

The Demolished Man Short Guide

The Demolished Man by Alfred Bester

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Demolished Man Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Copyright Information.....	8

Characters

While the protagonist of *The Demolished Man* is Lincoln Powell, Ben Reich is more than just a foil used to challenge Powell and to illustrate the policeman's nature. In a sense, the novel deals with both a hero, Powell, and an antihero, Reich (whom the hero cannot defeat singlehandedly).

By placing Powell in the role of a police prefect, Bester allows the reader to follow the investigation of a major crime from the point of view of a representative of society, one who believes in and strives to protect society from the antisocial elements that would destroy it. The attribution of extrasensory powers to the protagonist, however, allows the reader to go below the surface of the casual event to explore the psychological elements involved.

There is also an interesting facet in Powell's character that in itself divulges an antisocial impulse. On occasion Powell is overcome by an urge, which he labels Dishonest Abe, to tell the most outrageous lies. In contrast to Commissioner Crabbe, an unimaginative, insensitive, and reactionary bureaucrat who epitomizes a stagnant society, Powell manifests one of the prime aspects needed for a society to be able to advance, a sense of humor at society's expense. By incorporating this small flaw in Powell's character, Bester implies that the best people in a society are in some minor ways antithetical to it or they could not be encouraged to try to change it. They, too, are misfits.

It is this component of Powell's nature that permits him to identify with Reich and to realize that they share many of the same characteristics. The difference is that Powell has a social conscience and Reich is almost completely self-oriented. That "Reich is one of the rare Universe-shakers . . . a child as yet, but about to mature" is not just Powell's conclusion, but the reader's too, for, like Powell, the reader understands that Reich is two men, one of them "fine," the other "rotten," and that Powell and Reich are in some ways mirror images. The full delineation of Reich's character, particularly through the utilization of a heavily psychological subtext, reinforces the points that Bester makes through the character of Powell not only by means of contrast but also by complementing them.



Social Concerns/Themes

At the base of most of Bester's writing is an interrelated assemblage of social concerns and themes that the author explores in order to draw a lesson or moral. Unlike many writers of popular action fiction, Bester approaches his work with a carefully conceived philosophy of how humankind must evolve out of the precise image of the contemporary world that underlies his philosophical assumptions. Like dramatist George Bernard Shaw, then, Bester creates characters who, when confronted with the weaknesses inherent in modern society, develop into superhumans as a reasonable reaction to their social conditions.

These reactions are individual, but they move the human race forward in a positive direction and serve not only to demonstrate the mechanics of how the race can develop but they provide guidance in terms of where that development must head as well.

The plot of *The Demolished Man* involves a number of social concerns.

First of all, the novel is a mystery story, but it is not a traditional whodunit. The reader knows from the beginning that Ben Reich intends to murder his business rival, Craye D'Courtney. Thus, on one level, *The Demolished Man* explores the concept of business ethics. Clearly this is not a major concern of Bester's, yet throughout the story he includes economic details that are projections of current trends (or contemporary practices are set in a future context) in which the mass of humanity is seen being exploited to satisfy the greed and hunger for power of various characters.

Murder, of course, is the ultimate antisocial act. And, by not focusing on the detective's trying to determine who committed the crime, Bester emphasizes not the intellectual puzzle of the chase but rather the psychological puzzle of motivation. What makes the contest between Reich and the prefect of police, Lincoln Powell, extraordinary is the fact that Powell is a Class 1 Esper — he is endowed with an extrasensory perception ability to read human minds. Reich, therefore, cannot escape detection but, ironically, while Powell can prove that Reich killed his rival, he cannot provide a motive for doing so, in part because the murderer himself does not recognize his motivation.

Through a tangle of incidents involving sex, drugs, and a number of violent acts, Powell finally comes to realize that Reich was D'Courtney's illegitimate son and that the killer, a latent Esper, intuited this and sought revenge for his father's having abandoned him and his mother when he was a child.

This situation is compounded by D'Courtney's terrible feelings of guilt, Powell's love for D'Courtney's daughter, Barbara, who is Reich's half sister and who suffers a nervous breakdown when she witnesses the brutal murder, and the nature of Reich himself — a man of tremendous intellect and talent who has been perverted by events, a situation symbolically expressed in the figure of *The Man With No Face* who constantly stalks him in his dreams.



Once Powell has determined exactly what has happened and why, he is compelled by his own sense of duty to mankind to risk his life through the medium of Mass Cathexis Measure (MCM) in order to overcome Reich. In MCM one person functions as a focal point through which the energy of other Espers is funneled. Survival is not likely, but Powell realizes that the only way that he can defeat Reich is to 1077 erase Reich's personal psychological sense of reality (and this must be done before Reich consolidates his mental powers to the extent that he can virtually control the universe).

When Powell has accomplished his goal, Reich can be subjected to a treatment called Demolition. The procedure is an arduous one whereby the individual's personality is slowly stripped away, layer by layer. Once the primal layer is reached, the individual is reeducated — salvaged — so that society can take advantage of all of the good talents that allowed the person to be successfully evil.

The dual nature of man (impulses to both good and evil), psychological motivations, enlightened approaches to crime and punishment, these are the social concerns that run through *The Demolished Man*. In the end, although not as obviously delineated as in his later novels, Bester is also saying that humanity is basically good and improvable. In this case, extrasensory perception is the means, for once mankind understands and shares Powell's talent, it will recognize that, as he claims, "there is nothing in man but love and faith, courage and kindness, generosity and sacrifice. All else is only the barrier of your blindness. One day we'll all be mind to mind and heart to heart." The forced maturing of a single man represents the final maturing of the race.



Techniques

Bester's primary talent is as a storyteller, and in *The Demolished Man* he approaches his tale from a different perspective than that of the conventional detective story. For one thing, he uses shifting points of view. This leads to a confused sense of identification in the reader and thereby reinforces the author's main themes. He inserts the Powell-Barbara D'Courtney love plot to help steer the reader to identify with Powell, yet he includes the possibility of a Reich-Duffy love plot to demonstrate that the world is more yin and yang in its composition than it is black and white. The structure of the novel involves a series of subplots that parallel the main plot, again as a way of using form to parallel content, simultaneously expressing and illustrating Bester's themes. Even the humorous components of the novel serve a similar function.

The most imaginative technical device in *The Demolished Man* is the usage of print to make certain points. The spelling of some of the names (such as I/4maine for Quartermaine), for example, and the use of language suggest a futuristic setting (the solar system in the spring of the year 2301 — and it may be significant that spring, the time of rebirth, is indicated). The use of italics to represent mind-to-mind communications, and the occasional representation of italicized words in patterns on the page, graphically capture the feeling and cross-talk that might result.

Literary Precedents

The dual nature of mankind is discussed throughout literary history, most notably in the Bible, and the motivation of revenge can be traced back to Homer in classical literature and to Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (c.1586) and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c.1601) in more recent literature.

Likewise, mystery stories have existed since before prose was developed as an art form. One of the first to link the mystery story with science fiction was Anthony Boucher, who published *Rocket to the Morgue* under the pen name of H. H. Holmes in 1942, and *The Demolished Man* is one of the most important novels to follow in that tradition. Space travel and extrasensory perception are science fiction staples that date back to the works of H. G. Wells, Olaf Stapleton, and Hugo Gernsback.

The use of a nearly stream-of-consciousness approach to dialogue, the insertion of dream fragments, and the imaginative use of type is a melange of even older literary precedents and Bester's own nature. In *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767), for instance, Laurence Sterne uses type patterns, ink blots, and similar devices to advance his plot and to expose his characters, and James Joyce perfected the stream-of-consciousness technique. Bester had an inquisitive mind and was always trying to be innovative by approaching standard themes from new perspectives, so the linking of elements like this is characteristic of his writing. Actually, he claims that the idea of using typeface symbols in names occurred to him while he was surf-fishing, and he modeled one of his protagonists after a bronze statue of a Roman emperor that stands in the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. Some of his characters' names were taken from telephone books.



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

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

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