Name: Date:

“Why Agatha Christie's And Then There Were None is a Masterpiece”

By Laura Thompson

**Directions:** First, read the open response prompt on the back of this sheet. Then, actively read the following article by highlighting or underlining quotes that will back up the prompt and write ‘Q I’ next to the first one and ‘Q II’ next to the second one. After actively reading, construct a thesis on the graphic organizer and copy your highlighted or underlined quotes below it.

*With a star-studded new adaptation of this 1939 chiller coming to BBC One, Agatha Christie biographer Laura Thompson applauds the novelist’s pitch-black, brilliantly told meditation on guilt.*

*And Then There Were None*, published in 1939, the best-selling and surely the best-known detective novel ever written, is this year’s centerpiece at the BBC Christmas feast. A three-part series, cast to the gleaming hilt, begins on Boxing Day and the preview clips are promising. At last, perhaps, Agatha Christie's expressionist masterpiece will get the dramatic treatment that it deserves.

For it has suffered grievously in the past. Does anybody else recall late-night viewings of the 1974 film version in which Charles Aznavour, cast as the “young god” Anthony Marston, sits at a piano and maniacally warbles the lyrics of the nursery rhyme from which the book takes its title and plot? The first film, by René Clair in 1945, was better, although Christie herself did not think much of it. Nevertheless it was Clair’s adaptation, coupled with Christie’s own dramatization that ended up on Broadway, which lit the touch paper that would engulf her career and ensure that, in the fifties, a successful writer would be reborn as a phenomenon. As with Christie herself, the power of *And Then There Were None* does not diminish. I first read it aged 12, and was frankly terrified by this tale of 10 people being systematically murdered on an island off a Devon coast. It is all in the telling, in the much-maligned Christie style. Always minimalist, here she is almost viciously spare, with a stark, iterative quality that is at one with the subject. The book has the mocking power of an unsentimental fairy tale, together with a formidable detachment worthy of Muriel Spark’s *The Driver’s Seat*. It is not great “literature”, but it is pretty much perfection.

Yet Raymond Chandler – who emphatically did not agree – complained that *And Then There Were None* was a failure, because most of the murders could not happen in real life. You don’t say. His remarks were a riff on the all-too familiar criticism of Christie that she wrote mere “animated algebra”. *And Then There Were None* is, indeed, formulaic in the highest degree, almost like a machine ticking remorselessly towards the endgame. It is also quite unlike any other Christie [novel]. Nowhere else does she achieve that same schematic distillation, which is of course entirely deliberate and which most readers find hypnotic. But, as with all her best books, there is much more to it than plot. And Then There Were None is also a meditation on guilt, and a very brilliant one. When Chandler referred to the outlandish murders in the book, he neglected to mention that there are others besides those that take place on the island. Each of the 10 characters has – or so it seems – committed a murder in the past. Unnervingly, the crimes are all of a kind that the reader can imagine really happening. One, left conveniently to the hands of fate, I can just about imagine committing. The worst one of all is done for love. Facts slide out through the characters’ inner thoughts, through snatches of dialogue (“so you did kill that kid after all?”), and it is in this deep, dark relationship with the inescapable past that the heart of the book lies.

Christie, a happy-natured woman, was never afraid to confront the face of evil. She saw it everywhere: in pillars of the community, in the professions (doctors especially), in families, in children. She did not cast the respectable classes as murderers merely because it had shock value. She believed, quite simply, that a lot of people would do all sorts of dreadful things if they thought they could get away with it. Although her books were artistic constructs, they were underpinned by a knowledge, realistic to the point of cynicism, of base human nature. She had acquired this the hard way. In 1926, Christie’s first husband declared his passion for another woman and precipitated her calamitous 11-day “disappearance”. He also came close to being arrested for her murder. She may have wondered if the idea had ever, in fact, occurred to him. Her mantra was that murder was easy. The problem was that “afterwards you went on remembering”. On the island in *And Then There Were None*, where the Biblical texts remembered from childhood—“be sure thy sins will find thee out”—roll and crash at the characters’ consciences like the waves against the cliffs, they are forced by pure terror to confront their guilt. However, entertaining the book, it is also bleak, unyielding stuff. Not that this mood proceeded directly from Christie’s own life, which by 1938—the year she wrote *And Then There Were None*—had struggled back to cheerful equilibrium. In 1930 she married Max Mallowan, an archaeologist 16 years her junior. She embarked upon a dual existence, as wife on the digs that she helped to subsidize, and as “Agatha Christie”. She made money and reached her creative peak. Unquestionably, life was good in the Thirties: “free of outside shadows”, as she put it in her autobiography. Inwardly, however, she never fully recovered from 1926. She dedicated the book to two sisters, Charlotte (her former secretary) and Mary Fisher, who were among the few people who she felt had remained loyal during the very public aftermath of the disappearance. Like the characters on her island, Christie was always held by the darkness of the past. And her best works always carry the faint imprint of her complex emotions, as well as her clever brain. On the face of it, no book could be more impersonal than *And Then There Were None*, yet it is driven by a kind of grand urgency, engaging intensely with the character who kills for love, sketching in terse quick scenes the desperate struggle between guilt and retribution. Quite soon, of course, these questions would go beyond the merely personal. During the war that was then on its way, a group of POWs would stage the book at Buchenwald. It was, their leader later wrote to Christie, a reminder that justice did exist, however fierce in its form.

**Open Response Prompt:** After reading the article by Laura Thompson, discuss the ways Agatha Christie’s murder mystery *And Then There Were None* is her greatest work as outlined by the author.

**Graphic Organizer** (30)

**Thesis:**

**Quote I:**

**Quote II:**