successful 1973 film version directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz and featuring Laurence Olivier and Michael Caine."

---from The Dictionary of Literary Biography 13

II. THE SETTING

The play is set in "Andrew Wyke's Norman Manor House in Wiltshire, England. It is stone flagged, and a tall window runs the height of the back wall. It is divided laterally by a minstrels gallery which, in turn, is approached

by a winding staircase." Scattered about the room are various toys and games from the past and present: chess sets, draughts, card games, and such early pastimes as Senat and Nine Men Morris. "Sitting by the window . . . is a life-sized figure of a Laughing Sailor." The latter object moves and emits the sound of recorded laughter at the push of a button.

This setting vividly reflects the personality of its owner, Andrew Wyke, an immensely successful British mystery writer. It resembles the innumerable spooky old houses that provide the background for English murder mysteries by authors from Conan Doyle to P.D. James, a tradition Wyke himself practices in his own books. Thus, he inhabits what is virtually a scene from a novel, an environment that belongs more to the imaginary world of fiction than to everyday, ordinary reality.

Not only does the house reflect Wyke's obsession with the inventions and deceptions of fiction, it also echos his fascination with games and game-playing. These two concerns obviously are related, since writing a mystery novel is essentially a matter of constructing an intricately crafted plot which obeys the rules of its literary genre; it is like playing a game with the reader.

III. THE PLOT

"Andrew Wyke, an aging mystery writer who has created the famous detective St. John Lord Merridew, lures his wife's lover, Milo Trindle to his . . . house. . . . Although Andrew's only crimes so far have been imaginary, 'in the mind's eye, so to speak,' he now convinces Milo to dress in a clown's outfit and stage a robbery of his wife's jewels. He will help Milo fence the jewels and pocket the insurance himself, and both will be well served: Milo will gain the money he needs to carry off the affair and Andrew will be certain his wife will not return to him disenchanted with Milo. As Milo completes the 'theft,' Andrew announces the idea was all a charade to kill his wife's detested, lower-class lover and make his death 'the centre piece of an arranged bit of fun.' Pistol to the pleading Milo's forehead, Andrew fires point blank.

"With the opening of act 2, Inspector Doppler accuses Andrew of Killing Milo, who has not been seen for several days. Andrew explains that the supposed murder was all a game intended to humiliate Milo. The bullet had been a blank, and the humiliated but unharmed Milo had left safely that evening. If so, asks Doppler, why is there human blood on the stairway, Milo's suit in the closet, and a fresh mound of earth in the garden? Andrew's game has backfired, Doppler asserts; the bullet had been real, the circumstantial evidence irrefutable, and Andrew must contemplate a seven years' manslaughter sentence 'to regret silly games that go wrong.' As Andrew

pleads his innocence just as Milo had begged for his life, Milo strips away the mask of Inspector Doppler and boasts of having planted the incriminating evidence. The score is even now and Andrew would quit the game, but Milo refuses, declaring that after facing his own death, he can 'stand outside' and see himself 'for the first time without responsibility.' Milo now tells Andrew that he has committed a real murder. He has killed Andrew's mistress, Tea, called the police, and planted three pieces of evidence incriminating Andrew, which he must find before the police arrive in just ten minutes. While Andrew, playing now for his life, searches for and finds the clues, Milo reveals that he had learned from Tea of Andrew's impotence and taunts him with his 'dead world' of 'coldness and class hatred, and two-dimensional characters who are not expected to communicate.' Now, though Milo calls this just another game, Andrew cannot let him leave to mock him in the neighborhood. When Milo attempts to go, Andrew fires real bullets into him just as the police arrive."
----From The Dictionary of Literary Biography 13

A conspicuous feature of this plot is the extraordinarily strong role played in the action by the device of "reversal." According to Aristotle, complex plots require two elements, discovery and reversal. A discovery occurs when one character learns some utterly unexpected piece of information about another character. This discovery then produces a reversal, a change in the situation to the opposite of what it was a moment before. In *Sleuth* there are four such reversals: one at the end of Act I, and three in the course of Act II.

IV. CHARACTERS

Andrew Wyke is a man who is more at home in the world of games and imagination than he is with real events and real people. He is unloved by both his wife and mistress, but he nonetheless exerts all of his ingenuity to keep the former under his control, while he boasts about the latter's infatuation with his sexual prowess. Human relationships are not what is important to him; rather he seeks the satisfaction that comes with exerting power over others, with manipulating and controlling their lives. He deals with people as if they were pieces in a game of chess--objects to be moved about the board for his amusement.

His cruel game in Act I with Milo is a clear example of this trait. He wants to punish Milo for having an affair with his wife not out of wounded love, but because, as he says, "She's mine whether I love her or not. I found her, I've kept her." Like a man playing chess, Milo wants to keep the pieces he has captured; otherwise, there is no point to the game.

However, his gamesmanship is also what keeps him--at least until the end of the play--from crossing the line between imaginary and real crimes. He has

no desire to be trapped by the messy and unregulated impulses and problems of actual life. Rather, he prefers to live within a world governed by rules that he knows and controls--the world of his novels, and the world of his stunted emotional life. As he explains to Milo, "a game of intrigue and revelation mean more to me than people--even the ones I'm supposed to be in love with."

Milo Tindle has a markedly different relationship with the world. Unlike Wyke, a rich and powerful Englishman, Milo is an outsider, the son of a half-Jewish Italian immigrant who failed in business and returned to his native country. Milo has thus experienced more of the rough and tumble of life, its hardships, disappointments, and occasional joys. He genuinely loves Wyke's wife, Marguerite, and wants to make a life with her.

Perhaps the clearest insight into Milo's character is provided in the venomous assessment Wyke makes of his rival: "I hate your smarmy, good-looking Latin face and your easy manner. I'll bet you're easy in a ski lodge, and easy on a yacht, and easy on a beach. . . . I hate you because you are . . . a wop--a not-one-of-me." What Wyke recoils at is Milo's comfort with himself and with the world outside the Norman mansion, the ordinary world of lodges, boats, and beaches. Milo's relaxed enjoyment of everyday life, as much as his ethnic difference, is what makes him most emphatically a not-Wyke.

Andrew and Milo are thus polar opposites--a frequent situation in dramatic pairs. They complement one another, just like Hamlet and Horatio, or Laurel and Hardy, or Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton.

On the other hand, some critics have seen in their relationship a reflection of the psychology of twins, an interpretation influenced by our knowledge of the relation between Anthony Shaffer and his more famous playwright twin-brother, Peter. In this view, Andrew is driven by an ineradicable need for Milo, a need for someone who is his equal-- his twin--in gamesmanship. Thus, in the second act, after Milo has had his revenge, Andrew tries to explain the reason behind his original deception: "I wanted to get to know you--to see if you were, as I suspected, my sort of person," by which he means "a games-playing person." When Milo asks if he is, Andrew's reply is prompt and definite: "Most certainly. There's no doubt about it." By Act 2, then, Andrew has revoked his earlier judgment about Milo's insurmountable difference from him, and has begun viewing him as his brother in intrigue.

V. THEMES

This is a play that examines the line between imagination and reality. In Act I, Milo is certain he is facing death when Andrew pulls the trigger of the gun, but the whole situation turns out to be a clever scenario contrived by Andrew. The seemingly--and terrifyingly--real is converted in an instant into a "scene," a kind of grisly practical joke. The same is true in Act II, when Milo twice convinces Andrew that he is about to be arrested for murder. A terrifying threat is transformed into a mere game.

Andrew is certain until the end of the play that he is the master of this world of games and illusions, convinced that he need never be dragged into the uncontrollable circumstances of reality. However, reality cannot forever be kept at bay. Andrew's passions--his anger, humiliation, loathing--get the better of him in the end, and he crosses the line into actuality by shooting Milo with genuine bullets. Real feelings for once have real consequences in the life of this man who has tried to orchestrate his life as a novelist writes a book. With the killing of Milo, Andrew loses control over the script of his life; or rather his life crosses over from a kind of bloodless fiction into grim reality.

VI. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Where do the major reversal occur, and what does the prevalence of this device suggest about the play's view of life?
2. What is Andrew's major reason for wanting to punish Milo?
3. How does Milo's experience at Andrew's hands change him?
4. Are Milo and Andrew similar in any ways? If so, what are they?
5. In what ways are Andrew and Milo most dissimilar?
6. Why does Milo express such contempt for Andrew's detective-story universe?
7. Why does Andrew's girlfriend cooperate with Milo in the second deception in Act II?
8. Why does Andrew use real bullets at the end?
9. Write a newspaper article about Andrew's murder of Milo.

10. Create your own plot for a play in the whodunwhat genre. Write an outline and describe the characters.
11. The play mentions several characters without physically introducing them. What do you think Marguerite is like? Tea? Write a detailed description of each woman.
12. Research the psychological ramifications of obsessive game playing and present your findings in a report.
13. The critic Francis Gillen wrote in Dictionary of Literary Biography that Sleuth contains many important themes of modern drama: "language as instrument of power, the thin line between illusion and reality, fascination with the idea of death as a release from ordinary human restraint, voyeurism as a substitute for genuine feeling, freedom and its illusions." Respond to this statement.
14. How does Andrew use game playing to give him a feeling of omnipotence? How does this reflect the true state of his mind?
15. Why do you think Milo so readily goes along with the theft plan?
16. Is there a moral to this thriller? If so what is it?
17. Who is the murderer? Who is a victim? In fact, who is dead?
18. "SLEUTH" was written in the 70s how does it reflect Britain at the time?
19. Name some famous crime writers that Andrew Wyke is supposed to be like?
20. Is "Sleuth" a parody? If so what of?