

After Dark, My Sweet Short Guide

After Dark, My Sweet by James Thompson

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Characters

There are three main characters in *After Dark, My Sweet*: William Collins, known as Kid Collins during his boxing career; Fay, a woman Collins first meets in a bar who eventually becomes his love interest; and Uncle Bud, nobody's uncle, but a schemer who concocts a plan to make Fay and himself wealthy. Three other minor characters appear. Bert, the bartender, is the first person Collins meets. He unwittingly becomes involved in the kidnaping Bud plans and is shot and killed by the police when he is mistaken for Collins. Doc takes Collins in to live with him for a short while, and his voice remains the only voice of sanity throughout the novel. Seven-year-old Charles Vanderventer III is the child Collins helps kidnap and the eventual catalyst for Collins' death and redemption. The book is narrated by Collins in a peculiar postmortem narrative which Thompson employed in other novels as well. Collins, who escaped from a mental institution, has been clinically described as having "mild criminal tendencies or none, according to environmental factors . . .

psychosis, aggravated by worry . . . amiable, polite, patient, but may be very dangerous if aroused." Unfortunately for Collins, he is easily aroused, a victim-type often taunted by others for no reason. As a fighter, he had killed his opponent, the Burlington Bearcat, who, as Collins puts it, had "been fouling me . . . giving it to me in the clinches, calling me all kinds of names.

"I couldn't walk away from him." Collins's psychotic reactions to his taunters are described in chilling detail, from blinding headaches which attack without warning to a blood red haze which appears in front of Collins's eyes.

After meeting Fay at a local bar and accepting her invitation to her house, Collins finds himself caught up in a kidnaping scheme with an unwilling Fay and her friend, Uncle Bud. Bud has been searching for a suitable patsy to perform the physical aspects of the kidnaping of a very wealthy little boy.

Perceiving Collins to be a punch drunk boxer, he decides to include him in the plan, promising him a cut of the sizeable ransom for the boy. But Collins figures out that Bud really plans to kill him before he receives his cut; often misperceived as ignorant, Collins tells Fay, "I'm not at all stupid, Mrs. Anderson. I may sound like I am, but I'm really not." Fay urges Collins to leave town before the deed can be executed.

He leaves temporarily, but is drawn back to Fay with whom he has fallen in love. When she asks why he returned, he tells her, "I just couldn't take that old concrete pasture any more ... I mean, that's what it seems like to me.

"You keep going and going, and it's always the same everywhere. Wherever you've been, wherever you go, everywhere you look. Just grayness and hardness, as far as you can see."



Even though Collins assesses the situation and ascertains its dangers, he remains involved, partly out of concern with Fay, who is an alcoholic and also being used by Bud, but partly because he would rather be a part of something than to continue with his lonely existence. He rationalizes his actions by telling himself, "Kidnaping — the dirtiest kind of crime there is. Still, it was either this or nothing, the way things looked to me. It was this, or the old concrete pasture." Because he wants to believe everything will be alright, he stays with Fay and Bud.

After the kidnaping, Collins finds himself attached to the child who becomes ill from his diabetes. The balance of the novel involves his attempts to figure a way out of the trouble he has made which will leave Fay and the child safe. Like all of his efforts in the past, his attempts at escape prove futile. Bud ends up dead, the ransom is lost, and he and Fay, with the sick child, find themselves in a no-way-out situation. Amazingly, this situation causes the first secure thoughts Collins has ever experienced. He says that "when a man stops caring what happens, all the strain is lifted from him.

Suspicion and worry and fear — all the things that twist his thinking out of focus — are brushed aside." In the absence of those negative emotions which had become so familiar, Collins can, at last, see people as they are. He sees Fay as a woman worth saving. In his first flash of true insight, he decides to convince Fay of his worthlessness through threatening to kill the child.

He hopes Fay will accept his sudden shift in personality as genuine and shoot him in order to save herself and the boy. He tells her, "The crazy stuff . . . Hell, it's better than a pension. I could just roam about doing what I pleased — acting stupid, and cracking down when people fell for it." Fay does believe Collins, and she shoots him at the novel's conclusion.

Collins becomes, at long last, a person whose life has value. He gives up his own life, not only so Fay will survive, but in the hope that she may reach the potential which always remained beyond his own grasp. He dies, thinking, "And this — this, what had happened, was, as it had to be. She'd had to hate me. Fay had to go on hating me, thinking what she did about me, as long as she lived." While Collins experiences little joy in his last few moments of life, his satisfaction is intense. Only when he loses his life can he see its meaning.

Fay Anderson is an alcoholic widow who picks up Collins from Bert's bar.

Due to her perpetual semi-drunken condition, she at times harasses Collins terribly, causing him to at first judge her to be a worthless person. As Collins remarks, "She was changing again, getting back to the orneriness. She was on and off like that all the time, I found out — nice to you one minute, needling you the next." But in her sober and lucid moments, Fay evinces an intelligence and a capacity for warmth which causes Collins to fall in love with her. Early in their relationship, she convinces Collins, whom she calls Collie, to leave before Bud can get him into trouble. But he returns because of his love for Fay. She acts as the force which gives his hither to meaningless life meaning. Although she behaves in a way to arouse Collins' suspicions from time to time, he



eventually decides she's a worthy object for his affection. Before he decides to execute his plan to save Fay, Collins thinks of her: "Weak and frightened. Self-pitying, maybe. But good, too. Basically as good as a woman could be, and hating herself for not being better . . . Suddenly it made sense for Fay to live; it was the only way having lived would make any sense. It was why I had lived, it seemed." Fay's character allows Collins to do something for another human that she could not do for herself. Collins is able to give Fay the reason for living that he had never had. She also allows him to experience, for once, a correct assumption regarding another human. Fay acts as Collie predicts she will, killing him in order to save the boy.

Uncle Bud remains the unremittingly evil character in the novel. His easygoing manner at first fools Collins, who thinks of him, "You meet guys like Uncle Bud once — just over a drink or a cup of coffee — and you feel like you've known them all your life.

They make you feel that way." Having planned a kidnaping of the wealthy young Charles Vanderverter, Bud needs a third participant, in addition to Fay and himself. When he meets Collins, he first becomes very friendly with him, pretending to be understanding and sympathetic of his background.

In actuality, Bud plans to kill Collins after he has physically taken the boy from a playground. Bud draws the reluctant Fay into his deadly plans, without regard to her safety. Collins thinks of him, "Except for him, I wouldn't be in this spot. . . and Fay and I — things might have been a lot different between us. . . we might have swung the right way instead of this one. We might have. It could have worked out that way. If Uncle Bud had left us alone."

Bud also recruits Bert late in the novel to help with the pick up of the ransom.

Their plans fail, and both Bud and Bert are shot and killed by the police.

While not a main character, Doc Goldman reappears throughout the novel. He first finds Collins drunk at a cafe. Recognizing him as a mental patient, Doc offers help, and he takes Collins home with him to his clinic.

His character acts as the isolated good soul in the cold world which usually turns its back on Collins. He speaks frankly to Collins, telling him it would actually be better for him if he were a raving lunatic: "People could see the danger then. Now, well, what do they see, now? Why, they see an unusually handsome young man. A little eccentric perhaps, a little slow on the uptake occasionally, but in most respects normal. So they treat you as though you were normal, and the result sooner or later, is certain to be tragedy." He realizes that Collins's problems almost always result from his mistreatment by other people. It is from Doc's clinic that Collins later steals insulin to revive the kidnaped child from a coma, and Doc tries to convince the authorities that both Collins and Fay were coerced into their actions by Bud. His goodness in some ways stimulates the small amount of hope which Collins carries throughout the novel.



Social Concerns

In *After Dark, My Sweet*, Thompson attempts to demonstrate that life-long futility need not completely defeat a man. His first-person narrator, William "Kid" Collins, exemplifies the mentally disturbed individual which Thompson has used effectively in several of his novels. Although the action of the novel leads to Collins's death, he triumphs by saving the female character, Fay, through the ultimate act of sacrifice. Like Cosgrove, the protagonist of *Recoil*, Collins cannot distinguish truth.

He may recognize that many different possibilities for truth exist as related to a particular circumstance, but he cannot choose from all those possibilities.

The narrator symbolizes those fatecondemned figures with whom Thompson remained fascinated. Offered few choices in life, they simply must play with the hand they are dealt, and they seldom receive any good cards. They are used and abused by society, and they rebel by hurting those around them. In an early bar scene in the novel, Collins finds himself taunted for no reason by a bartender and a female barfly. Thompson reveals his narrator's helplessness in this situation when the narrator says, "I couldn't walk away from them, and I couldn't get them to stop." Thompson seeks for these societal misfits whatever grace they might find in life which might possibly lead to redemption. Collins remains one character who encounters that grace, a chance to compensate for past evils and to avoid future ones, through an act which represents the single heroism of his life. Thompson allows him to at last discover a reason for his unknowable nature and a purpose for the life which up to that point has remained void of meaning.



Techniques

Like many of Thompson's novels, *After Dark, My Sweet* is in the form of a first-person narrative. Like a few of his other novels, the narrator is telling the story after he has already died, a peculiar and surrealistic approach to narrative. This allows the narrator the emotional distance he seems to keep from himself. Even though he details his thoughts and emotions during the time span of the novel, Collins seems to be talking about someone else, so methodical is his voice. Death has not brought wisdom, however; he gropes for methods by which to analyze and describe the other characters of the book. His otherworldliness does not intrude into the story telling, yet the tone of removal from the scene remains distinct.

Others of Thompson's first person narrators who have died at end of the story they relate remain psychotic amoral killers. While Collins is diagnosed as psychotic, he is no killer. He bears no misperception regarding his intent toward others; he merely struggles to survive. This stands in sharp contrast to Lou Ford of *The Killer Within Me*, who sees himself as a savior, a figure above the fray, with the right to judge others. He destroys with abandon all who insult him and some who do not. Collins seeks survival, but not at the cost of the lives of others.

Thompson finds a way to reveal this to his readers through the psychological narrative he designs.

Themes

"Collie" Collins begins the final quest of his life as he had many others, with no clue as to why he was put on Earth. Unable to find the significance of his life previously, he was a prize fighter who defined his existence with his fists. In a fit of rage, he killed another fighter in the ring, then took up residence in a series of mental institutions. Thompson emphasizes the lack of control over fate of his protagonist when another character tells Collie, "You're inherently decent with a lot of good, strong moral fibre, but that isn't enough." This should be enough for anyone, but because people do not exist in a vacuum, they tend to be influenced by others. Thompson closely studies this idea of influence, which remains mostly negative, and is one reason why humans often bring out the worst in one another.

Through Collie, Thompson exemplifies the problems inherent in trying to know another's personality. Collie makes many formulations regarding his companions, but repeatedly discovers he cannot know or understand, he must merely accept. To try to plan the next step according to the humans around him, always results in disaster.

Thompson stresses this unpredictable aspect of human nature through Collie's relationship, or lack of relationship, with other characters. He justifies Collie's fits of rages by allowing the reader to see the world as perceived by him.

Self-identity remains an emphasis in *After Dark, My Sweet*, as Collie searches for his own. He foreshadows his eminent death in one passage, when he says, "A band seemed to tighten around my head. I closed my eyes, and for a moment, I just wasn't there. There was nothing but blackness with me floating away on it." Echoes of this statement will be seen in Collie's final statement: "I just kind of stopped all over." The nihilistic view of life projected by Collie becomes a theme for the book. However, he manages to subvert his own isolationist philosophy through sacrificing his own life in order that the woman he loves may continue living.

Collie's psychotic tendencies resemble those of other of Thompson's narrators, such as the irredeemable Lou Ford of *The Killer Inside Me* (1952). Every bit as violent and disturbed as Ford, Collie triumphs where Ford loses. Ford's final vision of salvation lacks the lucidity of Collie's. Where Ford falsely sees himself as a savior figure, Collie remains a true savior. Thompson suggests that even in a controlling world, one might be able to make a choice, if willing to sacrifice the price that choice demands.

Adaptations

After *Dark, My Sweet* appeared as a 1990 film version. Starring Jason Patric as Collins and Bruce Dern as Uncle Bud, it is pronounced by Thompson's biographer, Michael McCauley, to be "bravely understated and staunchly faithful to Thompson's novel," capturing "the three-way dance of mistrust between Kid Collins, Fay and Uncle Bud." This positive critique contrasts with other film versions of Thompson's works, such as *The Killer Within Me*, starring Stacy Keatch, which remains a flat imitation of Thompson's most disturbing first-person narrator.



Key Questions

A group might procure the film version of the novel in order to provide focus for discussion. Contrast and comparison between the reader's notion of the characters and the director's vision as they are presented on the screen can be stimulating.

Thompson's use of a deceased narrator will also spark commentary. This unusual method of presentation may please some and irritate others; a discussion of the differing affects and the reasons behind them will be enjoyable. Most helpful would be the reading of other of Thompson's novels for comparison. Because the novels are not lengthy, two or three could be compared within a single session. Also interesting would be comparison of Thompson's "psycho" narrator to the "crazies" featured in more contemporary horror works, such as those by Stephen King or Dean Koontz.

1. Assess the use of a psychotic deceased protagonist as narrator. What benefits might this provide the author?

What drawbacks?

2. What passages focus upon Collins's supposed insanity? Are they convincing? Does he seem more psychotic than other of the novel's characters?

3. Is Collins actually redeemed by the novel's conclusion, or does his redemption occur before? Explain what it is that redeems him.

4. What do you see as the purpose of Doc's presence in the novel? Like many others of Thompson's "good" character, Doc Goldman is likely Jewish. What importance, if any, does this have to the story? Did the character need to be a physician in order to fulfill his function?

5. How might Collins's story have varied had he not killed another fighter?

6. Did the novel have to conclude with Collins's death? Would the story have been feasible had he survived?

7. What do you predict will happen to Fay's life. Can you justify trading Collins's life for hers?

8. Analyze Uncle Bud's manipulative methods. What about him draws others to his personality?

9. Discuss the theme of innocence in the novel, using the kidnaped child as a starting point.

10. Note as many places as you can find which foreshadow Collins's death and self-sacrifice.

Literary Precedents

Due to its unusual first person narration by a dead character, the novel lacks many precedents as far as narrative technique goes. The exploration of the human psyche, and of character motivation, remain plot aspects used as long as stories have been written.

Many such plots are derived directly from the Bible and from classical mythology. However, such exploration had not entered the detective/crime genre until recent decades.

Related Titles

The last of thirteen Thompson novels published within three years, *After Dark, My Sweet* became part of a tradition of Thompson psychotic narrator tales. Similarities may be found among the narrators of his *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), *Savage Night* (1953), and *A Hell of a Woman* (1954).

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