

# Carpenter's Gothic Short Guide

## Carpenter's Gothic by William Gaddis

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# Characters

Like Amy Joubert in *J R*, Elizabeth Booth is an attractive daughter of a wealthy tycoon (the former head of Vorakers Consolidated Reserve [VCR], in southeast Africa). Her husband, Paul Booth, is a fast-talking capitalist who has lost much of Elizabeth's money through bad investments and ill-advised schemes. Now financially strapped, they have moved from New York City to a rented house up the Hudson — a ninety-year-old house in "Carpenter's Gothic" style — where Paul hopes to make it big as a media consultant. One of his clients is Reverend Elton Ude, an evangelical preacher from the rural South who with Paul's help parlays an accidental drowning during a baptism into a providential call for a multimedia crusade against the forces of evil, a.k.a. the powers of darkness: communism, teachers of evolution, the "Jew liberal press," and secular humanists everywhere.

Since he is almost always gone, Liz is lonely and bored at home, visited only occasionally by her younger brother Billy. Enter the owner of their house, McCandless, a geologist who did the original exploration of the African ore field that is now up for grabs between VCR and Reverend Ude (Ude has a mission and radio station there). Disgusted at CIA involvement with movements toward independence in Africa, McCandless left that country and drifted for years, during which time he married, had a son Jack (who once attended school with Billy), wrote a novel about his African experiences with the CIA, divorced, married a younger woman named Irene, who left him two years before the novel begins. He is presently hounded by a CIA agent named Lester, a former colleague of his Africa days, who is convinced McCandless retains vital information regarding the ore field under dispute. In the end, McCandless, unable to convince Liz to accompany him, leaves. And Paul, who is mugged, is \$10,000 richer because he keeps for himself a bribe Ude intended for the FCC and Senator Teakell (an important, if onedimensional, character, who represents the corrupt U.S. government). After Liz dies of a heart attack (and after Billy is killed when his plane is shot down), Paul immediately sets about securing her money for himself.

## Social Concerns

The most notable social aspect of Carpenter's Gothic is its all-encompassing depiction of the deterioration of society. There is no fully realized love in the novel. Nothing very positive happens to any of its characters. Even everyday activities seem to be hazardous and doomed to failure: objects are constantly knocked over, no good news comes over the radio or television, food is repeatedly burned, cars and trucks break down, clocks and newspapers provide information which proves to be false.



## Techniques

Paul's refrain, "fit the pieces together you see how fit the . . . damn pieces together," represents Gaddis's challenge to the reader. It is not easy to carry out. Gaddis leaves readers in the dark quite often: the initials VCR are used without revealing what they stand for until the end; a letter from Thailand arrives and its contents are divulged, again, not until the end; and names are dropped but not identified for pages. A description of the house itself — as "a patchwork of conceits, borrowings, deceptions . . . a hodgepodge of good intentions like one last ridiculous effort at something worth doing even on this small a scale" — can work quite well as a description of the novel.

However, according to Steven Moore, the novel is highly symmetrical: the action takes place during one month's time (October to November 1983), and chapters are arranged symmetrically: 1 and 7, 2 and 6, 3 and 5 are linked in various ways, while chapter 4, at the center, contains most of the climactic action of the novel.



# Themes

The deteriorating social environment depicted in Carpenter's Gothic contributes significantly to one of its major themes. In such a world where nothing goes well, how can individuals find solace or meaning? The answer, in Carpenter's Gothic, is that they do not. One of the main characters, McCandless, reads his fate in a book (V. S. Naipaul's *Mimic Men*): "A man, I suppose, fights only when he hopes, when he has a vision of order . . . . But there was my vision of a disorder which it was beyond any one man to put right." McCandless's bleak vision has been seen as representing Gaddis's. References to the apocalypse and Armageddon toward the end of the novel indicate that there is nothing whatsoever that follows this meaningless earthly existence — and if that is the case, all the events of the novel are rendered insignificant.

One related theme would be that, in a world where there is so little hope, truth becomes a slippery entity. Ambiguity, introduced in the very first line of Carpenter's Gothic — "The bird, a pigeon was it? or a dove" — prevails. In a complex post-modern world, nothing seems clear-cut. Another related theme is how the distortions of Christ's message by modern-day Christians have led to an absolutist mentality that has contributed greatly to the diseased state of present-day society, resulting in the kind of self-serving Bible-quoting heard from Lester, and the cold war ideology espoused by the president in the New York Post headline appearing at the novel's (and perhaps the world's) end: **PREZ: TIME TO DRAW THE LINE AGAINST EVIL EMPIRE**. One last theme would be a focus on the creation (and again, the worth) of fiction, here depicted through McCandless.

## Literary Precedents

The Book of Revelations is the most frequently cited biblical text, and there are long quotations from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Like Bronte's novel, Carpenter's *Gothic* both draws from and parodies the conventions of gothic fiction. Set around Halloween, the novel employs several gothic elements: the isolated mansion, the mysterious locked room, an endangered maiden, the mysterious stranger, and even a picture's moving eyes (here those on a magazine cover). Gaddis makes ample use of Shakespeare, particularly the sonnet, "That time of year thou mayst in me behold" in the context of the Liz/McCandless romance.

## Related Titles

Like William Faulkner and John Barth, Gaddis refers unabashedly to his previous works or characters in Carpen-ter's Gothic. The story line, and even some of the names (Ude and Teakell, for example) come from J R (one reviewer has said that the main plot of Carpenter's Gothic comes from seven pages of J R). Liz refers to The Recognitions twice. In its focus on writers writing, Carpenter's Gothic echoes the depiction of Jack Gibb's composition of Agape Agape in J R, and Otto's struggles to concoct his play and Esme's to write her poetry in The Recognitions.





# Copyright Information

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