

Demons and Shadows Short Guide

Demons and Shadows by Robert Westall

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Overview

The stories contained in *Demons and Shadows* possess all the qualities of fantasy/science fiction as well as realistic fiction. In these writings, set in England a generation ago, the reader experiences the frightening and supernatural through the eyes of realistic characters, including shopkeepers, graveyard superintendents, school teachers, teenagers, and shy ladies, each with their own eccentricities. Westall's narration takes the reader inside the minds of his characters, including the demons and unnamed supernatural creatures. The reader feels a creature's driving hunger to eat away at the memories of its victim as well as the malevolent nature of a corpse who desecrates graves. Readers share the transformation of Maude, a shy young woman, who discovers that when she puts on supernatural spectacles, she gains great insight into others, becomes assertive, and gains the ability to lure men. Other stories realistically reflect the confusion of adolescents as they gain greater understanding of themselves and their place in society.

Westall's stories also raise serious social and moral questions. One young man must choose between sacrificing the life of an old wizard and ridding himself of a burdensome gift. Rachel, a young girl, must maintain her goodness and faith in fellow man to save her village from evil. Young teenage boys must cope with the death of their buddy who is killed in a motorcycle crash as well as their disillusionment in the justice system when the drunk driver responsible for the accident is given a light sentence. However, the real appeal of the stories contained in *Demons and Shadows* lies in their vivid description and narratives which draw the reader into bizarre, but believable, encounters with the inexplicable and supernatural.



About the Author

Robert Westall was born October 7, 1929, in Tynemouth, England. He received his bachelor of arts degree from the University of Durham (with high honors), and his doctorate degree from the University of London. He taught art and later became head of the department at Sir John Deane's College as well as serving as head of careers guidance. Westall saw himself as a teacher who wrote. An interview with Westall revealed that he had an extremely happy childhood and shared a close relationship with his father who was the foreman-engineer of a gasworks. His father appears in two of his novels, *The Machine Gunners* and its sequel, *Fathom Five*.

Westall began writing stories for his son, Christopher. The author wanted to share his own childhood with his son, especially what it was like to grow up in England during World War II. Christopher read all Westall's books and bluntly criticized them.

When Christopher was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident at the age of nineteen, Westall continued to write, but he found it extremely difficult and less enjoyable. In reading Westall's works and reading his comments about his son, it becomes clear that they adored one another.

Westall's personality was unique. He said that he loved cats because they are free and because friendship is earned. As a result, nearly all his books and short stories contain cats, and several revolve around cats.

However, Westall had an aversion to large groups, whether political, social, or religious. He said they were like "paying someone to do your thinking for you."

Westall's first novel, *The Machine Gunners*, published in 1975, was a great success.

Set during World War II, it tells the story of teenagers in England who find a downed German plane and steal its machine gun.

They intend to use it to protect England from enemy attacks. Unfortunately, the teens keep their discovery a secret which leads to disaster. The novel's significance is in its realistic portrayal of World War II. *The Machine Gunners* illustrates the emotional and economic stresses that war places upon families and adolescents. Like many of Westall's books, *Machine Gunners* is based on real people from Westall's past. Although criticized for its realistic depiction of war and strong language, *Machine Gunners* won numerous awards, including the British Carnegie Medal in 1976, a Horn Book-Boston Globe Honor Book citation in 1982, and the Laseratten Prize (Germany) in 1988.

The realism found in Westall's works reflect his strong belief that children have a right to know the truth. In several of his novels, the youths are victims of sexual abuse by adults. Although the scenes are in no way explicit, they do demonstrate realistic situations that children sometimes face and the effects such abuse has upon children.

Westall has also been criticized for having children deal with death; however, he observed that teens are especially drawn to catastrophes and that many teens have already had to deal with the death of a loved one. Such commitment to the truth comes from Westall's personal belief that man spends his life creating great structures of lies; therefore, Westall attempts to break through these networks of lies to reveal the truth.

One of the lies that Westall attempts to destroy in his writings is that children are incapable of taking care of themselves. The teens in his novels frequently have the sorts of adventures that teenagers dream of having, such as going off on their own. However, through their adventures, the characters prove themselves to be competent, ingenious, and intelligent. They seem to have a built-in ability to recognize who can be trusted and who should be avoided.

Their "gut instincts" are often more dependable than adult reasoning. For these reasons, the young characters are able to overcome great obstacles, including terrifying encounters with the supernatural.

Besides historical novels like *The Machine Gunners* and its sequel, *Fathom Five*, Westall wrote mysteries and supernatural stories.

The appeal of Westall's stories lies in their ability to reflect the fears, insecurities, sick fantasies, and the bizarre sense of humor of teens. Westall's vivid descriptions also allow the reader to experience the beautiful geographical areas of England with its infinite variety of people and dialects. The reader hears the Cockney accent of the policeman and shopkeeper as well as the king's English of the government official. Adolescents "nip off" or tell one another to "bugger off." The children wear "knickers," "jumpers," and "rubbers," while they eat "bangers," "mash," and "chips." However, Westall's novels also raise serious questions about the validity of war, guilt and the justice system, human cruelty, personal courage, human behavior, and even the behavior of the insane.

Westall's other award winning novels include *The Scarecrows*, which was given a Carnegie Medal by the British American Library Association in 1981. A Horn Book Boston Globe Honor Book citation was also awarded to *The Scarecrows* in 1982. A "Best Books for Young Adults" citation from the American Library Association was awarded to *The Devil on the Road* in 1979, and *Kingdom by the Sea* received the Guardian Award in 1992.

Robert Westall died in 1993 after a bout of pneumonia. He left behind an enormous legacy of books and short stories for children and young adults.

Setting

Realistic settings are an essential trait of Westall's stories. His narratives acquaint the reader with the small villages of England with their shops, churches, tiny cottages, and isolated country lanes. The contrast between the comfortable familiarity of each setting and the sudden appearance of ghostly creatures and supernatural occurrences make such instances even more horrifying to the reader. Westall frequently uses somber, dreamlike settings to foreshadow evil.

In "Rachel and the Angel," the old church where Rachel's father is vicar and where she has amused herself hundreds of times, becomes a place of terror when Rachel discovers a mysterious figure near the altar.

The empty, hollow church reflects Rachel's boredom but also creates a somber, eerie mood. The sanctity of the church provides a stark contrast for the appearance of an evil angel, Zaphael, and the sudden appearance of the Ten Commandments on the wall of the church reveals the sinfulness of those in the village whom Rachel believes are pious.

In "Graveyard Shift," the old graveyard keeper sits in the quiet darkness of his cottage each night. Only the creaking of the rocking chair signals the nightly appearance of spirits of the dead, including one vengeful spirit. In "The Creature in the House," Westall vividly describes the old house with its windowsill where the old woman sits for hours as her mind is gradually drained. The dark, remote corner of the upstairs attic is a place of terror as the reader learns of the evil creature that lives there. Only the cat's terrified hissing signals the unseen creature's presence in the room.

In "The Last Day of Miss Dorinda Moyneux," an old, medieval church becomes the setting of a sexually-repressed corpse who is particularly drawn to young ladies. Westall contrasts the sanctity of the church to the bitter, twisted mind of the ghost. However, Geoff, the main character, is immediately aware that the church "feels wrong." Because of his growing sense of evil, Geoff tries to dissuade Miss Moyneux from bringing her students to the church.

Westall uses the familiar country lanes of an English village for a terrifying and dangerous motorcycle ride where a gang of teenaged boys are chased by an angry motorist in "The Night Out."

It is clear that many of Westall's settings are remembrances of his youth. Westall, once an art critic and antique dealer, describes the antique shop he frequented as a young man and apologizes to its owner for borrowing it for the setting of his story.

Clearly, the country lanes and forests where the gang of boys flee on their motorcycles and the park bench where a wizard suddenly appears are places from Westall's childhood. Westall's stories also recreate England as it was during and shortly following World War II. The author's references to the Luftwaffe, Spitfires, and bomb shelters are



vivid reminders of the terror of World War II and how it forever changed the citizens of England. For instance, in "Gifts from the Sea," Brian, the main character, is sent to his grandmother's to live after his house is nearly destroyed by the German bombings. Brian expresses shock when a stray dog frolics among the barbed wire coils along the shoreline where mines are believed to be buried. Charred pieces of wood floating ashore also remind Brian of the battles which took place offshore a short time ago. Likewise, in "The Making of Me," the memorabilia found in Granda's old wooden box are vivid reminders of the war and its effect upon those who witnessed it firsthand.

Westall's detailed, realistic settings create a somber mood, provide startling contrasts for the appearance of the supernatural, and give historical perspective for his short stories.



Social Sensitivity

While the stories contained in *Demons and Shadows* contain no socially sensitive or controversial issues, they do reflect the personality of the characters and the realistic thoughts of young people. The conscience of Maude, in "The Woolworth Spectacles," reminds her of her religious upbringing, although she chooses to ignore it and to continue wearing the spectacles which bring lustful thoughts and immoral behaviors.

The sexually-repressed corpse in "The Last Day of Miss Dorinda Moyneux" writes disturbing messages on the walls of the church and is drawn to young girls. The language of the adolescents in "A Night Out" realistically portrays the teasing of teenaged boys and their sense of humor regarding bodily functions and sexuality. However, none of these references is explicit.

These stories also raise important moral questions and reflect the social and psychological concerns of young people. Rachael's religious faith and her faith in mankind are tested. Maude demonstrates hypocrisy and manipulation. The young men in "The Night Out" are forced to question their faith in mankind and their own personal values and beliefs. "The Making of Me" demonstrates the evilness of war and its effects upon those who experience it, while "Death of a Wizard" presents a difficult moral choice, choosing life or death for another person in order to ease one's own suffering.

Literary Qualities

The stories contained in *Demons and Shadows* combine the qualities of fantasy fiction, horror, realistic fiction, and myth. Although each story contains supernatural or fantasy elements, each is set in a familiar, realistic setting, drawing the reader into the story. It is from this familiar, everyday background that ghostly evil emerges. The main character's adventure or quest adds mythological elements to many of the stories. Relying on their admirable qualities of courage, faith, ingenuity, and innate goodness, these heroic characters overcome obstacles in order to save others or to gain personal wisdom and understanding.

Both myth and fantasy are present in "Death of a Wizard." The main character receives the gift of insight from a wizard he saves from being run down by a lorry, or truck. However, he quickly learns that knowing the entire truth about an object or person means understanding its pain and suffering. He must make a difficult choice between sacrificing the life of the wizard and ridding himself of his burdensome gift.

Likewise, Brian's secret adventure, or quest, along the deserted beach in "Gifts from the Sea" leads to a cherished, magical gift known only by him.

Elements of horror are found in "Walk on the Wild Side," where a very large cat becomes ravenous and threatens the lives of the townspeople. Likewise, the vampire spirit of the local doctor terrorizes Cem and the recently dead in "Graveyard Shift."

School children are threatened by the evil, sexually-repressed corpse living in the old church in "The Last Day of Miss Dorinda Moyneux." Each of these stories contains terrifying creatures who threaten to destroy the main characters.

A recurring motif in Westall's stories is truth versus appearance. Characters or situations are frequently not as they appear. For instance, Rachel in "Rachel and the Angel" questions whether the appearance of the dark angel is real or merely a result of her desire for something different to amuse her. Maude, in "The Woolworth Spectacles," appears quiet, pious, and non-assertive while in reality she entertains shameful thoughts and manipulates people. In "The Last Day of Miss Dorinda Moyneux," the angry thoughts written on the surface of tombstones appear to be a vicious hoax when the character discovers the presence of an evil, twisted spirit of the dead.

Westall's use of allusions, particularly Biblical allusions, adds depth to his stories while his figurative language vividly portrays the feelings and actions of the main characters.



Themes and Characters

Westall develops his themes by probing the inner thoughts and feelings of the main characters, including some of the ghosts and supernatural creatures. Through their terrifying encounters, some characters mature and gain a new understanding of themselves and others. For instance, "The Making of Me" is a young man's reflection on his strange and frightening grandfather, Granda. As a child, the young man's greatest fear is being left alone with his bizarre and sometimes abusive grandfather. However, one night, in an apologetic act, the grandfather explores a box of memorabilia with his grandson. As Granda relates the significance of each item in the box, his grandson gains a deeper understanding of his grandfather and his war experiences. As an adult, the young man acknowledges the influence his grandfather has had on his life; he also recognizes how they grow more alike with each passing day. In "The Night Out," a gang of teenage boys on motorcycles finds amusement in disturbing lovers who are parked on a dark, country road.

Their prank nearly turns disastrous when a disturbed driver turns vengeful, chasing the boys and attempting to force their motorcycles off the road. Later, when one of the gang is tragically killed in an accident with a drunk driver, the main character realizes that he is mortal, that life is not fair, and that one must eventually leave behind the impetuosity of youth.

"Rachel and the Angel" develops the theme of the power of faith and good in overcoming evil. The main character, Rachel, seeks some new diversion and adventure.

As she roams through the familiar church where her father is vicar, she senses an unearthly presence. She thinks the bird-like creature is merely a product of her fanciful imagination until she watches it unfold its wings, and she feels the heat radiating from its dark shape. The evil angel Zaphael is there to destroy Rachel's faith in the villagers and to prove that the Earth is still a Sodom and Gomorrah. However, Rachel's steadfast loyalty and faith in those she loves demonstrates true goodness to Zaphael and saves the village from destruction. Likewise, in "Graveyard Shift," Cem Robson, the graveyard superintendent, is an understanding man who soothes the restless spirits of those he has recently buried. However, Cem is forced to fight evil when the vampire spirit of Dr. Warwick appears. In doing so, he provides peace for those who have recently passed.

Other themes include the universal theme of the quest. "The Night Out" deals with the quest of maturation. As the main character grapples with the death of his friend, he learns how one moment can change a person's life, understands the importance of relationships, and mourns the inevitable loss of youth. Likewise, in "The Making of Me," the main character gains understanding of his grandfather as well as himself.

Brian's quest in "Gifts from the Sea" is an adventure which leads to the discovery of the mermaid hidden away in a cave.

The strength of the adolescent characters in Westall's stories empowers the reader through their ability to overcome great obstacles, including difficult moral dilemmas and supernatural forces. By demonstrating determination, resourcefulness, wisdom, and courage, the characters build a sense of personal power within the reader.



Topics for Discussion

1. List the traits of fantasy and discuss how those traits are evident in Westall's stories.
2. Discuss various methods used by Westall to build suspense. Which do you think is most effective? Why?
3. Compare/contrast the style of Robert Westall to another horror story writer such as Edgar Allan Poe.
4. Westall states that he feels adolescents have a right to know the truth. What "truths" do you think Westall reveals through these short stories? Give examples.
5. Many of Westall's stories reflect England in the 1940s. How does he recreate this era for the reader? Find examples.
6. Westall once stated that his characters are alone with their consciences. How is this reflected in his short stories?
7. How does Westall foreshadow the appearance of evil in his stories? Give examples.
8. Explain why the evil angel in "Rachel and the Angel" alludes to Sodom and Gomorrah? How do Biblical allusions add terror to the story?
9. Is the character in "Death of a Wizard" right or wrong to sacrifice the life of the wizard? Explain.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the London Blitz. What were the effects upon London and the surrounding countryside? How do you think the Blitz would have affected the lives of teenagers during World War II?
2. How do you think the "Woolworth Spectacles" will continue to affect Maude's life?
3. Research the myths involving mermaids. Where did the stories originate?

What is their basis? What do they symbolize?

4. The main character in "The Making of Me" discovers how his grandfather has affected his life. Write about a person who has had a great influence in shaping your life.

5. Research the history of "horror" stories. Who were some of the first writers of this genre? What characterized their work?

6. Write a poem based on one of the stories. 7. Pretend you are a newspaper writer interviewing the main characters of one of the short stories contained in the collection. Write a news article based on your interview. Remember to answer who, when, what, where, and why.

8. Write the next chapter in one of the character's lives. For instance, what will happen to Maude now? Will she continue to wear the spectacles? What will happen to Brian in "Gifts from the Sea?"

Will he ever reveal his secret?

9. Westall makes several references to the Luftwaffe. What was the Luftwaffe?

Why were they significant? What were Britain's defenses against German air strikes?

For Further Reference

"Westall, R. A." In *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series*, vol. 68. Detroit: Gale, 1998. This entry contains a biographical sketch of Westall along with a list of his works and interesting sidelights.

"Westall, R. A." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 23. Detroit: Gale, 1981. This article contains a biographical sketch of Westall and personal comments from the author.

Related Titles/Adaptations

"The Woolworth Spectacles" and "The Last Day of Miss Dorinda Molyneaux" also appear in a ghost story collection for adults titled *Antique Dust*. Short stories contained in *Demons and Shadows* also are found along with other ghost stories by Westall in *Rachel and the Angel and Other Stories*, *The Haunting of Chas McGill and Other Stories*, and *Echoes of War*.

Related Web Sites

"Learning about Robert Westall." 2001.

Kay E. Vandergrift's Special Interest Page

<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/special/kay/westall.html> March 16, 2002. A brief biography of the author, list of his published works, and critical commentary.



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