

The Businessman: A Tale of Terror Short Guide

The Businessman: A Tale of Terror by Thomas M. Disch

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Characters

The *Businessman* features well-developed characters. Most of them are ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary interaction of the spirit world and Earth.

Bob Glandier is a venal businessman with ordinary tastes and petty emotions; his evil is banality. Giselle, the wife Glandier murdered, is a spirit who had been predestined by God to be a saint. Her murder ties her spirit into the nightmarish dreams of her husband. Giselle's mother, Joy-Ann Anker, dies of cancer and finds herself under the care of the spirit of a nineteenth-century actress and poetaster, Adah Menken. A courageous and strong person, Joy-Ann struggles to free her daughter from Bob Glandier's ugly dreams, and in so doing she also gains entry to heaven for several poet-suicides, including Berryman and Sylvia Plath.

The mixture of fantasy and reality in *The Businessman* is sometimes startling.

The character of John Berryman, who was a real-life poet who committed suicide, exemplifies much that is surprising in the novel. Giselle and Joy-Ann encounter him as they rush to get Joy-Ann to an elevator to heaven. Berryman had killed himself by jumping off a bridge onto a frozen river. He is destined to be a ghost who perpetually bleeds from the wounds suffered in the fall until he admits to Adah Menken that her second-rate poetry is better than his. Unwilling to humble himself, Berryman is trapped until he helps Giselle. The employment of spirits of historical figures as well as purely fictional ones gives *The Businessman* a bizarre tone and enhances its efforts to comment on the nature of human spirituality. Even the egotistical and suicidal Berryman may have a great soul and may hope for salvation.

Social Concerns

many of Thomas M. Disch's writings, society is shown to be incomprehensibly complicated. Characters are often buffeted by the laws and customs of society that are irrational and ridiculous. In *The Businessman*, Disch takes the theme of a senseless social order further than in his previous novels. He portrays society as merely providing the illusion of order. In a vast world order, in which human life is part of a hierarchy from insensible stones to a richly complex afterlife, Earthly society is shown to be unable to cope with a universe in which heaven and earth routinely interact.

Agents of society, such as policemen and physicists, insist on explaining supernatural phenomena in Earthly terms while denying the possibility of spiritual influences on events and human behavior.

Techniques

The problems Disch must deal with in *The Businessman* are especially challenging.

A story of ghosts and hauntings could easily become a one-dimensional tale of routinely spooky scenes in dark houses.

The mixture of everyday life and the world of spirits could be awkward, with neither everyday life nor the world of spirits becoming believable. Disch overcomes the problems in two ways: first, by carefully creating realistic characters, and second, by using techniques from science fiction for creating plausible explanations for how spirits and the living could interact.

Disch develops his characters by showing them in action, rather than by straight description. For instance, Joy-Ann is shown to be a courageous woman by the way she handles terminal cancer; she is shown to be loving by the efforts she makes to help her daughter; and she is shown to be goodhearted by her lack of guile and her tendency to believe the best of people, including Glandier. When she enters the afterlife, she clearly will not be the typical spooky ghost. The spirits of the dead retain their human personalities, and their interaction with the living involves the interaction of personalities between the living and the dead. Spiritual relationships are therefore too complicated to be merely a matter of terror and fright. Indeed, it is possible for the living to haunt the dead, as Glandier haunts the spirit of his murdered wife, who only wants to get away from him. She is tied to his venal personality and is terrorized by his nastiness. This twisting around of the traditional situation of the haunter and haunted makes *The Businessman* an extraordinarily original novel.

Disch's use of science fiction techniques in *The Businessman* has been controversial, with a few readers objecting to the mixing of scientific speculation into what on its surface seems to be a gothic horror story. Nonetheless, Disch uses scientific speculation to good effect. For example, he uses physics to explain how spirits and nature interact. According to Disch, spirits exist on the level of subatomics, interacting with all the atoms that make up a body, so that while a person lives, the spiritual and physical worlds are united in him into one complete human being. Furthermore, spirits may blend into trees and other objects, and like Giselle they may be temporarily trapped in their corpses after death. By suggesting that the afterlife is subject to physical laws, Disch limits what spirits can do. He thus maintains suspense in *The Businessman* because spirits are not all powerful but are limited in their capabilities. Their efforts to help Giselle require them to overcome obstacles in the physical world.



Themes

The Businessman is a well-conceived portrait of a world in which nature, humanity, and spirits are united into a system of existence that transcends the daily concerns of people. Even death is but a momentary blotch on a person's existence; from death comes new life in heaven. The only true death comes from the lack of imagination. In The Businessman, imagination is the key to understanding the universe. Through imagination, one may perceive wood nymphs, demons, and even spiritually advanced frogs. Indeed, the afterlife itself is defined by the imagination: "Heaven is no more than a fantasm generated by the excess energies of the pooled imaginations of the blessed."

Many themes are developed in The Businessman. In addition to the themes of a confused society, death, and imagination, Disch explores sexual and spiritual love, Christianity, dreams, and those traits that make people fully human. Unusual for Disch is the theme of hope. In most of his work, he creates satirical tragedies; the main characters are doomed to failure and death. However, the afterlife of The Businessman offers hope for eternal happiness. The afterlife can be just as terrible as Earthly life; spirits can suffer and live in purgatorial nightmares, but they always have the hope for advancement up heaven's hierarchy to the ultimate communion with God. Even the titular businessman, Bob Glandier may advance. He is grossly obese, small minded, and a murderer. He defines his entire life by his greed and eventually sells his soul to evil. Yet at the novel's end, he is in a purgatorial state that is not much different from what the spirit of John Berryman had to endure, and at the novel's end Berryman is in heaven. By inference, Glandier may also rise.



Key Questions

Leave it to Disch to create a ghost story in which the traditional situations and images of the genre are turned topsyturvy. Given its unusual thesis—that people haunt ghosts—and its mixture comedy and horror, *The Businessman* should generate a good discussion. The novel calls attention to its stylistic devices, so a discussion might well begin with them, emphasizing symbolism and the twisting of tradition.

1. What laws or customs of society are depicted as irrational? What makes them irrational? Are there any that appear rational?
2. How do characters rationalize supernatural events? Do their rationalizations have foundations in real-life?
3. How does imagination shape the lives of characters? What role does it play in the supernatural as well as mundane world?
4. Is there a theological basis for the spirits of those who have committed great sins going to heaven? Does it relate to the Christian concept of redemption?
5. What are the ethics of including real-life characters in a moralistic fantasy, especially near-contemporary figures such as Berryman?
6. How do the living and supernatural worlds intermingle in *The Businessman*?
How does one affect the other?
7. How can the spirit of a dead person be haunted by someone who is alive?
8. What are the limitations of spirits? In what ways do these limitations enhance suspense? In what ways are they comical?
9. What are the most effective literary allusions in *The Businessman*? Why are there so many literary allusions? Is Disch making a point with them?
10. How well drawn are the characters?
Are any stereotypes?
11. What techniques does Disch use to make his spiritual themes credible?

Literary Precedents

The *Businessman* is richly allusive to the writings of other authors. Not only is a John Berryman an important character in the novel, but the works and ideas of other writers such as Algernon Charles Swinburne and William Shakespeare are alluded to. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* provides a thematic focus for Disch's novel. In the play, Hamlet speculates on suicide and death: "To die, to sleep;/To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;/ For in that sleep of death what dreams may come . . ." (*Hamlet*, III, i). In *The Businessman* death and dreams are united into a perception of spiritual reality. Dreams are often visions of real events, some wonderful and some terrifying. Spirits and the living often interact in dreams, and death has some of the qualities of dreams, such as distortions of the physical world and the dreamers' ability to move invisibly from one place to another.

In a broad sense, Disch borrows from various literary subgenres. *The Businessman* has the organization of a gothic horror tale. It uses techniques from science fiction to make its situations believable.

From the Bible, it creates a Christian afterworld. The novel is decidedly Modernist in its reworking of traditional morality, yet displays respect for traditional literary forms. The mixture of genre and traditions makes *The Businessman* intellectually exciting, as well as making it unpredictable and mysterious. The mixture of historical figures and realistic events with speculation and fantasy is reminiscent of the fiction of the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. By taking great care to develop his characters, Disch infuses the events of the novel with emotional appeal. The combination of originality, well-drawn characters, and thematic complexity makes *The Businessman* a major novel.



Related Titles

Disch's first novel *The Genocides* (1965; see separate entry) is a brash, stylish affair that defied the traditional happy ending in which humanity defeats a terrifying and cruel invader from outer space. In it, the alien invaders wipe out humanity with ease; humanity never even has a glimpse of the great power that annihilates it. In the ethos of *The Genocides*, there is no spiritual world, no God, nothing to suggest that human beings are any more than mere animals, to be exterminated as pests in a farm crop. In this, it seems a great distance from *The Businessman*, in which the actions of individual human beings may have far-reaching effects in a universe that is vast in its spiritual dimensions.

His next novel *The Puppies of Terra* (1966) seems like more of the same, with human beings being merely domesticated animals for an extraterrestrial species, but it has hints of what has become a concern central to Disch—the effects of repression on the human capacity to love.

Out of this concern has evolved such fiction as *On Wings of Song* (1978; see separate entry), in which Disch investigates the yearning of the human spirit to simultaneously be free and to be part of a group. In it, society oppresses freedom of thought; people seek elements of freedom in bizarre social rituals, the arts, and in a spiritual quest to be at one with the rhythms of the universe. Its protagonist Weinreb manages to escape the fatal lure of "flying," in which the spirits of people may be caught forever in the rhythm of the rotation of the Earth, and he almost manages to attain a degree of spiritual freedom through his singing, but the amoral, antiritual society in which he has grown up destroys him with one of its perverted progeny—an assassin whose actions are motivated by a stunted personality and a repressed spiritual life.

This focus on spiritual freedom presages Disch's next two novels for adults, *The Businessman* and *The M.D.: A Horror Story* (1991; see separate entry).

In *The Businessman*, Disch's authorial voice has lost the brashness found in the early novels; in its place is a melancholy voice tempered with humor—Disch seems to at last understand, care for, and sympathize with his characters. In common with most of his work is the stylish prose, which is beautiful enough to attract an audience for its own graceful merits. Yet, the maturity of Disch's voice does represent an end to his investigation of spirituality, not has he abandoned his bitter criticism of a society that oppresses the spirit—spirits are oppressed throughout *The Businessman*. Further, Disch still writes acidly of aspects of American society that limit people's minds and their spiritual lives. What seems to be the most important change is what happens to the victims of cruelty and oppression—the novel implies a moral universe in which there are high standards of love and honor to which people may aspire; this leads to redemption for his characters.

Their suffering, meaningless in *The Genocides*, has great meaning in *The Businessman* because they can be released from it.



Suffering is neither final nor eternal; it can be ended.

The M.D. is evidence that *The Businessman* is not Disch's last word on the subject of the human spirit; it is evidence that Disch has the scope of imagination to explore the many possibilities of spiritual growth and the implications of a vision of a universe in which people interact with a spiritual realm that is concerned with human affairs. In *The M.D.*, the spiritual implications of evil are explored, raising new questions that are hard to answer: Is evil inherited—genetic? Is evil the product of spiritual forces outside the material world? Is evil generated by society? In a tale of a warped visionary who uses evil in order to try to do good, Disch offers examples of people who overcome their own evil to become good, loving human beings, as well as of others who once having tasted the fruits of evil find it irresistible. And yes, forces beyond the spiritual world can lure people into evil; the protagonist Billy is pursued by Mercury even after Billy has forgotten about the caduceus and the evil it has wrought. In *The M.D.*, no one controls evil; for all his skill at using the caduceus, William becomes a monstrous being who creates a terrible plague in order to cure another one. It is a frightful lesson, resulting in great suffering, and it is taken to its logical end: Having created the ultimate vessel for his scheme to rule humanity, even clever Mercury cannot control the evil he has created. In spite of the tremendous power of the human spirit to destroy with its devotion to evil, as in *The Businessman*, *The M.D.* offers hope for redemption. In the case of *The M.D.*, a devotion to God, even in someone whose spirit is twisted like a crazed animal—someone capable of extreme cruelty—is just enough, just barely enough, to thwart evil; as in *The Businessman*, there is hope for redemption.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994