

By Love Possessed Short Guide

By Love Possessed by James Gould Cozzens

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Characters

James Gould Cozzens's own brand of realism is perhaps at its best in his development of characters. His minute examination of important moments in characters' lives leads to his ability to people his novels with an unusual number of well-rounded characters.

Ironically, this novel is a kind of Bildungsroman, a story containing the coming of age of Arthur Winner, Jr., a lawyer in his fifties. Arthur's background has produced in him a dedication to the principle of reason, yet he discovers, one weekend, that a combination of events has been building in him for many years that will force him to reevaluate his unswerving commitment to reason. As a young judge, Fred Dealy, wisely observes "Whatever happens, happens because a lot of other things have happened already.

When it gets to where you come in — well, it's bound to be pretty late in the day." Arthur assumes that he can control events by subjecting them to reason, as he has done with his early affair with Marjorie Penrose, the wife of his law partner. But he discovers that some events have a life and a momentum of their own. In another incident, he feels that his agreeing to defend Ralph Detweiler, the brother of his legal secretary, Helen, will be enough to comfort her. Yet Helen feels so disgraced and betrayed when Ralph jumps bail that she commits suicide, a very unreasonable eventuality that Arthur had not foreseen. Thus, Arthur learns that reason cannot be the exclusive basis for his actions, since it does not likewise govern the actions of those around him. In an ideal situation, reason would work, but the world is far from ideal, and Arthur must learn to act within the actual.

He is assisted in his lesson by Julian Penrose, his partner and friend, who is crippled by polio. When Arthur tells Julian about Noah Tuttle's crime, Arthur is surprised to discover that Julian has known about the embezzlement for quite a while. Julian has been waiting for Arthur to make the discovery, since that moment, Julian knew, would be critical. Arthur would have to decide between exposing Noah and becoming his accomplice. Julian has lived with compromise all his life. His polio has forced him to find ways to be happy in a world that was not particularly accommodating to men in wheelchairs, and he has lived for years with the knowledge that Arthur Winner and Marjorie Penrose had had an affair. His chief emotion about the affair is gratitude toward the two, who had the decency to act reasonably, not only in ending the affair but also in not confronting Julian with the facts. Julian had known, of course, but he treated the affair according to one of the fundamental rules of evidence — that which does not appear does not exist.

Since Arthur and Marjorie have kept their affair to themselves, no action has been required, and under the circumstances, that is the best that can be done. Again, the ideal was never a possibility: Once the affair had begun, it could not be undone. But Arthur and Marjorie had had the power to keep the affair from ruining a marriage, a friendship, and a partnership, and they had done that. So, since Julian understands compromise, understands living with diminished capabilities, he is the one to counsel Arthur not to expose Noah Tuttle. Again, since Noah had already done the deed before



Arthur and Julian had ever come onto the scene, the ideal was removed from the realm of possibility. No action, this late in the game, could simply remove the crime. Arthur's only choices, as Julian points them out, are to expose Noah, destroying the eighty-year-old man's only consolation (his reputation for honesty) or to keep quiet, not letting Noah or anyone else know that the secret is out. Arthur chooses the latter action, not because it is a reasonable one, but because he comes to realize that Noah's act, done out of love and concern for his friends and fellow investors, while it may not have been the right thing to do, was certainly the best thing to do. He therefore allows his reason to be overcome, and he decides to keep Noah's secret, even though he must also, in doing so, accept the responsibility to carry on the deception should Noah die before all the trusts are put back to rights. Julian's wisdom, his knowledge that the world often demands unreasonable solutions, makes him Arthur's mentor, for it is through Julian Penrose that Arthur Winner, with the insulation of his upper-class background stripped away, finally comes of age.

Social Concerns

Cozzens does not use his novels as a forum for his personal views, so they do not contain broad statements on social issues. Cozzens tries, above all, to draw a realistic picture of life, whatever his subject might be. Thus, the social issues in a particular novel are simply those that happen to be present in the situation Cozzens has chosen to explore. Since he often, as in *By Love Possessed*, writes about professional men, in this case lawyers, his social concerns are centered around the examination of upper-class values and around the relationship between the man and his work. Arthur Winner, the main character in *By Love Possessed*, sees himself as a man of reason, and he sees reason as a supreme quality, as life's only necessity. Yet Winner, in choosing to cover for Noah Tuttle, comes to realize that a decision based totally on emotion — on love — can be the right decision. Winner learns that a personal code of conduct is fine for most situations, but the element of chance in life often produces situations in which a usually reliable and beneficial code, if it is adhered to strictly, actually works evil. Thus, Cozzens's social concerns are usually general. He seems in this novel to believe that reason can be a negative principle, yet in *S.S. San Pedro* (1931), Anthony Beadell fails because he lacks reason. Cozzens examines codes of conduct in general, whether they are military, professional, moral, or merely personal, and asserts that any code, applied uniformly to every situation, will eventually work harm.

Techniques

Cozzens's primary technique here and in most of his fiction is his own brand of realism, a realism which is marked by the extreme compression of time. *By Love Possessed* is, by anyone's standards, a long book, yet it covers a period of only forty-nine hours. The events that take place within that time are, necessarily, told in great detail.

This method has the effect of demonstrating the complexity of life as Cozzens perceives it and of heightening the sense of realism, giving the story greater credibility. The method also keeps the story moving, for even though little time elapses, so much happens that there is little chance of becoming bored. Amazingly, although Cozzens fills in the past through conversation and introspection, he does not use flashbacks. He manages to compress events into a very small period and to stay, chronologically, within that period. There are no tricks to distract or confuse the reader. Cozzens remains faithful to his vision of the writer's job.



Themes

This novel centers on the theme of reason versus passion. Arthur Winner, a lawyer modeling himself after his lawyer father, is the man of reason who, within the forty-nine hours covered by the novel, must confront and act upon situations arising out of passion. Arthur discovers that Noah Tuttle, now at eighty the senior partner in the law firm, had, during the Depression, embezzled money from trust accounts to prevent the failure of the Brocton Rapid Transit Company and the subsequent ruin of its many local investors. Over the years, Noah has made clever investments by means of which he has slowly covered almost all the shortages. Arthur must decide whether to turn Noah in — the correct and reasonable act — or to allow him to continue to make his investments, a decision which would make Arthur a legal accomplice, obliging him to continue the scheme in the event of Noah's death. Arthur struggles with his respect for Noah and his knowledge that Noah's act was an unselfish one, even a heroic one, for Noah risked his own career and his unspotted reputation.

This situation allows for a full treatment of the conflict between reason and passion and for Cozzens to explore, once more, the notion that no one code of conduct is either adequate or desirable.

This theme thus leads to the secondary theme of the novel, the fact that circumstances and chance occurrences severely limit the actions people can take in any crisis. Every situation calls for action, yet action is limited by what is possible under the circumstances.

Noah Tuttle, whose honor was sacred to him and who valued his reputation for honesty above all else, found himself compelled, out of love for his friends and fellow townspeople, to commit a crime, a crime he would be forced to repeat, for the best of motives, all his life. Likewise, Arthur Winner, faced with his discovery of Noah's secret, finds that there is no ideal solution, no action that can make everything right again. For Cozzens, the proof of Arthur's manhood, the action that really makes him a winner, is that, under the severe limitations life places on the ideal, Arthur is able to act within the possible, to take the best action he can under the circumstances and to live with the consequences of that decision.

Adaptations

Almost before the book came off the presses, Cozzens sold the movie rights; estimates of how much he was paid range from \$100,000 to \$250,000. The film, a 1961 United Artists release, does not attempt to deal with the novel in all its depth. Instead, Cozzens's novel is reduced to the level of soap opera a la *Peyton Place*. Director John Sturges consciously chose to eliminate the introspective qualities of the novel, saying, "If you want that, read the book." This forgettable, superficial film stars Efrem Zimbalist, Jr. as Arthur Winner, Jason Robards as Julian Penrose, and Lana Turner as Marjorie.

Literary Precedents

Two precedents bear mentioning.

First, Cozzens stands naturally at the logical end of the movement of literary realism. Once the portrayal of "life as it is" became desirable, then a Cozzens became almost inevitable, for his method renders action in a way that is very close to the way action happens in life.

There are interruptions and inconsistencies in the events Arthur Winner must deal with, largely because the author is committed to portraying life with all its warts. Cozzens refuses to tidy up reality.

The second precedent is the dramatic monologue, as practiced by Robert Browning. Cozzens does not randomly choose any forty-nine hours to portray; he chooses the forty-nine hours. These two days are the most crucial ones in the lives of all the characters involved: Arthur, Julian, Noah, Marjorie, Helen, Ralph, and the rest. So much of what has been happening for the last forty years comes together in this period that Cozzens has ample material for a long novel. This technique is reminiscent of Browning's monologues, where he catches a character at a crucial moment, a turning point in his life, and allows the character to speak, revealing more about himself in a short poem than a thirdperson narrator could have done in a much longer work.



Related Titles

Since Cozzens's whole career marks his movement toward greater and greater realism, all his novels are related to this one. But his use of this particular method begins with *Castaway* (1934) and continues throughout the rest of his career. By the publication of *The Just and the Unjust* (1942), Cozzens had perfected the method, and he used it best in *Guard of Honor* (1948), his Pulitzer Prize winner, and in *By Love Possessed*, his best seller.

While Bus Beal's problem takes center stage, the principal player in *Guard of Honor* turns out to be Col.

Norman Ross, a peacetime judge who, as an older man of reason, acts as Beal's mentor. As the story unfolds, Ross is the guard of Beal's honor. He recognizes that his commanding officer's will is frozen, and he manages, by doing what he can within the context set out for him, to hold the situation together, to maintain the status quo, until Beal can act again. Ross, a kind of grown-up Anthony Beadell, realizes both that the individual cannot control the chance occurrences that govern his life — cannot, that is, prevent chance from introducing chaos into an otherwise ordered existence — and that the most important test of a person's character is his ability to act effectively within what is possible, to choose the best among the available choices. This theme is emphasized when the touring Inspector General comments on what constitutes effective command: "You can't order a man to flap his wings and fly; but you can always order as many qualified pilots as you have to take as many planes as you have and fly the wrong way to the wrong place at the wrong time." Judgment, then, consists of ignoring the nonexistent ideal situation and avoiding misguided or mistaken choices.

As is usual in a Cozzens novel, *Guard of Honor* explores several aspects of professional (in this case military) life. The novel addresses the conflict between a sense that past events determine present actions and the capacity of an individual to control his destiny.

Major General Bus Beal's rapid rise in rank occurred in combat, where he always seemed to make the right choices. The reader sees him, however, in a crisis of confidence brought on by his youth, his frustration over his noncombat assignment, his uncertainty about his actual abilities, and, the catalyst, an on-base racial crisis centering on an all-black bomber crew. Beal must act, yet he is uncertain about his capacity to handle the situation. Either he will control his own fate or he will be carried along on a tide of history about which he can do nothing. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that Beal's combat record is spotless, yet the greatest crisis of his career arises during his command of a flight training school in Ocanara, Florida. Through this ironic situation, Cozzens comments on men's lack of control over the chance events that shape their destinies.

As a supporting theme, Cozzens explores the extent to which characters resolve great issues through small actions. Beal thinks that his noncombat assignment puts him in the



backwaters of the war, in an unimportant role, yet Cozzens's juxtaposition of what is happening in Ocanara with what is happening in Europe and the Pacific indicates that without Ocanara, victory would be impossible. In addition, during Beal's crisis of inaction, Colonel Norman Ross, Beal's Air Inspector, holds the situation together by taking care of details. For example, he accompanies a visiting Inspector General to the hospital to present the Distinguished Flying Cross to a wounded black pilot; in so doing, Ross helps defuse the racial situation and keep the peace until Beal's period of self-doubt has passed and he is once more capable of action.

Compression of time is Cozzens's major fictional device, and in *Guard of Honor* he compresses both time and events into a three-day period. The book is divided into chapters entitled "Thursday," "Friday," and "Saturday."

Cozzens has chosen to portray a seemingly unimportant aspect of World War II, yet his novel emphasizes its importance. Compressing events into three days tends to magnify their importance, while Cozzens achieves a kind of balance by juxtaposing events in Ocanara with news of and speculation about the war. This combination of compression and juxtaposition reveals the relationships among events and shows the distant effects of seemingly insignificant occurrences.



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