

Sorry, Wrong Number




Introduction



- Sorry, Wrong Number tells the story of Mrs. Elbert Stevenson an invalid woman confined to her bed, who becomes increasingly frantic as the story progresses. The drama begins with Mrs. Stevenson attempting to call her husband, who is working late. Frustrated with the busy signal, she seeks the help of the operator who connects her through to what she assumes is her husband's office phone.



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- Instead of hearing his familiar voice, she listens in on a conversation where two men are plotting a murder. The victim is a woman, home alone, who lives near a bridge. The men plan for the attack to take place just as the train crosses the bridge, so the sound will mask any screams from the victim.
 - Horrified by what she hears, Mrs. Stevenson calls the operator to demand that she trace the source of this call.
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- The operator explains that only the police can push through a request like that, and so begins 20 minutes of calls to the police, telephone operators, and even to the phone company's Chief Operator as Mrs. Stevenson attempts to alert someone to the gravity of the situation.
- None of the people she talks to will acknowledge that she is in any danger. Meanwhile, the audience learns that Mrs. Stevenson has been confined to her bed for 12 years with anxiety issues.





- No one on the phone has the answers she's seeking and her anxiety mounts, building suspense that her health may be at risk.
- The drama culminates in a scene where Mrs. Stevenson becomes certain that she's the target of the murder; after all, she lives near a train that crosses a bridge, and when she hears that her husband has left town on business, she knows that she will be at home alone at the designated time for the attack.





- In the final minutes she hears an intruder listening on the downstairs phone, and then she picks out footsteps coming up the stairs.
- She hastily calls the police for help, and just before they answer the phone, her screams let the audience know that she has been caught by the killer.
- The drama ends when the police ask about the nature of callers emergency.





- The killer picks up the phone, explains that he is fine, and says that he never meant to dial the police.
- He apologises for dialing a wrong number, and hangs up.



Themes



- Helplessness and Arrogance
- Abandonment
- Technology and Isolation



Helplessness and Arrogance



- The main ingredient in Mrs. Stevenson's terror in Fletcher's play is that of helplessness. Whether the protagonist's dependence is caused by real or imagined illness, Mrs. Stevenson believes she is at the mercy of those around her. She cannot get out of bed. She cannot get through to her husband. She cannot make the telephone operators, the police officer, or the hospital receptionist understand just how helpless she is. She cannot do anything.
- She wants someone to come over to soothe her nerves and, later, to protect her from the man who is coming to her bedroom. Instead, everyone brushes her off in one way or the other, including Mrs. Stevenson's husband. Because of her helplessness, Mrs. Stevenson makes the perfect victim. Her only defense is her voice. Her screams are easily muffled and her only connection to the outside world is through the telephone, which can easily be disconnected.





- It is interesting to note that Mrs. Stevenson's helplessness does not humble her in any way, however. To the contrary, it is coupled with an unbecoming arrogance and sense of self-righteousness. The combination of these character flaws might have been what drove Mr. Stevenson to have his wife killed.
 - When a person is dependent on others as Mrs. Stevenson appears to be, gratitude and humility often follow. Instead Mrs. Stevenson is rude and impatient. She is quick to find fault with the answers people give her. She carelessly insults and degrades others, often implying that she knows more about other people's jobs than they do. This arrogance leads her to initially misinterpret the clues. She does not consider her own mortality; someone else must be the intended victim.
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Abandonment



- An undercurrent of abandonment flows through Fletcher's drama. The first hint of this occurs in the beginning of the scene when Mrs. Stevenson cannot get through to her husband's office.
 - From her remarks and the resultant frustration, the audience can tell that this situation is new for Mrs. Stevenson. She cannot believe that her husband's phone line could be busy for almost an hour. Surely there must be something wrong with the phone. That is why she dials the operator and asks for help.
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- As the play continues, on more subtle levels, everyone Mrs. Stevenson talks to eventually abandons her in some way. No one takes her seriously. Her story about overhearing a murder plot sounds too fantastic to be true.
- As seen through Sgt. Duffy's eyes, Mrs. Stevenson's story lacks concrete details, therefore, there is nothing he can do to help. He cannot send out policemen to investigate based merely on Mrs. Stevenson's hunch that a murder might take place. Besides, Duffy is too hungry to dig any deeper into her story and he, too, abandons her.





- Also, the phone operators cannot trace the phone call without the policeman's authority. The hospital receptionist cannot send out a nurse without a doctor's orders. Mrs. Stevenson is left alone. Either no one believes her or no one cares enough to investigate further. Thus she rightfully feels abandoned.
 - The most significant example of abandonment, though, lies squarely on Mr. Stevenson's shoulders. Toward the end of the play, it becomes evident that not only is he leaving her, but he is planning to permanently get rid of her.
 - His phone line is probably purposefully kept busy so he will not have to talk to her. Then he plans his alibi by sending a telegram, which would leave a paper trail, unlike a simple call home. He is leaving her for the night, he tells her through the telegram. The audience knows by then that Mr. Stevenson has no plans of seeing her again.
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Technology and Isolation



- For the duration of *Sorry, Wrong Number*, Mrs. Stevenson is confined to her room. Her only method of communicating with the outside world is through technology, specifically the telephone. Mrs. Stevenson's reliance on this technology, which is meant to enable communication, ironically becomes an obstacle to her ability to communicate meaningfully.
- She is unable to reach her husband and spends most of her time talking to various operators. The telephone also makes Mrs. Stevenson privy to a conversation she was not meant to hear—that of the very men planning her murder.
- When she depends on the same technology to help her address the situation, it fails. Instead, it reinforces her isolation, as she is unable to make meaningful connections to the outside world. Ultimately, her isolation is broken by the intruder who brings her life to an end. He reinforces technology's failure with his final statement: "Sorry. Wrong number."



CRITICISM



- In Fletcher's radio thriller, *Sorry, Wrong Number*, the protagonist, Mrs. Stevenson, experiences an increasingly agitated state of mind. The play begins with Mrs. Stevenson mildly annoyed at a constant busy signal as she attempts to place a phone call, and ends with her in a state of complete panic.
- Fletcher has Mrs. Stevenson's emotions evolve subtly at first, but as the play builds toward the climax, Mrs. Stevenson's mental state quickly and dramatically deteriorates. Examining the progression of Fletcher's dramatic tension reveals the critical role of the audience in giving the events meaning.





- With Mrs. Stevenson's slamming down the telephone receiver in the opening moments of this play, the audience immediately detects the protagonist's unrest. "Oh—dear!" Mrs. Stevenson says as an exclamation of her inability to connect with her husband's office.
- Then immediately afterward, she dials the operator and communicates her slight concern and frustration at not being able to reach her husband. Her concern is not for her husband or for herself at this point. Rather she just thinks that something is wrong with the phone.
- She is put off by this inconvenience, which is just that—a slight setback in her desire to talk to her husband. She is slightly annoyed but not much else. At this point, the audience likewise has little feeling of tension. The woman's attempts to communicate with someone have been blocked, but that happens to everyone. There is very little to worry about. After all, it is just a busy signal.





- When Mrs. Stevenson calls the operator to report what she has overheard, the first thing she says is, "I—I've just been cut off." This is a strange reaction. Mrs. Stevenson's first reaction is about herself and what has happened to her.
- If she were concerned about the unknown woman, the logical first response would be that someone's life is threatened, not that she was inconvenienced by being cut off from a phone conversation.
- It is only in her next comment that Mrs. Stevenson tells the operator about the planned murder. Mrs. Stevenson's emotions then take a new turn. She becomes haughty. She commands "imperiously" that the operator trace the previous call. Someone, she insists, must do something about this.





- This new attitude of Mrs. Stevenson's grows. It is as if her fears have been quelled by an inner anger. She begins to look down on everyone she talks to. She concludes that the operator is stupid and does not know how to do her job.
 - During this sequence of conversations, the tension that was building in the audience has been dissipated. While the audience once thought Mrs. Stevenson was attempting to save another woman's life, and so were invested in her cause, she now seems to be a fool. Mrs. Stevenson's responses to the operator's questions do not improve the situation.
 - She does not know the number that was dialed, though she insists that the operator redial it. She does not know the names of the men she has overheard. She does not know who the woman is nor where she lives. Her story has many holes in it, but she demands that the operators solve the problem. When someone acts arrogantly, it is easy to dismiss that person's concern. The audience at this point of the play is more annoyed than fearful.
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- The telegram from Mr. Stevenson stating that he is unexpectedly going out of town and will not be home that evening, forces the audience closer to the edge of their seats. Mrs. Stevenson cannot believe that her husband would leave her alone.
- However, there is a rising suspicion in the audience that he would. Mrs. Stevenson seems to realize this possibility when she exclaims, "No—no—it isn't true! He couldn't do it!" With the train roaring by outside her bedroom window, the tension is closer to a full pitch.
- The audience, as well as Mrs. Stevenson, has been set up by the author. The subway train signals the time has come for the meeting of the murderer and his victim. There is still a slight doubt that the victim is Mrs. Stevenson, but this doubt is removed when Mrs. Stevenson hears someone downstairs. Everyone knows it is not her husband. Who else could it be?





- In complete terror by the end of the play, Mrs. Stevenson makes one last call to an operator. The author suggests that Mrs. Stevenson is desperate. The protagonist is weak. All her arrogance is gone. The audience is pulled deeply into her plight. They know her and all her faults.
- She is completely at the mercy of the man coming up the stairs. The audience knows what is coming next, but they cannot save her. Her plight reveals their own vulnerability. The play ends and the anticipation of both the fear and the hope of saving her is extinguished as Mrs. Stevenson's still body lies across the bed.





- Thank You

