Chapter III

Parody: Retreating Reality in The Real Inspector Hound

Like pastiche, parody also involves a frame of reference within which previous precursor texts are located. It implies a re-making of an existing work with deliberate emphasis on its subversion. However, in its most simplistic form, parody means merely a repetition of speech - written or oral - using different intonations with an intention of ridiculing the original. The term “parody” originated in the Greek word “paroidia” literally meaning “a song sung alongside another,” meaning a criticism or mockery which imitated the style and manner of a writer or his work to highlight his/its defects or exaggerations. According to Simon Dentith, “parody in writing, like parody in speech, is part of the everyday processes by which one utterance alludes to or takes its distance from another” (6). It is then a form of allusion wherein the stance is that of intertextuality, as in parody the text has to draw upon some previous text. At the same time, it involves an appreciation of the original text without which even ridicule is not possible. Parody, therefore, demands recognition of the original, only then can its absurdities be exposed whether it is a genre or a text in question. However, this “ridicule” is substantially different from the mockery which burlesque implies. Parody and burlesque are closely related but burlesque is more trivial and coarser than parody.

Both pastiche and parody have seen a revival in the modern and post-modern ages of literature. Now considered a high modernist form, parody re-works texts to modify and adapt them to suit the writer’s requirements, bringing to the fore, the fluidity of all texts. In many cases, the parodist will make a conscious effort to update the context of the original work in order to contemporize it. Parody can be of different types: general, where the whole idea behind a text or the entire genre itself is parodied, specific, where one single text is the object of subversion. This chapter projects The Real Inspector Hound as a text which parodies generally not only the crime thriller genre, specifically, the whodunit, but also Agatha Christie’s The Mousetrap specifically. Through parodic
transformation, Stoppard mounts the hypertext i.e. The Real Inspector Hound on the hypotext i.e. The Mousetrap. Stoppard has used parody not only as a tool of criticism to comment on the thriller mechanism but also to look backward to the tradition of theatrical parody. In Stoppard’s case, parody, therefore, invites “the reader to examine, evaluate and re-situate the hypotextual material (Dentith 16). In the modern context, parody almost always leads to a repudiation of the established and “dominant cultural forms of the nineteenth century under the impact of modernity” (Dentith 153). In this case, Stoppard chooses to parody the whodunit and makes it his object of subversion. The reason why Stoppard chooses this particular genre to experiment with and to consequently subvert lies in the “extremely predictable rules of construction and expectations of setting, of characters, of character relationships, of dialogue, and so on…” (Carlson 432).

The basic principle lying beneath a whodunit is that it consists of two stories. The first story is that of the crime which is committed either before the play or novel begins or just after the beginning and the second story describes the investigation into the crime revealing all truth at the end. It is imperative that the first story ends before the second begins. Stoppard does conform to this particular norm but the problem is that no one notices that the crime, rather the fact that any crime, has been committed at all. Absurd as the situation is, the dramatist makes sure that the characters avoid detecting the crime at all costs, as will be discussed later in this chapter. The whodunit, thus, is a very “happening” genre. The event which sets things in motion happens in the first part and the reason for this particular incident is delineated in the second part. Therefore, “the narrator cannot transmit directly the conversations of the characters who are implicated, nor describe their actions: to do so, he must necessarily employ the intermediary of another (or the same) character who will report, in the second story, the words heard or the actions observed” (Todorov 161). Commenting on this symmetry in a whodunit, Todorov further says, “The whodunit thus tends toward a purely geometric architecture” (160). This is partially applicable to The Real Inspector Hound, as it is divided in two symmetrical Acts. However, Stoppard takes this norm too literally and even goes to the extent of repeating, rather pasting, dialogue from the first Act to the second. The
Mousetrap conforms to all these rules, The Real Inspector Hound transgresses all. In this light Todorov offers an interesting generalization, “The whodunit par excellence is not the one which transgresses the rules of the genre, but the one which conforms to them...” (159). However, this play is not only a parody of the whodunit, it is also a parody of the type of reviews such plays fetch from critics.

In the previous chapter, I focused on the people about whom texts are not written - attendant lords in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and the writer himself in Shakespeare in Love. Here, Stoppard goes a step further and shifts the spotlight to the critics in the audience whose primary task is to comment and not to take part, while maintaining a critical distance. Originally written as The Stand-Ins in 1960-61 and revised later to its present version, The Real Inspector Hound contains the meta-theatrical devices of play-within-the-play and role-playing-within-the-role to highlight the self-reflexive mechanism of the play. While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead employed a Shakespearean outer text, here, both inner and outer texts are Stoppard's own creations which give him sufficient opportunity to inter-link them all the more closely. In an interview, Stoppard explains that The Real Inspector Hound is based on his years as a newspaper critic: “I went around for years actually reviewing the kind of play I’m parodying” (Hodgson 50) and it seems that Stoppard is having fun at the expense of his former journalistic colleagues by parodying their jargon. The biographical perspective of the text comes from the fact that Stoppard had left school at the age of seventeen to work for the Western Daily Press “as a reporter, feature writer, humorous columnist, and reviewer of plays and films” (Kelly, Craft 9). He worked with the Western Daily Press for four years from 1954-57, before accepting an offer from the Bristol Evening World in 1958, “to write a soccer column, features and film reviews (Ibid 10). These years as a reviewer gave him a hands-on experience of the practical side of stagecraft as he learnt the ups and downs of the business. From 1962-63, Stoppard wrote reviews and essays for Scene, an arts magazine. It is around this time that his writing acquired a certain degree of seriousness and intensity while showing his impatience at inferior attempts and at times attacking a certain section of the theatrical scene which did not pay attention to the art of stagecraft. This is why, probably, his reviews during this period reveal his strong
admiration for certain productions of Shakespeare, Brecht, Ibsen and Beckett, while being sharply critical of others.

First performed on June 17, 1968 at the Criterion Theatre in London, The Real Inspector Hound is a specific parody of The Mousetrap, a murder story by Agatha Christie and a general spoof of all such country-house whodunits and clichéd theatre reviewing. In this play, Stoppard uses and abuses the conventions of the genre through his parody of the most famous of all stage whodunits ever. Stoppard has himself directed The Real Inspector Hound for a National Theatre production in 1985. It was revived first in 1992 on Broadway together with The 15-minute Hamlet and later in London in 1998. Though Christie was primarily a fiction writer yet this play also belongs to the same genre of thrillers, which comprise the major body of her writing, in which a murder takes place and the detective goes around searching for clues, motive, opportunity and the murderer. This body of writing is popularly called the “whodunit” type of thriller. Christie takes the title of her play from the-play-within-the-play in Hamlet where Hamlet refers to it as a device to catch the conscience of the king. Stoppard’s network of allusions comes full circle here. He picks such a play (The Mousetrap) which has the title of Shakespeare’s play-within-the-play, from Hamlet to parody. Thus, Stoppard goes back to Shakespeare, like the two texts studied in the last chapter, but this time through Agatha Christie. The Mousetrap (1952) set a world record for the longest continuous run at a single theatre - the Ambassadors Theatre in London. It ran for more than 21 years with 8862 performances before moving to another theatre.

The Real Inspector Hound, like the title of its pre-text is a contrivance. Stoppard acknowledges, “The Real Inspector Hound...is a sort of mechanical toy; it actually is a play that is built to go: “Brrm, chink, clonk, klump.” And it does so. And I like it for that” (qtd. in Hodgson 54). Before proceeding to analyse The Real Inspector Hound, a glance at its hypotext is essential for understanding the parody at work here. When The Mousetrap started its glorious run, the mystery play popularly known as the whodunit, was at the pinnacle of its popularity on the London stage, closely followed by its kin “the courtroom drama.” However, these genres have undergone drastic transformation in their
forms to stay “in tune with postmodern generic playfulness” (Carlson 431). According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” and that parody is the “perfect postmodern form” (qtd. in Carlson 432). Stoppard, on similar lines, uses the whodunit to subvert its notions as well as the complacency of its characters. The Real Inspector Hound, thus, anticipated this change in its playfulness of form and content. As a genre, the detective story attracted subversion because of the predictability of its form. Its construction, characters, settings, dialogue, solutions – all are conventional to the point of stubborn fixity. The roots of the survival of these particular genres lie in their popular appeal, and not in their literary value. The detective story, thus, takes its place as one of the most popular genres of the modern ages of literary history. Katherine E. Kelly extends Stoppard’s playfulness with limited forms to the entire spectrum of modern theatre, “(I)t does reveal his early determination to master and outdo the theatrical forms he had inherited from both the popular and serious theatre of the 1950s” (Journalist 382).

Both The Real Inspector Hound as well as The Mousetrap have eight characters each. Stoppard’s play takes place in Muldoon Manor while the action of The Mousetrap takes place in the hall of Monkswell Manor, a period piece in shambles because of the dwindling resources of the present generation of occupants. In Christie’s play, Giles and Mollie Ralston, the present owners, decide to convert the Manor into a sort of Motel to provide for the upkeep of the house and also to tide over a financial crisis. They have some guests over and one of them, a Mrs. Boyle, is murdered as the house remains cut-off from the outside world because of heavy snow. There is a policeman, Detective Sergeant Trotter who arrives without anyone having sent for him. Significantly, the murder is committed after the policeman has arrived on the scene. To complicate the situation further, there is a killer on the loose in the vicinity of Monkswell Manor, after having murdered someone in London. He leaves behind a notebook containing the address of Monkswell Manor and “the police” have reason to believe that he will now head for the Manor. Monkswell Manor becomes Muldoon Manor in Stoppard’s play and the snow is replaced by “deadly fog” and “treacherous marshes.” Similarly, in The Real Inspector Hound the madman “on his escape” makes “a beeline for Muldoon Manor”
because according to Hound “he bears a deep-seated grudge against someone” there. So, the situations in both plays are remarkably similar and are based on the same premises. Stoppard mocks the standard formula of the murder mystery, displacing certain clichéd and stereotyped notions of the genre. There is, however, a major difference. In The Mousetrap, the murder takes place well into the play; but, in Stoppard’s play, “the corpse” is already on the stage. In fact, the play begins with only the body lying sprawled in the middle of the stage, the characters enter later. Conveniently placed corpses continue to figure in Stoppard’s writing. In his 1972 play, Jumpers, a corpse always appears in the bedroom as soon as George, the main lead, vacates it and is always conveniently out of view when he re-enters. There is also a supposed corpse in After Magritte, a play which has been discussed later in the context of The Real Inspector Hound.

Stoppard’s play derives its complexity not from the whodunit plot but from its inter-linking with the outer play of which the two theatre reviewers are the only characters. Moon and Birdboot are two critics who are reviewing the inner play or the play-within-the-play. Stoppard is strongly repetitive in his choice of names and does not like to crowd the nomenclature of his plays. Kelly gives an interesting insight into the choice of these particular names, “The Moon type often represents the cerebral half of Stoppard’s persona while the Boot type represents the sensual half” (Craft 83). He gave the same name to his other early innocent characters as well. According to Stoppard, “Moon is a person to whom things happen” and also that he is “a Moon himself” (Hunter, Tom Stoppard 18). Moon figures repeatedly in his works, for instance, in his first and only attempt at fiction writing, Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon (1966), Another Moon called Earth (1967) and “M” is for Moon Among Other Things (1964). Boot is derived from the hero of Evelyn Waugh’s novel, Scoop, and it was also Stoppard’s pseudonym when he wrote for Scene. The butler in Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon is also called Birdboot.

Stoppard opens The Real Inspector Hound with quite elaborate stage directions, this time he uses mirrors – “The first thing is that the audience appear to be confronted
by their own reflection in a huge mirror.” This reflection of the whole audience is “progressively faded out as the play goes on” (9) until only the two seats occupied by Moon and Birdboot, remain visible. The opening frame shows us that only the corpse is visible on the stage. Stoppard starts with the middle of the crime thriller; normally the crime is committed as the plot has sufficiently progressed. Here, the body is there for all to see, yet no one sees it. This hiatus right in the beginning irritates Birdboot, “You can’t start with a pause!” (11).

Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and Shakespeare in Love, the dramatic action and the text will operate on two levels: the first and the more obvious level is the parody of the whodunit murder mystery while the second and the more understated level is the relationship of the theatre critics, Moon and Birdboot, who stand for all critics. The levels of action too will alternate between these two situations - the conversation of the two critics and the action of the play that they are watching. Further, it deals with the frustrations and tensions of various levels of critics: main, stand-in and third string. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, they also get caught up irrevocably in the action of the play that they are watching and are destroyed in the end. Despite Stoppard’s parodic intentions and the play’s parodic implications, it ends in tragedy for the critics. They were supposed to maintain a critical distance and keep performance and observation separate. But, they loose control over themselves and get swept away in the movement of the plot. Therefore, the play explores the link between the action and the audience as we move along the text. Gradually, the distinction between the two gets so blurred that the spectators and the actors exchange roles. We retreat farther and farther away from reality as we watch the outer play in which Moon and Birdboot are watching the inner play in which they finally take the place of the actors, who, in turn occupy their seats. Stoppard says, “I originally conceived a play…with simply two members of an audience getting involved in the-play-within-the-play” (Ambushes 8). Moon and Birdboot enter Muldoon Manor just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern might have come to Elsinore, this implies that the former pair is a derivative of the latter and Ros and Guil may be treated as their precursors. However, there are both comic as well as serious concerns in The Real Inspector Hound. It seems that entertainment at the cost of a spoof
on Christie’s play is not the only purpose that Stoppard has in mind. He is also making a statement about the issues of multiple identities and illusions as the plot gets complicated because of Moon stepping into the spotlight by picking up the phone ringing onstage. Little does Moon realize that he is risking his life as he walks on to the stage.

The clumsy exposition of the play-within, too, is a straight take-off on the Christie mechanism. In The Mousetrap, the police issue a statement on the radio conveying their anxiety “to interview a man seen in the vicinity, wearing a dark overcoat, light scarf, and a soft felt hat” (288), and who is probably one of the suspects. Minutes later, Giles Ralston arrives home attired in similar clothing. In The Real Inspector Hound, the agent of exposition is Mrs. Drudge, the cleaning lady who ‘supplies information and atmosphere at inordinate and ridiculous length (Hodgson 54). Highlighting the predictability in the structures of modern detective stories Stoppard plays on the name of the domestic help and “the wife”. Birdboot’s wife is called “Myrtle” and she is his “beloved” and “homely but good-natured wife” who according to her husband “understands perfectly well” that his philandering ways are a part of the showbiz which provides him his livelihood. As the appropriately named Mrs. Drudge switches on the radio, we hear a perfectly timed ‘special police message” very conveniently right from the beginning. This message sets the tone for the almost farcical tone which will follow in the rest of the play:

RADIO (without preamble, having been switched on by MRS. DRUDGE): We interrupt our programme for a special police message.

(MRS. DRUDGE stops to listen.)
The search still goes on for the escaped madman who is on the run in Essex.

MRS. DRUDGE (fear and dismay): Essex!

RADIO: County police led by Inspector Hound have received a report that the man has been seen in the desolate marshes around Muldoon Manor.

(Fearful gasp form MRS. DRUDGE.)
The man is wearing...advised to phone the nearest police station.

(A man answering this description has appeared behind MRS. DRUDGE...) (13)
Three elements are revealed here - first, the exaggerated “fearful gasp” of Mrs. Drudge as she hears that the escaped madman is probably in the vicinity of Muldoon Manor. Secondly, the description of this madman fits exactly the profile of the man who now appears onstage behind Mrs. Drudge. And lastly, though “the body” is sprawled in the middle of the stage for everyone to see, yet Mrs. Drudge “does not see the body. Quite fortuitously, her view of the body is always blocked, and when it isn’t she has her back to it” (13). Stoppard makes his purpose elaborately clear through his stage directions; that the whole play is going to mock the formula which constructs these “who-killed-thing” crime thrillers. After this rather “dramatic” opening, Stoppard’s play slips back into the conversation of Moon and Birdboot, who comprise the first level audience. The watching reviewers underscore Stoppard’s purpose as they try to classify the type of play they are about to see:

BIRDOOT: ...I mean it’s a sort of a thriller, isn’t it?
MOON: Is it?
BIRDOOT: That’s what I heard. Who killed thing? - no one will leave the house.
MOON: I suppose so. Underneath.
BIRDOOT: Underneath?!? It’s a whodunit, man! - Look at it!
(They look at it. The room. The BODY. Silence.)
Has it started yet?
MOON: Yes.
(Pause. They look at it.)
BIRDOOT: Are you sure?
MOON: It’s a pause.
BIRDOOT: You can’t start with a pause!...Where’s Higgs tonight, then?
MOON: It will follow me to the grave and become my epitaph - Here lies Moon the second string: where’s Higgs?... (11)

Through this exchange, Stoppard makes it clear right in the beginning that the two critics are in a no-comfort zone. They “acknowledge each other” but only “with constrained waves” (9). Stoppard also super-imposes the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as also
Vladimir and Estragon type of banter on their conversations, which reveal their continuing pre-occupations throughout the play. The former is concerned about his position in the critical world vis-à-vis Higgs, the first string critic for whom he is standing in, and how he longs for an elevation in his status, while the latter is full of himself and his amorous thoughts bordering on the sexual as he is an old hand at liaisons with actresses in return for putting in a good word about them in his reviews. Birdboot hardly pays any attention to what Moon is saying, instead he is more engrossed in the female leads of the play:

BIRDOOT: Where’s Higgs?
MOON: I’m standing in.
MOON AND BIRDOOT: Where’s Higgs?
MOON: Every time.
BIRDOOT: What?
MOON: It is as if we only existed one at a time, combining to achieve continuity. I keep space warm for Higgs. My presence defines his absence, his absence confirms my presence, his presence precludes mine…When Higgs and I walk down this aisle together to claim our common seat, the oceans will fall into the sky and the trees will hang with fishes.

BIRDOOT (he has not been paying attention, looking around vaguely, now catches up): Where’s Higgs? (10)

Evidently, they will always converse at tangents. While Birdboot will mostly comment on the play-within, Moon will constantly harp on his stand-in status. At times, it seems that Stoppard is reporting verbatim the words he might have exchanged with his fellow critics, as he went around reviewing plays in his initial years. Moon writes for an important national daily while Birdboot writes for a popular newspaper. Moon even prefers exotic varieties of chocolates while Birdboot settles for the normal ones. The former comes across as a simple yet ambitious person while the latter is a sensualist, vain, pompous and of an intimidating nature. He carries with him not only “a few colour transparencies” of his review which has been displayed outside a theatre but also “a battery powered viewer” for his colleagues to read them in the dim light of a theatre.

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Moon appreciates the “electric” appliance and cribs, “All I ever got was “Unforgettable” on the posters” (15). However, till now Moon is apparently not plagued by any violent thoughts for Higgs, the first-string reviewer as he does not want “to wax at another’s wane” (19), in other words, he would find it difficult to step into Higgs’s shoes if the latter were to die unnaturally.

After the exposition of the outer play, Stoppard uses Mrs. Drudge to expound the situation at the beginning of the play-within in The Real Inspector Hound. In fact, Mrs. Drudge emerges as the “chorus” of the whodunit genre by reading out the prologue and also overhearing plenty of “very significant” remarks regarding various characters (who are little more than caricatures of stock thriller types), threatening to “kill” each other as we shall see later. In the first half of the play, the phone in the drawing room of Muldoon Manor rings again and again and each time the caller asks for someone who is not known to the receiver. Later, when Moon picks up the phone, we realize that the person wanted is in fact, Birdboot, and the caller is none other than his wife, Myrtle. As the phone rings for the first time, Mrs. Drudge picks it up giving us nothing less than a telescopic version of the narrative details to follow:

MRS. DRUDGE (into phone): Hello, the drawing-room of Lady Muldoon’s country residence one morning in early spring?...Hello! - the draw - Who? Who did you wish to speak to? I’m afraid there is no one of that name here, this is all very mysterious and I’m sure it is leading up to something, I hope nothing is amiss for we, that is Lady Muldoon and her houseguests, are here cut off from the world, including Magnus, the wheelchair-ridden half-brother of her ladyship’s husband Lord Albert Muldoon who ten years ago went out for a walk on the cliffs and was never seen again - and all alone, for they had no children. (15)

This expansive piece of information given by Mrs. Drudge over the phone to an unknown person continues the rather shabby way of exposition which Stoppard mocked initially. She speaks as if she is reading out some stage directions which explain the time, season, place, the presence of houseguests, the isolation due to conditions of weather and topography, the missing master of the house, the strange half-brother and the absence of...
any children on the scene. Hence, Mrs. Drudge provides the ambience necessary for murder stories by divulging this information with abundant generosity. Establishing the same, “Stoppard repeatedly sets up the standard classical thriller situations with the deliberate intention of knocking them down” (Crossley 78). The dramatist also uses Mrs. Drudge to come chorus-like to inform us about the end of a scene or an act. She speaks into the phone, “The same, half an hour later?...” (28). It is through Mrs. Drudge that Stoppard reminds us time and again about the fact that the Manor and its residents are “somewhat isolated” and “high water” cuts them off “for all practical purposes from the outside world,” while “treacherous swamps” surround “this strangely inaccessible house”:

MRS. DRUDGE: Yes, many visitors have remarked on the topographical quirk in the local strata whereby there are no roads leading from the Manor, though there are ways of getting to it, weather allowing.

... MRS. DRUDGE: The fog is very treacherous around here - it rolls off the sea without warning, shrouding the cliffs in a deadly mantle of blind man’s buff. (16)

She likes ranting off this remark whenever she gets the opportunity:

MRS. DRUDGE: Should I close the windows, my lady? The fog is beginning to roll off the sea like a deadly - (23)

Stoppard continues to mock the clichéd notions of such thrillers when he establishes their quirks. Major Magnus’s identity, which is questionable, is always described in quite a detail. Stoppard’s purpose is to establish him as the probable killer having the aura of a stranger and the resultant effect, thereby foregrounding the preliminaries of a murder plot. Therefore, Mrs. Drudge always gives a very comprehensive account of Major Magnus, “the crippled half-brother of Lord Muldoon who turned up out of the blue from Canada just the other day, (who) completes the house party” (17). The character of Major Magnus corresponds to the Major Metcalf of The Mousetrap who turns out to be the real policeman in Christie’s play. Towards the end of Stoppard’s play too, Major Magnus tries to push Moon into the role of the killer while
assuming the role of the policeman himself. Continuing with his exposure of the clichés
of murder mysteries, Stoppard’s characters always turn on the radio when the “special
police message” is being broadcast and the message is always heard in its entirety and no
part is ever missing:

(A strange impulse makes SIMON turn on the radio.)
RADIO: Here is another police message… (18)

Felicity turns on the radio and the situation is no different as she also hears a well-timed
message:

RADIO: We interrupt our programme for a special police message… (29)

In this text of dramatic imbroglio, three types of “drama” run into each other.
First, the play-within-the-play that all are witnessing, second, the relationship of the
critics present (Moon and Birdboot) and absent (Higgs and Puckeridge), the offstage
lecherous ways of Birdboot in his short-lived relationships with actresses and third, the
play that Stoppard’s audience is watching. In order to link these three themes, Stoppard
himself provides a hint. Stoppard says that this play might be a case of “wish-
fulfillment.” The implication is that the play-within-the-play serves to project the desires
or wishes of the critics who are watching the first show of a new play. Moon seems to be
only concerned with getting Higgs out of the way, be it at any cost, while Birdboot’s
heart’s desire is to seduce Cynthia. That is why their dialogue, rather monologue consists
entirely of these thoughts in which they are “completely preoccupied”:

BIRDBOOT: Do you believe in love at first sight?
MOON: It’s not that I think I’m a better critic -
BIRDBOOT: I feel my whole life changing -
MOON: I am but it’s not that.
BIRDBOOT: Oh, the world will laugh at me, I know….
MOON: It is not that they are much in the way of shoes to step into….

... MOON: Sometimes I dream that I’ve killed him.
BIRDBOOT: What?
MOON: What?

(They pull themselves together.) (26-27)

When both of them enter the inner play, these wishes are fulfilled. Moon is astounded when he sees Higgs’s body on the stage, while Birdboot relishes the prospect of possessing “Cynthia.” Here, Stoppard thwarts another norm of detective stories. Love has no place in the classical whodunit, but it does figure in the scheme of things in a thriller, where love is usually vile and amoral. In this sense, The Real Inspector Hound shares some degree of commonality with both the thriller and the whodunit. However, keeping in view their critical duties, both of them “have a “public” voice which they turn on for sustained pronouncements of opinion”:

MOON:... Already in the opening stages we note the classic impact of... (19)

BIRDBOOT: The answer lies out there in the swamps. (19)

MOON: The son she never had... (23)

In a side-swipe at critics, Stoppard also comments about the power that critics wield. Birdboot tells Moon that “a word” from them “could make” one of the actresses because they would be “spotting her first time out” (12). As critics, however, there is a difference in their views. While Birdboot is only bothered about the identity of the killer (regardless of the fact that they do not even know who has been killed), Moon’s criticism is “heavy.” In strongly meta-theatrical terms, he feels “bound to ask - does this play know where it is going?” Further, he wants to know “what in fact is this play concerned with?” (28). This self-reflexivity could be extended to Stoppard’s play as well. Till this point, the “real” audience does not know what type of play they are watching. Stoppard anticipates the type of reviews his play will generate and in a phraseological parody, Moon invokes the name of Voltaire, questions the existence of God, uses foreign phrases and rattles off the names of plenty of literary figures to add weight to his rather wordy and verbose critique:

MOON: Faced as we are with such ubiquitous obliquity, it is hard, it is hard indeed, and therefore I will not attempt, to refrain from invoking the names of Kafka, Sartre, Shakespeare, St. Paul, Beckett, Birkett, Pinero, Pirandello, Dante and Dorothy L. Sayers. (36)
In a glaring omission, the one name missing from this rather weighty list is that of Agatha Christie. None of the names mentioned here has anything to do with the specific genre of the whodunit which Stoppard is parodying and his sole purpose is to underscore the rhetorics of literary criticism by showing us how critics try to identify “sources” and “influences.” And certainly, the “Birkett” mentioned here is indeed a Stoppardian joke, he expects us to go looking for someone of this name in literary history. The name is similar to Beckett and that is the only purpose Stoppard had in mind as he threw this red herring in our way. The two parodies, namely, of the thriller genre and of apparently scholarly reviews now run parallel to each other, only to entangle hopelessly in the next act. Hence, Stoppard’s play confounds the audience, unlike the whodunit in which the audience comprehends the sequence of events.

The red herring of the play-within is Simon Gascoyne. He has cheated Felicity and is supposedly now in love with Lady Muldoon, Cynthia. The first reported conversation of Felicity and Simon ends with Felicity saying, “I’ll kill you for this…” (21). As expected, she is overheard by Mrs. Drudge, who also overhears the following remark from Simon to Cynthia, “I’ll kill anyone who comes between us!” (23). Magnus too stakes his claim on Cynthia, “It’s Gascoyne, isn’t it? I’ll kill him if he comes between us!” (24). There is even a gun on the scene. After this threat, Magnus leaves to “oil” his gun. In this love quadrangle, Cynthia too is willing to kill:

CYNTHIA: If I find that you have been untrue to me - if I find that you have falsely seduced me from my dear husband Albert - I will kill you Simon Gascoyne!

(MRS. DRUDGE has entered silently to witness this. On this tableau, pregnant with significance, the act ends, the body still undiscovered. Perfunctory applause.) (26)

At the end of this act, the body on the stage lies “undiscovered” despite the presence of eight characters. “Significantly,” all the people in the Manor want to kill Simon as he is conveniently set up as the next victim. And quite predictably, he is the one shot dead next. This is only one of the stock situations which Stoppard has assembled here, apart
from various stock characters and devices which he uses in brilliantly original ways. However, the trip-up lies in the corpse originally on the stage. With so much talk of killing and guns going around, we fail to see how they fail to see that a murder has already been committed, even before the play began. It is at times like these that the parody verges on satire. Stoppard also mocks “clumsily-written realist plays” by showcasing their “tedium of eating and drinking” (Hunter, Plays 40) as Mrs. Drudge occupies almost a full page offering coffee, black or white, sugar, then biscuits to Cynthia, Felicity and Magnus by turns, provoking Birdboot to note that “The second act, however, fails to fulfill the promise....” (29). With satirical sophistication, Stoppard also makes fun of the notion of romantic love. Cynthia “loves” Albert, who has been missing for ten years. She tells Simon that she’ll “never give up hope” whereas, she is already having an affair with him. She says all this only to keep up appearances. She also reminds Magnus to “remember Albert” and even rebuffs Hound who never had such intentions in the first place:

    HOUND: Please Lady Cynthia, we are all in this together. I must ask you to put yourself completely in my hands.
    CYNTIAH: Don’t, Inspector. I love Albert.
    HOUND: I don’t think you quite grasp my meaning. (32)

As the first act ends, a device that must be highlighted is the overlapping that takes place at the transition from the play-within to the outer play which contains the comments of the critics who form the audience-within. For instance, as Simon is left “undecided” on the stage by Mrs. Drudge, the dialogue of the two levels runs into each other:

    MOON (ruminating quietly): I think I must be waiting for Higgs to die.
    BIRDBOOT: What?
    MOON: Half afraid that I will vanish when he does.
    (The phone rings. SIMON picks it up.)
    SIMON: Hello?
    MOON: I wonder if it’s the same for Puckeridge?
    BIRDBOOT AND SIMON (together): Who?
The effect achieved is that of a fluidity which does seem contrived at times. After Magritte, Stoppard’s 1970 play, also presents a strange tableau complete with a supposed corpse in the beginning. Presenting a bizarre spectacle, the play is a pseudo-surreal thriller. Stoppard devotes almost three pages to stage directions to convey his point – “Most of the furniture is stacked up against the street door in a sort of barricade...MOTHER is lying on her back on the ironing board...A white bath towel covers her from ankle to chin...Her head and part of her face are concealed in a tight-fitting black rubber bathing cap. A black bowler hat reposes on her stomach. She could be dead; but is not” (10). The Harris couple too is depicted in strange postures – “THELMA HARRIS is dressed in a full-length ballgown and her hair is expensively "up" but she is “discovered on her hands and knees” obviously looking for something (9). While, REGINALD HARRIS is standing on the wooden chair, “his torso is bare” but he is wearing “fishing waders” with “black evening dress trousers” (9). Police Constable Holmes watches this scene through the window. He calls his superior, Inspector Foot, who deduces from his inspection of the spectacle, that, the couple “performed without anesthetic an illegal operation on a bald nigger minstrel about five-foot-two or Pakistani and that is only the beginning!” (31). The point Stoppard underscores is that any presentation of a situation i.e. a signifier is bound to have numerous signified interpretations and Foot provides just one of them. He interprets facts in the light of his own wisdom. But, the reality is that the mother has a back problem which requires massages and that is why she is lying on a straightened back on the ironing board. Thelma is looking for a misplaced needle to mend her dress and Harris is changing a bulb in rubber waders to avoid electrocution just before going out for the evening. In this play, Stoppard has carried forward his mockery of dramatic conventions. The policemen’s rationality leads them to deduce fantastic conclusions as Stoppard suggests that Inspector
Foot and Constable Holmes are the descendants of not only Hound but also of Holmes and Watson. They play the game of detection only to reach a travesty of a denouement, in opposition to the archetypal detective who according to Crossley is:

"(t)he epitome of the problem solver par excellence who brings order and reassurance because he brings answers. These plays (After Magritte and The Real Inspector Hound) are a mock celebration of such a character, of all who believe in him, and of the concept of drama which defines itself in terms of the enactment of a riddle and its answer. (86)"

It seems that all policemen in Stoppard’s plays are fated to have allusive names. In After Magritte, the two policemen are called “Foot” and “Holmes.” In The Mousetrap, the policeman is Sergeant “Trotter” and he appears on skis to maneuver through the snow. In Stoppard’s play, Inspector Hound arrives on pontoons, “inflatable-and inflated” rubber contrivances “with flat bottoms about two feet across” to negotiate the marshes which surround Muldoon Manor and he carries a foghorn for his assistance in the fog. In both cases, the policemen come without anyone having sent for them. Inspector Hound’s arrival is accompanied by “a mournful baying hooting” like “the cry of a gigantic hound,” hence the name:

MRS. DRUDGE: Inspector Hound!
CYNTHIA: A police dog? (30)

Stoppard does not hesitate from making fun of the name of the policeman. When Inspector Hound sees the corpse he asks them, “Is there anything you have forgotten to tell me?” (33) and he wants to call the police. But, Cynthia reminds him that he is “the police” and at the same time, this also reminds us about the ambiguity manifest in the title of the play; Hound’s identity will always be in question since the play is about the real Inspector Hound. Assuredly, the character who would walk in announcing himself as Hound would not be the real Inspector Hound. When Stoppard inserts a hopeless story about the madman’s past, nobody pays attention to the fact that Hound is in fact reporting verbatim the conversation of the madman with “the real McCoy” who was responsible for his mad state in the first place:
HOUND: William Herbert McCoy who as a young man, meeting the madman in the street and being solicited for sixpence for a cup of tea...the madman...never forgot that moment, and thenceforth carried in his heart the promise of revenge! (33)

Stopnard’s purpose of general as well as specific parody is well fulfilled when he mocks the solutions of all such stories. Mocking the neat, compartmentalized solutions of whodunits, Hound insists that the dead body on the stage belongs to Cynthia’s husband. He almost forces the notion on her because this would solve all complications while providing an identity to the nameless corpse:

CYNTHIA: But who’s that? *(The corpse.)*

HOUND: Your husband.

CYNTHIA: No, it’s not.

HOUND: Yes, it is.

CYNTHIA: I tell you it’s not.

HOUND: *I’m in charge of this case!* (33)

Inspector Hound foreshadows the logical deductions which his successors, Foot and Holmes will arrive at. His adamant assertion regarding the identity of the body reminds us of *After Magritte’s* ending. Hound is Stoppard’s instrument for his mockery, when he sums up the situation just before the curtain falls, signaling the end of the first act, “Yes! One of us ordinary mortals thrown together by fate and cut off by the elements, is the murderer! He must be found - search the house!” (34). This is nothing short of a mockery of melodrama at the cost of a parody of the murder thriller. Very conveniently, Simon enters as everyone leaves, providing sufficient opportunity for any of them to murder him. Stoppard does even try to narrow down the scope of the identity of the murderer, he removes all the characters from the stage - “*There is a shot. SIMON falls dead*” (34). Now, they have two bodies to reckon with, one known, the other, unknown.

At this juncture, Moon and Birdboot again take over and reflect on the incidents in the play-within. While Moon finds the thought of murder and killing quite fascinating,
Birdboot is enthralled by Cynthia. Moon looks for ways for “getting away with murder” and realizes that if he “could” kill, then “so could” Puckeridge, his stand-in. Birdboot envisages a possible encounter with Cynthia at “a rather nice hotel, very discreet.” As the play progresses, they become increasingly involved with the happenings onstage and they move towards making the plunge into the story of the play-within-the-play by anticipating a fulfillment of their own wishes through this move. However, both of them find their bearings once again and proceed to review the play in question. According to Birdboot, the author “has created a real situation” and he expects “a startling denouement” pointing out that “it has a beginning, a middle” and “no doubt it will prove to have an end.” He also commends Cynthia’s performance and considers it to be “one of the summits in the range of contemporary theatre” (35). In comparison to these rather mundane and stereotypical remarks, Moon looks for symbols in this supposedly placid “country-house week-end.” He insists that the author has given them “the human condition” and even summons the name of Van Gogh to certify his claim (35-36), though the relevance of the latter to the former is by and large incomprehensible.

It is at this point that the inner play merges with the outer play. As the telephone rings again, Moon is unable to stay in his seat and walks down to pick it up, making the transition from drama to real life within the confines of Stoppard’s play. It is supposed, that, Stoppard borrows this incident from “the anecdote about the American critic Robert Benchley, who is said to have responded to a similar moment by getting up saying “That’s for me” and leaving the theatre” (Hunter, Plays 224). Birdboot’s caller is his wife, Myrtle. As Birdboot goes onstage to receive his call, we retreat a step away from reality and the play-within starts all over again. This time Birdboot takes over Simon’s role. As Felicity sees Birdboot/Simon she repeats verbatim her dialogue from the first act. However, this conversation takes on a “real” connotation because we are aware of the fact that the previous evening Birdboot was with her i.e. the woman who is enacting the role of “Felicity.” As Birdboot is now entranced by Cynthia, he tries to explain the situation to Felicity, who threatens to kill him. Expectedly, Mrs. Drudge overhears this “last remark.” Birdboot, who is unable to grasp “the reality” is “wide-eyed” (37-38).
Moon tries to restore the normal order of things by calling him back but Birdboot cannot resist the idea of meeting Cynthia who is “in quite a tizzy” according to Mrs. Drudge:

MOON (from his seat): Birdboot! - (a tense whisper). Birdboot!
(BIRDBOOT looks round vaguely.)
What the hell are you doing?
BIRDBOOT: Nothing.
MOON: Stop making an ass of yourself. Come back. (38)

Moon is still in his seat but they are now caught in the action and will be swept in the course of the same events which had occurred in the previous act. Stoppard could have moved the plot forward by developing the storyline further but instead he depicts a repetition of the events and makes his audience his new dramatis personae. The lines which were spoken earlier now acquire a new context because they project the desires of the critic-actors. Birdboot is rewarded by a passionate embrace from Cynthia while Mrs. Drudge and Major Magnus enter as before. Moon tries to knock some sense into Birdboot’s head, “For God’s sake sit down!” (40). But, he has already taken Simon’s place at the card table and is eventually left alone on the stage. He talks to Moon across the threshold of the stage:

MOON: For God’s sake pull yourself together.
BIRDBOOT: I can’t help it.
MOON: What do you think you are doing? You’re turning it into a complete farce!
BIRDBOOT: I know, I know… (43)

The playwright pauses to reflect on the pseudo-thriller type of play that he has written, deliberating that it has now become a farce. What Stoppard has achieved in effect through his experiments, here, is the creation of an almost new genre. He started off with the tried and tested murder mystery, albeit with a difference in the presence of the unrecognized and apparently invisible dead body on the stage right in the beginning. Towards the latter half, all the events take place again with different characters in the tradition of Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. Stoppard complicates things further leading to
an almost absurd crescendo. As Birdboot comes to the body on the stage, he makes the startling discovery that it is Higgs. Moon is "bewildered" and has a tough time convincing Birdboot that he did not act on his heart’s desire of eliminating Higgs. In an anti-climactic move, just as Birdboot is about to unravel the mystery for us, "There is a shot and BIRDBOOT falls dead." Moon is unable to control himself, considering the circumstances and rushes to Birdboot. Cynthia enters almost immediately and by a Stoppardian twist she takes Moon to be Inspector Hound. Moon makes an effort to go back but stops in his tracks:

(MOON turns to face her. He stands up and makes swiftly for his seat. Before he gets there he is stopped by the sound of voices.)

(SIMON and HOUND are occupying the critics’ seats.)

(MOON freezes.) (44)

To ensure that this transition from life to art is irreversible, Simon and Hound are now Birdboot and Moon respectively. They too have their crack at the principles of literary criticism. But, now both are unanimous in their criticism and tear the ridiculous play to shreds. Simon says that “this ragbag” is not his “cup of tea” while Hound says that “it lacks pace” and it is a “shower of filth and sexual allusion foisted on to an unsuspecting public in the guise of modernity at all costs” (44). Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are surrounded by the players in a “menacing circle” at the end, here, Moon finds himself accosted by Felicity, Magnus and Mrs. Drudge who surround him in a ‘semi-circle.” They think that the man killed is Simon but Moon knows better and is “in grief” for Birdboot. Taking on himself the role of the stereotypical policeman, he tries to arrange a re-construction of the crime using the standard ingredients of the plots of murder mysteries. He asks “everyone to go to the positions they occupied when the shot was fired” and tells them that “no one will leave the house” (45). In The Mousetrap too, Sergeant Trotter asks all the people present in Monkswell Manor “to go through” their supposed activities at the time of the crime in order to provide “a reconstruction of the movements of apparently innocent persons” (358). Mrs. Drudge gives her statement to the purpose that she had heard the following: “a remark made by the deceased Simon Gascoyne” (45), Cynthia’s remark “to the deceased” (46) as well as “a remark made by
Miss Cunningham” (46). Moon’s unraveling of all the incidents does not sound plausible to his audience, Felicity says that “it doesn’t make sense” (47). Then “Magnus” takes over and exerts pressure on Moon in the fashion of a sustained interrogation by the police.

Evidently, the second half of the play is almost a pastiche of the first half. Birdboot parrots Simon’s dialogue to give vent on the stage to his lechery, which we had heard of offstage. Stoppard has deliberately used repetitive dramatic situations here and elsewhere to convey the improbability inherent in this particular genre. The dialogue is clichéd and rhetorical like the genre which Stoppard subverts. If the play is a parody of murder stories and critics, then on another level it is also about “the real Inspector Hound.” As the title suggests, a certain degree of role uncertainty will permeate the whole play. The Inspector who was the first to arrive on the scene is certainly not real because he occupies the critics’ seats now. And Moon too is not a policeman by any stretch. Then, the question arises who is “the real Inspector Hound.” In a startling denouement, the wheel-chair ridden Magnus reveals himself as the undercover policeman and as Puckeridge too, Moon’s stand-in, while forcing the madman’s identity on Moon:

MAGNUS: I put it to you! - are you the real Inspector Hound?!
MOON: You know damn well I’m not! What’s it all about?
MAGNUS: I thought as much.
MOON: I only dreamed…sometimes I dreamed -
CYNTHIA: So it was you!
MRS. DRUDGE: The madman!
FELICITY: The killer!
CYNTHIA: Oh, it’s horrible, horrible.
MRS. DRUDGE: The stranger in our midst.
MAGNUS: Yes, we had a shrewd suspicion he would turn up here - and he walked into the trap!
MOON: What trap?
MAGNUS: I am not the real Magnus Muldoon! - It was a mere subterfuge! - and (standing up and removing his moustaches) I now reveal myself as -
CYNTHIA: You mean - ?

MAGNUS: Yes! - I am the real Inspector Hound!

MOON (pause): Puckeridge! (47-48)

This rapid verbal to and fro sheds some light on the remarkable goings-on, which finally put to rest all speculations about the identity of the madman. How Puckeridge became Major Magnus Muldoon and where is the actor originally slated to play this role is a matter of conjecture. The use of the word “trap” with deliberate emphasis is certainly not a coincidence. It refers to the traps of both Shakespeare as well as Christie. Moon, the critic, is now trapped in the identity of the madman who committed the first murder. He is doomed because in the scheme of The Mousetrap the supposed Inspector who turns out to be the real killer is doomed. Birdboot, before him, is doomed because his theatrical fore-runner, Simon is doomed. So, their fates could not be any different indeed. But, it is equally possible that Moon murdered Higgs before the start of this play-within-the-play, then hid his body onstage before occupying his seat in the critics’ stand. The actors do not notice the body because they are not supposed to notice it. However, when they do see it, they set up a trap, “the mousetrap,” to catch the conscience of Moon. This is why, the plot of the inner play does not move forward after the first act, instead it re-loops to the beginning destroying the reality of the outer play.

Through a dramatic ambush which ties up another loose dramatic end, Magnus, the crippled half-brother alias Hound, the police inspector alias Puckeridge, the third string reviewer, now reveals that he has been “leading a double life - at least!” (48). He is also the missing Lord Albert Muldoon, the missing husband, “who lost his memory and joined the force, rising by merit to the rank of Inspector, his past blotted out - until fate cast him back into the home he left behind” (48). According to standard notions of the whodunit, the culprit must not be the detective himself. However, Trotter, the supposed detective in The Mousetrap, and Hound, the supposed detective in The Real Inspector Hound are the criminals. Here, Stoppard also sticks to Christie’s final trick of the “Major” and the most likely suspect being the policeman. But, while Christie’s detective did his job of revelation of the truth, Stoppard’s detective does not do so, “Unlike
Metcalf, however, Magnus does not fulfill the detective’s traditional actantial role of providing clarity and closure to his narrative, but introduces a new level of complexity and intrigue” (Carlson 435). There is a trick-within-the-trick in the denouement as is evident from the following representation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Mousetrap</th>
<th>The Real Inspector Hound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Supposed Detective</td>
<td>Trotter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Suspect/Real Detective</td>
<td>Metcalf</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first trick refers to the revealing of the prime suspect, Magnus, as the real Inspector Hound. The trick within, however, is the revealing of Magnus as Puckeridge as well. In reality, Puckeridge is no more the policeman than Moon was. While Moon was the alleged murderer, Puckeridge is the real murderer, not the real Inspector Hound. In fact, there is no real Inspector Hound, this name is only a mask behind which the characters of the outer play hide to serve their own interests. In the search for this reality, we retreat further from it. Thus, Puckeridge gets not only “the girl” but also the position of the first rate critic. Identities here are not dual rather quadruple. Such is the improbability of these “who-killed-things” Stoppard seems to say as we realize that an astounding trick has been played on us. Regarding the unraveling, Stoppard says:

I’m very fond of the play because I didn’t know how to do it. I just got into it, and I knew that I wanted it somehow to resolve itself in a breathtakingly neat, complex but utterly comprehensible way… (Ambushes 8)

There is no sense of narrative closure in Stoppard’s play at the end, like traditional detective stories which end with the restoration of order after chaos which was the result of the unnatural act of murder. Stoppard has challenged the rational order of things in this play. Crime stories, especially murder stories, are supposed to be the
epitomes of rationality. The detective uncovers a series of logically related events, one by one to establish the motive for the crime. Everything appears rational and calculated once the solution is reached. But, in *The Real Inspector Hound*, Stoppard’s Muldoon Manor is the house of irrationality. Events duplicate themselves, there is no passage of time, “Everything is as it was. It is, let us say, the same moment of time” (37). Lovers and apparent policemen become critics, third string critic murders first and second strings in a military style coup. The situation is all the more complicated at the end than it was at the beginning. Perhaps, Stoppard also intended to parody not only the crime thriller but also the world of critics as an institution; their mutual bitterness, petty jealousies as well as heart burns due to impregnable hierarchies. But then, this is true of all establishments and work cultures and should not be limited to the same.

Stoppard has produced an innovative blend of the hackneyed plot of a crime thriller and the hackneyed comments of critics using juxtaposition of both but without any intellectual pretensions. Therefore, he has used the play-within-the-play as a device to explore the relationship between life and art. In *The Real Inspector Hound*, Stoppard has given his audience a riddle/crossword and a clue/hint i.e. the figure of the detective whose job is to bring about order as he is the provider of answers. In this process, *The Real Inspector Hound* becomes a mock-celebration of the thriller as well as the whodunit genre. Both forms are sub-types of the same category, but there are differences between them. Crime is committed in both, but, early on in the whodunit and during the course of the story in the thriller. There is no danger to the life of the detective in the whodunit because that would defeat the whole purpose of the work. In a thriller, the detective puts his life to considerable risk to solve the riddle. Stoppard’s play has a detective but he has constructed his play around the absence or void of the real Inspector Hound who never appears and here, he succeeds in creating a new genre: the meta-theatrical anti-detective pseudo-thriller. It can also be termed a whodunit thriller with suspense because the mystery is there. Stoppard has retained the milieu of the thriller and the suspense of the whodunit. At the same time, it is also a cerebral farce with a paradox inherent in its construction. Stoppard anticipates absurdist theatre but with a parodic intent giving us theatre of criticism. Moon and Birdboot are like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because
they too are trapped and then manipulated by forces beyond their control. Hence, there is role-playing-within-the-role as Moon and Birdboot play their first roles as critics before succumbing to the machinations of Puckeridge as the false Inspector Hound and Simon respectively. Thus, Stoppard’s purpose behind writing this spoof of the whodunit seems to be to sound the death knell of the whodunit, “stoppard is leading us all up the garden path in order to show us that the detective play has come, in every sense, to the end of the road. Thus, the well-made thriller is, nominally and theatrically “Hounded” to death…” (Crossley 79).