

Ten Little Soldiers: Nursery Rhyme as a Narrative Device in Agatha Christie's and then There Were None

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Abstract

Agatha Christie's 1939 novel *And Then There Were None* is considered her greatest work and holds the record as the best-selling mystery story. Unlike her conventional detective fiction featuring Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple, this novel eliminates the central detective figure and structures the entire plot around the English nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldiers". This study examines how Christie transforms a children's rhyme into a complex narrative device that drives plot progression, builds suspense, and enforces thematic unity. Through close textual analysis, the paper explores three key functions of the rhyme: 1) as a structural framework where each stanza predicts and mirrors a murder, 2) as a psychological tool that manipulates reader expectation and creates dramatic irony, and 3) as a moral commentary on justice, guilt, and collective punishment in post-war Britain. The study argues that by embedding the rhyme within the setting of Soldier Island, Christie subverts the traditional 'whodunit' formula and turns the victims themselves into both executioner and executed. This subversion challenges reader expectations of the Golden Age detective genre and redefines the boundaries of suspense fiction. The findings highlight Christie's innovation in using folklore to craft a self-contained, closed-circle mystery with no survivors, no detective, and no escape.

Keywords: Agatha Christie, Narrative Device, Nursery Rhyme, Detective Fiction, Suspense

Introduction

Detective fiction emerged as one of the most popular literary genres of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reaching its peak during the period commonly known as the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. Characterised by intricate plots, logical deduction, and the eventual restoration of order, the genre traditionally revolves around the presence of a detective who uncovers hidden truths and resolves criminal mysteries. Among the leading figures of this tradition, Agatha Christie occupies a central position. Often referred to as the "Queen of Crime," Christie revolutionised detective fiction through her mastery of plot construction, innovative narrative techniques, and ability to manipulate reader expectations. Her novels continue to attract scholarly attention for their formal complexity and enduring appeal.

Published in 1939, *And Then There Were None* is widely regarded as Christie's most accomplished and commercially successful novel. Unlike her detective-centered works featuring Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple, the novel abandons the conventional investigative framework and presents a self-contained mystery in which ten strangers are invited to Soldier Island and systematically murdered according to the sequence of the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldiers." With all external connections severed and in the

absence of an official detective, the characters are driven to address both their culpable pasts and the increasingly apparent threat to their lives. This narrative departure from the traditional detective formula has led critics to regard the novel as a landmark text in the development of modern crime fiction.

Central to the novel's design is the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldiers," which functions as far more than a decorative literary motif. Each stanza of the rhyme corresponds to a murder, providing a predetermined pattern that structures the narrative from beginning to end. The rhyme not only dictates the sequence of events but also shapes the psychological atmosphere of the novel by creating anticipation, fear, and uncertainty among both characters and readers. Through its repetitive and predictive structure, the rhyme transforms an apparently simple children's verse into a mechanism that governs plot progression and intensifies suspense.

The incorporation of folklore into literary narratives has long been recognised as a means of generating symbolic and thematic resonance. Nursery rhymes, in particular, carry cultural associations with childhood, innocence, and communal memory. Christie deliberately subverts these associations by transforming a familiar children's rhyme into an instrument of death and punishment. This inversion creates a disturbing contrast between innocence and violence, contributing to the novel's unique atmosphere of dread. At the same time, the rhyme serves as a vehicle through which broader themes of guilt, justice, fate, and retribution are articulated. The murders appear not merely as random acts of violence but as stages in a carefully orchestrated ritual of moral judgment.

Although *And Then There Were None* has generated substantial critical scholarship, existing studies have primarily focused on its status as a closed-circle mystery, its treatment of justice and morality, and its psychological portrayal of fear and guilt. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining the nursery rhyme as the central narrative mechanism that unifies these dimensions of the text. Most discussions treat the rhyme as a plot device or symbolic element rather than as a complex narrative framework that simultaneously structures the plot, directs reader response, and reinforces thematic concerns.

This study seeks to address that gap by investigating the role of "Ten Little Soldiers" as a narrative device in *And Then There Were None*. Drawing upon narratological and reader-response perspectives, the paper examines how the rhyme functions as a structural blueprint for the novel, a psychological instrument that shapes reader expectations and suspense, and a thematic vehicle through which Christie explores questions of justice, guilt, and punishment. It argues that the nursery rhyme is not merely an accompanying motif but the organising principle of the entire narrative. By embedding folklore at the heart of the novel's construction, Christie challenges the conventions of Golden Age detective fiction and redefines the possibilities of suspense narrative, contributing significantly to the evolution of modern crime fiction.

Literature Review

Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939) has remained a significant subject of scholarly inquiry within crime fiction studies because of its innovative narrative structure and departure from conventional detective fiction. Critics have examined the novel from various perspectives, including genre studies, narratology, psychological criticism, and moral philosophy. However, despite considerable scholarship on the novel, the role of the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldiers" as a comprehensive narrative device has received comparatively limited attention.

Early scholarship on detective fiction largely focused on the formal characteristics of the genre. Howard Haycraft, in *Murder for Pleasure* (1941), identifies Christie as a master craftsman of the detective puzzle

whose success lies in her ability to construct intricate plots while maintaining reader engagement. Similarly, Julian Symons (1972) emphasises Christie's skill in manipulating narrative expectations and creating complex mystery structures. They primarily focus on plot mechanics and detection rather than on the specific narrative function of the nursery rhyme in *And Then There Were None*.

The novel has frequently been discussed as an exemplary "closed-circle mystery." According to Priestman (2003), the isolation of characters within a confined setting intensifies suspense by restricting both movement and possibilities for resolution. Knight (2004) further argues that Christie transforms the detective formula by eliminating external intervention and placing characters within a self-contained environment where social order gradually collapses. These studies emphasise the significance of Soldier Island as a spatial framework but devote relatively little attention to the textual framework provided by the nursery rhyme that governs the sequence of deaths.

Narratological approaches offer valuable insights into the novel's structure. Todorov's influential theory of detective fiction distinguishes between the story of the crime and the story of the investigation (Todorov 44). Traditional detective narratives rely on the reconstruction of past events through investigative processes. However, *And Then There Were None* challenges this model because the investigative element remains secondary to the unfolding pattern dictated by the nursery rhyme. The narrative's emphasis shifts from solving a crime to anticipating future deaths, suggesting a unique structural arrangement that deserves closer examination.

Reader-response theorists such as Wolfgang Iser have argued that literary texts generate meaning through the interaction between textual cues and reader expectations (Iser 275). This framework is particularly useful for understanding Christie's manipulation of suspense. The nursery rhyme functions as a predictive text embedded within the narrative, encouraging readers to anticipate forthcoming events while simultaneously withholding crucial information. As a result, suspense emerges not merely from uncertainty regarding the culprit's identity but from the tension between expectation and surprise. Existing studies of Christie's suspense techniques acknowledge reader involvement but rarely analyse how the rhyme itself orchestrates that engagement.

The relationship between folklore and literature has also attracted scholarly interest. Alan Dundes contends that folklore forms such as nursery rhymes carry cultural meanings that extend beyond their surface simplicity. When incorporated into literary works, such forms may acquire symbolic and structural functions. In *And Then There Were None*, Christie transforms a familiar children's rhyme into an instrument of death, thereby subverting traditional associations of innocence and playfulness. Although scholars have recognised the ironic contrast between childhood folklore and violent crime, few studies have investigated how the rhyme operates simultaneously as intertext, narrative framework, and thematic guide.

Psychological analyses of the novel have emphasised the effects of fear, guilt, and paranoia on the characters. Makinen (2006) argues that Christie's fiction frequently explores the instability of identity and the psychological consequences of concealed guilt. In *And Then There Were None*, the progressive fulfillment of the nursery rhyme intensifies the characters' anxiety, leading to suspicion, isolation, and emotional disintegration. These readings illuminate the psychological dimensions of the novel but tend to treat the rhyme as a catalyst for fear rather than as a narrative mechanism that structures psychological experience.

Another important area of scholarship concerns the novel's treatment of justice and morality. Scaggs (2005) observes that crime fiction often functions as a reflection on legal and ethical systems. In Christie's

novel, Justice Wargrave assumes the role of judge, jury, and executioner, punishing individuals who have escaped formal legal consequences. Critics have interpreted Wargrave's actions as an expression of vigilante justice and moral absolutism. Yet relatively little attention has been given to the way the nursery rhyme legitimises and ritualises this process of punishment, transforming individual murders into a coherent moral performance.

More recent scholarship on crime fiction has increasingly emphasised the relationship between narrative form and ideology. Scholars argue that literary structures themselves generate meaning rather than merely conveying thematic content. From this perspective, the nursery rhyme in *And Then There Were None* can be understood as the central organising principle that unifies plot progression, suspense, characterization, and thematic development. Nevertheless, existing research tends to examine these elements separately rather than considering how the rhyme integrates them into a single narrative system.

Therefore, a significant gap remains in scholarship concerning the multifaceted role of "Ten Little Soldiers" as a narrative device. Previous studies have explored issues of genre, suspense, justice, and psychology, but few have analysed how the nursery rhyme simultaneously functions as a structural framework, a reader-oriented mechanism of suspense, and a thematic vehicle for exploring guilt and punishment. This study addresses that gap by employing narratological and reader-response approaches to demonstrate that the nursery rhyme serves as the primary organising principle of the novel and constitutes one of Christie's most innovative contributions to detective fiction.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine the narrative function of the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldiers" in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939). The research focuses on how the rhyme operates as a structural, psychological, and thematic device within the novel. Through close reading and interpretation, the study analyses the relationship between the rhyme, plot development, suspense creation, character psychology, and themes of guilt and justice.

The primary text for this study is Christie's *And Then There Were None*, with particular attention given to passages where the nursery rhyme influences the sequence of events and shapes the characters' experiences. The analysis examines how each verse corresponds with the deaths on Soldier Island and how the rhyme transforms the novel from a traditional detective mystery into a predetermined narrative pattern.

The study applies a narratological approach to explore how elements such as sequence, repetition, and anticipation contribute to the structure of the novel. It examines how Christie replaces the conventional detective-centered model of investigation and solution with a narrative controlled by the progression of the rhyme. A reader-response approach is also used to investigate how the rhyme influences audience expectations and creates suspense. By providing clues while withholding complete explanations, the rhyme encourages readers to predict events and participate actively in the construction of meaning.

Additionally, the study incorporates folklore and intertextual perspectives to analyse how Christie transforms a familiar children's rhyme into a symbol of fear, violence, and moral judgment. The research examines how the rhyme reflects themes of guilt, punishment, and Justice Wargrave's concept of personal justice. Overall, this methodology combines close textual analysis with narratological, reader-response, and folklore approaches to demonstrate that "Ten Little Soldiers" functions not merely as a symbolic element but as the central narrative device of *And Then There Were None*, shaping its structure, suspense, and thematic significance.

Analysis and Discussion

Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* marks a decisive departure from the conventions of Golden Age detective fiction by replacing the detective's rational investigation with the predetermined logic of a nursery rhyme. While earlier detective novels typically relied upon a central investigator to reconstruct the sequence of crimes through observation and deduction, Christie transfers this organising function to the English nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldiers." Rather than operating as a decorative motif or a simple instrument of foreshadowing, the rhyme becomes the governing narrative principle of the novel. It structures the chronology of events, regulates the rhythm of suspense, shapes readers' expectations, and ultimately provides the interpretative framework through which the murders acquire meaning. The rhyme therefore functions not merely as an intertext embedded within the narrative but as the narrative's underlying architecture, transforming a familiar piece of folklore into the structural intelligence of the novel.

The importance of the rhyme is established long before the first murder occurs. Upon their arrival at Soldier Island, each guest discovers a framed copy of "Ten Little Soldiers" displayed in the bedroom, while ten china soldier figurines stand prominently on the dining-room table. These objects initially appear to be harmless decorative features that complement the island's name. Their significance, however, extends far beyond atmosphere. By foregrounding both the written rhyme and its material representation before any act of violence takes place, Christie subtly announces the textual system that will govern the narrative. The rhyme exists before the crimes, and consequently the murders appear to emerge from it rather than merely resemble it. This reversal is crucial. Instead of retrospectively explaining the events, the nursery rhyme prospectively determines them, establishing a narrative order that precedes the plot itself.

The structural function of the rhyme becomes unmistakable with Anthony Marston's sudden death during dinner. The opening stanza, "Ten little soldier boys went out to dine; / One choked his little self and then there were Nine" (27) is transformed from an apparently innocent verse into a narrative script. Marston dies after drinking whisky laced with cyanide, his violent physical reaction recalling the choking imagery of the rhyme without reproducing it literally. Christie deliberately avoids exact correspondence between verse and event. Rather than mechanically illustrating the poem, she reinterprets its imagery within the conventions of realistic detective fiction. The significance therefore lies not in literal imitation but in structural equivalence. The first fulfilled stanza teaches readers how the novel should be read. From this moment onward, the nursery rhyme ceases to function as an object within the story and becomes the principal code through which subsequent events are interpreted.

The disappearance of one china soldier figurine immediately after Marston's death reinforces this transformation. The remaining guests notice that only nine figures remain upon the table, creating a visual counterpart to the verbal reduction announced in the rhyme. This recurring disappearance is far more than a decorative flourish. It externalises the numerical progression embedded within the poem and converts abstraction into visible narrative movement. The figurines silently record the advancement of the plot, confirming after each death that another stage of the rhyme has been fulfilled; "Nine little soldier boys sat up very late/One overslept himself and then there were Eight" (27). Language and image thus operate together, producing what may be understood as a dual narrative system: the rhyme predicts the sequence verbally, while the figurines register its completion visually. Their combined effect is to remind both characters and readers that the narrative is advancing according to an irreversible pattern.

From the perspective of narratology, this recurring sequence illustrates Gérard Genette's concept of repetition as an organising principle of narrative discourse. Each murder constitutes a distinct event involving different circumstances and victims, yet all are governed by a single pre-existing textual pattern. Christie does not simply repeat the same action ten times; rather, she constructs a series of variations upon an established narrative design. The repetition therefore generates progression rather than redundancy. Every fulfilled stanza simultaneously closes one stage of the story as "Eight little soldier boys travelling in Devon" (27) and opens another, directing attention toward the remaining verses while maintaining narrative momentum as One said he'd stay yhere and then there were Seven" (27). The nursery rhyme transforms chronology into a visible countdown, ensuring that every reduction in number intensifies awareness of the inevitable conclusion toward which the novel is moving.

This predetermined structure fundamentally alters the mechanics of detective fiction. Tzvetan Todorov famously argues that the classical detective novel consists of two narratives: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. The detective reconstructs hidden events, restoring order through rational explanation. And Then There Were None, however, deliberately unsettles this model. There is no Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple to gather evidence, interrogate suspects, or impose logical coherence upon the mystery. Instead, coherence is supplied from the outset by the nursery rhyme itself. The poem organises the narrative before any investigation begins, thereby diminishing the detective's traditional function. Although the identity of the murderer remains concealed, the structural logic governing the murders is openly displayed. Christie therefore shifts attention from reconstructing the past to anticipating the future, replacing investigative progression with narrative inevitability.

This innovation also transforms the reader's experience of suspense. Detective fiction ordinarily relies upon uncertainty: readers possess incomplete knowledge and gradually approach the solution through accumulated clues. Christie adopts the opposite strategy. The nursery rhyme announces in advance that every guest will die according to a descending numerical order, apparently reducing uncertainty. Yet the novel becomes more, rather than less, suspenseful. Roland Barthes' distinction between the hermeneutic and proairetic codes helps explain this paradox. The hermeneutic code sustains the central mystery by withholding the murderer's identity, whereas the proairetic code advances the narrative through successive actions. In Christie's novel, the nursery rhyme intensifies the proairetic code. Once readers recognise that the murders correspond to the verses, they instinctively begin anticipating how the next stanza will be realised. Suspense no longer depends solely upon discovering who commits the crimes but upon observing how the already announced pattern will unfold. Predictability becomes the source of anxiety rather than its negation.

The psychological consequences of this narrative strategy are profound. Following the first two murders, the remaining guests repeatedly return to the nursery rhyme, comparing recent events with its verses and searching for clues to the next death. The poem gradually assumes an authority that exceeds ordinary language. It ceases to function as a children's rhyme and becomes an interpretative document governing every conversation, suspicion, and decision. Christie thereby demonstrates how narrative itself can shape psychological reality. The guests are no longer responding only to the murders; they are responding to the story that appears to have anticipated those murders. Their fear arises not merely from physical danger but from the growing conviction that they are trapped within an already written script.

Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory illuminates this process by emphasising the active role readers play in constructing textual meaning. According to Iser, literary texts contain interpretative gaps that invite readers to formulate expectations and continually revise them. Christie exploits this principle through the

nursery rhyme. While the poem reveals the order of the deaths, it leaves crucial questions unanswered. Which character corresponds to the next soldier? Will the next stanza be fulfilled literally or symbolically? Can the sequence be interrupted? These uncertainties require readers to participate actively in the production of meaning. The nursery rhyme therefore transforms reading into an interpretative exercise in which every stanza functions simultaneously as memory and prediction.

This participatory reading experience distinguishes *And Then There Were None* from conventional detective fiction. The reader is not simply invited to identify the murderer but is encouraged to decode an evolving relationship between poetic language and narrative action. Every completed murder confirms the authority of the rhyme while simultaneously increasing uncertainty regarding the next. Christie repeatedly frustrates literal expectations by translating the imagery of the verses into symbolic equivalents, ensuring that readers recognise the pattern without being able to predict its exact execution. Suspense thus emerges from the tension between recognition and surprise, between knowing the destination and remaining uncertain about the route by which it will be reached.

The culmination of this structural and psychological strategy is the gradual transfer of narrative authority from detective to text. As the investigation repeatedly fails to produce certainty, the nursery rhyme increasingly assumes the role traditionally occupied by the detective. It organises chronology, directs interpretation, regulates expectation, and provides the framework through which every event is understood. Long before Judge Wargrave's final confession reveals the mechanics of the murders, the rhyme has already taught readers how to read the novel. Before the ending couplet "One little soldier boy left all alone/He went and hanged himself and there were None" (28) readers already predicted that this time there is no one left. Christie therefore achieves a remarkable inversion of detective fiction: instead of allowing the detective to explain the story, she allows the story itself—in the form of a nursery rhyme—to explain the detective narrative.

The structural and psychological authority of the nursery rhyme reaches its fullest expression in the latter half of the novel, where it develops beyond a narrative framework into a symbolic and ethical code. As the number of survivors steadily decreases, the rhyme no longer merely predicts events; it begins to determine how those events are interpreted by both the characters and the reader. Every successive murder is understood in relation to the corresponding stanza, transforming the rhyme into the moral vocabulary through which guilt, punishment, and justice are negotiated. Christie thus elevates a familiar piece of folklore into an instrument of ethical inquiry, demonstrating that narrative structure can simultaneously function as a system of symbolic judgment.

This transformation becomes increasingly apparent as fear gives way to fatalism among the remaining guests. During the early murders, they search for rational explanations, debate possible suspects, and attempt to impose logical order upon the seemingly inexplicable crimes. Gradually, however, these investigative efforts collapse beneath the persistent authority of the rhyme. The guests repeatedly return to the verses, reading and rereading them in the hope of anticipating the next death. In doing so, they unconsciously grant the rhyme greater authority than their own reasoning. The text therefore illustrates a remarkable reversal: instead of interpreting the rhyme through events, the characters begin interpreting events through the rhyme. Narrative gradually supersedes rational investigation, and symbolic order begins to dominate empirical reality.

This shift also intensifies the novel's engagement with folklore. Nursery rhymes traditionally occupy a liminal space between innocence and cultural memory. Although commonly associated with childhood, many preserve traces of violence, punishment, or historical anxiety beneath their rhythmic simplicity.

Christie exploits this ambiguity by preserving the repetitive cadence of the rhyme while radically transforming its function. What ordinarily encourages play and memorisation becomes a ritual of execution. The comforting familiarity of repetition is converted into an instrument of dread, illustrating how cultural forms may acquire entirely new meanings when relocated within a different narrative context. The rhyme consequently becomes both an intertext and a symbolic system through which the novel interrogates ideas of crime and punishment.

The ethical significance of this symbolic system is inseparable from Judge Wargrave's conception of justice. Unlike the formal legal institutions that failed to convict the guests for their earlier crimes, Wargrave constructs an alternative judicial order in which every accused individual is tried, sentenced, and executed according to the predetermined sequence of the nursery rhyme. His project is motivated by dissatisfaction with the limitations of legal evidence and procedural justice. Yet Christie carefully avoids presenting this private system as morally unproblematic. Wargrave's certainty rests not upon due process but upon personal conviction, allowing him simultaneously to occupy the roles of judge, jury, executioner, and dramatist. The nursery rhyme enables him to transform punishment into performance, converting each death into one stage of a carefully choreographed ritual.

Wargrave's posthumous manuscript retrospectively confirms the centrality of the rhyme to his design. He acknowledges that "the second clue lies in the seventh verse of the nursery rhyme,"(249) thereby directing attention back to the poem as the key to understanding the murders. This admission is significant because it reveals that the rhyme functions not merely as decoration but as evidence. The murderer himself instructs readers to interpret the crimes through the language of the nursery rhyme. Consequently, the confession does not replace the poem as the explanatory principle of the novel; rather, it validates the interpretive authority that the rhyme has exercised from the beginning. Wargrave's manuscript therefore operates as a meta-narrative, explaining not only how the murders were committed but also why the rhyme had to govern their execution.

The confession also reveals the profoundly theatrical nature of Wargrave's imagination. He remarks that he "chose the method" because "the rhyme... was perfect." The adjective perfect is particularly revealing. Wargrave does not seek merely to eliminate those whom he believes guilty; he seeks aesthetic symmetry. Justice, in his imagination, must possess formal elegance as well as moral certainty. The nursery rhyme provides precisely such a pattern, allowing each murder to contribute to an increasingly coherent artistic design. Christie thereby exposes the dangers of conflating justice with aesthetic perfection. Wargrave's obsession with order transforms the administration of punishment into an elaborate performance in which human lives become components of a predetermined script.

One of the most striking consequences of this design is that Wargrave himself ultimately submits to the same narrative order he has imposed upon others. Near the conclusion of his manuscript, he predicts that he will be found "shot through the forehead"(250) and that his body will conform to "the record kept by my fellow victims."(250) These statements fundamentally alter the reader's understanding of narrative authority within the novel. Although Wargrave devised the murders, he does not stand outside the system he created. Instead, he deliberately incorporates himself into the numerical sequence established by the rhyme. The architect of the narrative becomes one of its final participants. This self-subordination demonstrates that the rhyme ultimately governs everyone, including the individual who attempted to manipulate it for his own purposes.

It is here that the nursery rhyme assumes what may be described as narrative sovereignty. Throughout the novel, the rhyme performs functions traditionally associated with the detective. It organises chronology,

structures expectation, directs interpretation, and retrospectively explains the sequence of events. By the conclusion, even Wargrave's confession confirms rather than supersedes its authority. The rhyme becomes the supreme organising principle of the text, determining not only what happens but also how those events are understood. Detective fiction conventionally grants interpretive authority to the detective, whose final explanation restores order by revealing hidden truth. Christie radically redistributes that authority. The explanatory centre of the novel is no longer an individual investigator but a cultural text whose repetitive structure governs both narrative progression and reader interpretation.

This innovation significantly reconfigures the conventions of Golden Age detective fiction. As Tzvetan Todorov argues, the classical detective novel is divided between the story of the crime and the story of its investigation. And *Then There Were None* deliberately destabilises this model. The investigation remains fragmented, uncertain, and ultimately unsuccessful because no detective possesses sufficient knowledge to reconstruct the murders while they are occurring. Instead, the nursery rhyme provides continuity across the apparently disconnected crimes. Readers repeatedly return to the poem rather than to a detective for interpretive guidance. The novel therefore shifts generic emphasis from the reconstruction of hidden events to the gradual fulfilment of an already announced narrative pattern. Suspense arises not from recovering the past but from awaiting the completion of a textual design.

The closing movement of the novel reinforces this inversion. Wargrave anticipates that rescuers will discover "ten dead bodies and an unsolved problem on Soldier Island"(250). This concluding image encapsulates the paradox at the heart of Christie's narrative strategy. Structurally, the story has achieved complete closure. Every stanza has been fulfilled, every figurine has disappeared, and the numerical countdown has reached its inevitable conclusion. Epistemologically, however, the mystery initially remains unresolved. The apparent contradiction between narrative completion and interpretive uncertainty distinguishes the novel from conventional detective fiction, where explanation ordinarily accompanies closure. Christie separates these two processes, allowing the rhyme to complete its structural task before the confession retrospectively clarifies the mechanics of the murders.

The significance of this strategy extends beyond the solution of the mystery itself. By ending with complete annihilation, Christie rejects one of the most persistent conventions of detective fiction: the restoration of social order through survival and legal justice. There is no triumphant detective, no rescued innocent, and no reintegration into ordinary society. Soldier Island remains an isolated narrative space in which every participant—including the architect of the murders—is ultimately absorbed into the logic of the rhyme. The numerical progression from ten to none is therefore more than a method of organising deaths; it symbolises the gradual elimination of every conventional source of narrative stability. Investigation, law, community, and even the distinction between judge and criminal collapse before the authority of the predetermined pattern.

Ultimately, the achievement of *And Then There Were None* lies in Christie's transformation of a simple nursery rhyme into the governing intelligence of the novel. Structurally, the rhyme organises chronology through its descending numerical sequence. Psychologically, it shapes the expectations of both characters and readers by generating suspense through anticipation rather than surprise. Symbolically, it converts folklore into a language of ritual judgement through which questions of guilt and punishment are explored. Generic expectations are likewise reconfigured as the rhyme assumes many of the interpretive functions owntraditionally performed by the detective. Wargrave's confession does not diminish this authority; instead, it confirms that every stage of the narrative has been orchestrated according to the poem's internal logic. The nursery rhyme thus emerges not as an ornamental motif but as the novel's governing narrative

system, demonstrating Christie's remarkable ability to transform an apparently innocent cultural text into the structural, psychological, and ethical foundation of one of the most innovative detective novels of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the nursery rhyme “Ten Little Soldiers” in Agatha Christie’s novel *And Then There Were None* functions as far more than a symbolic element of folklore. Through close textual analysis using narratological, reader-response, and folklore approaches, the research establishes that the rhyme operates simultaneously as a structural framework, a suspense-generating mechanism, and a thematic representation of guilt, justice, and punishment.

Structurally, the nursery rhyme serves as the central organising principle of the novel. By eliminating the traditional detective figure, Christie replaces the process of investigation and deduction with a predetermined narrative pattern controlled by the rhyme. Each verse corresponds with the sequence of deaths, while the disappearing soldier figurines reinforce the gradual movement toward the final outcome. This technique transforms the conventional “whodunit” mystery into a narrative based on anticipation and inevitability, where the reader follows the completion of the pattern rather than simply searching for the identity of the murderer.

The study also reveals that the rhyme plays a significant role in creating psychological suspense. Unlike traditional detective fiction, where tension is primarily produced through uncertainty and revelation, Christie creates suspense through the knowledge of what is likely to happen next. The rhyme provides clues while withholding complete information about their fulfillment, creating a balance between expectation and surprise. As readers recognise the connection between the verses and the murders, they become active participants in interpreting the narrative. The transformation of an innocent childhood rhyme into a source of fear demonstrates Christie’s innovative use of familiarity to create psychological tension.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the thematic importance of the nursery rhyme in relation to justice and morality. Through Justice Wargrave’s carefully designed plan, the rhyme becomes a framework for his personal system of punishment. Although the characters are guilty of past wrongdoing, Wargrave’s decision to act as judge and executioner raises questions about the limits of individual justice. Christie’s transformation of a children’s rhyme into an instrument of death creates a powerful contrast between innocence and violence, allowing the novel to explore complex ideas of guilt, responsibility, and revenge. The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of Christie’s narrative innovation. *And Then There Were None* challenges traditional detective-fiction conventions by demonstrating that suspense does not depend only on investigation or final revelation. Instead, Christie creates tension through structure, repetition, and reader anticipation. The nursery rhyme becomes the connecting force that unifies the novel’s plot, character psychology, and moral concerns. In conclusion, “Ten Little Soldiers” is the foundation of *And Then There Were None* and one of Christie’s most remarkable narrative achievements. By transforming a simple nursery rhyme into a device of suspense and judgment, Christie expands the possibilities of crime fiction and creates a mystery where the pattern itself becomes the most powerful controlling force.

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