

The story of the investigation

Stoppard employs a dual narrative structure in *The Real Inspector Hound* and undermines the convention in crime fiction that a detective with a superior intellect investigates the murder.

Detective paradigm

In *The Real Inspector Hound*, the dominant role that a detective plays in an investigation is subverted and the conventions of the Golden Age 'whodunit' are parodied, as are theatre critics and the role of the audience as witnesses to a theatrical performance.

Stoppard attempts 'a sort of comic coup in pure mechanistic terms' in this play. He cleverly creates complications using on-stage and off-stage plot devices. Originally, Stoppard wrote a goon-show version of a whodunit without a structure, which involved just two people engaging with the performance. In *The Real Inspector Hound*, Stoppard establishes an absurd world, but eventually manages to resolve the absurdity in an intelligible way.

Stoppard's Sherlock Holmes may be seen as a comic construction. At the same time, the character draws the audience's attention to their participation in the performance by showing them their reflection in a mirror, which may serve to highlight their passivity.

The play within the play

The off-stage and on-stage narrative structure employed by Stoppard overturns assumptions about the status of the detective as being central to an investigation. At first, the focus of the audience is not on the investigation, but the real identity of two outsiders – Simon, the free-spirited lover, and

Magnus, a distant relative who is confined to a wheelchair. By creating a play within a play, Stoppard is able to blur the lines between art, and its critics and audience.

The off-stage action centres around a conversation between two theatre reviewers, Moon and Birdboot, oddball characters who are later drawn into the play they have come to review. The audience is privy to their tragi-comic fate. To further complicate the off-stage situation, the reviewers constantly refer to Higgs, a missing third reviewer. There is the suggestion that the corpse in the play that they are watching may be Higgs.

Moon's and Birdboot's pretentious speech is riddled with the jargon of dramatic criticism. Their style of speech ridicules both the critic and the audience. Stoppard may be seen to parody theatre critics by exposing their illusions and casting doubt on the validity of their criticism. The audience is challenged to evaluate their uncritical acceptance of the conventions of the crime fiction genre, and the genre's assumptions which had become stale as a result of changing cultural and historical circumstances. Moon and Birdboot draw attention to the way in which audiences can slip into the habit of being passive receivers, watching a play for its entertainment value alone.

Stoppard shows how the personal opinions of theatre critics influence their understanding of a performance. In his article 'Ambushes for the Audience' Stoppard claimed that he was not intentionally attacking theatre critics, but wanted to imagine what personal problems and private fantasies they may have. His experience as a journalist in regular contact with critics made them an easy target. Moon and Birdboot with their anxieties and petty pretensions, as well as the game of mirrors, highlight how much the ego dominates people's thoughts and actions. At the theatre, Moon and Birdboot literally lose themselves in the play, escape their frustrations and realise their fantasies. The critics' desire for the death of someone who makes them green with envy is paralleled in the play that they witness.

Stoppard uses the outer-play structure – the critics – to undermine the world of the inner-play that the critics are watching and which employs many of the conventions of a detective story. Through the dialogues of the critics, Stoppard exposes the shallowness of the detective story and