

# **A Graveyard for Lunatics Short Guide**

## **A Graveyard for Lunatics by Ray Bradbury**

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# Characters

The unnamed narrator in some ways resembles Bradbury himself. Like the narrator, Bradbury wrote motion picture screenplays in the early 1950s and even worked with director John Huston on *Moby Dick* (1956). The narrator, a talented writer, is naive, idealistic, and unwilling to let an idea go before he has worked out all of its possibilities.

This last factor makes him a dogged investigator; when presented with the mystery of the undead Arbuthnot, he relentlessly tracks down clues. He feels a deep personal need to know the answers to nagging questions.

He is surrounded by a cast of bizarre and eccentric characters. Some of them are based on real-life figures. For instance, Fritz Wong — an imperious director who only respects people if they stand up to him and call him names the way he calls them names — seems to be based on director Fritz Lang, with a dash of the personality of Eric von Stroheim. The novel's special effects wizard, Roy Holdstrom, seems based on the real-life figure, Ray Harryhausen. Roy's imaginary worlds are more real to him than the people around him; he has foregone almost all human relationships in order to devote himself to the creation of dinosaurs and bizarre beasts for motion pictures.

When many of his creations are destroyed, he hangs himself and later returns as one of the novel's several undead personalities. Other delightfully strange characters include a make-up artist who made Lenin look better in death than he did in life; a man who has played Jesus Christ in so many motion pictures that he has lost his own identity, becoming a combination of a sinner and a saint; a doctor whose job is cleaning up and moving dead people rather than healing; and the Beast, a man with a hideously deformed face and a depraved nature.

Holdovers from *Death Is a Lonely Business* (1985) are the narrator, the detective and part-time novelist Crumley, and Blind Harry, whose sense of smell is so good that he can tell exactly what has and has not been in Arbuthnot's crypt for twenty years.

## Social Concerns

A Graveyard for Lunatics: Another Tale of Two Cities is a zany retrospective of the "studio system" of the Hollywood motion picture industry in its decline. From the 1920s through the 1940s, Hollywood studios contracted the exclusive services of actors and other important personnel, thus giving the studios great power over the careers of their employees. Studio heads such as Samuel Goldwin and Louis B. Mayer became famous for building industry giants. By the early 1950s, the studio owners were losing control of their personnel; unions, court rulings, and the desire of actors to control their own pursuits ended the studios' ability to dominate motion picture careers. A Graveyard for Lunatics takes place in 1954, when one studio, Maximus Films, is reaching the end of its heyday. During the novel, the studio falls apart; by the end, much of it has literally been leveled, with sets uprooted and buildings razed.



# Techniques

Several reviewers have pointed out what they believe to be the novel's major flaw: Almost any reader is going to solve the mystery of the undead Arbuthnot before getting half way through the novel. A much greater flaw than the easily-solved mystery is the use of the Beast as a kind of phantom-of-the-opera figure lurking about the back lots of Maximus Films. The idea of transplanting the classic figure from the cellars of an opera house to the dark old sets of an aging motion-picture studio is a cliché; it has been the central plot of some uninspired made-for-television movies.

The transparency of the mystery is not a major obstacle to enjoying the novel. Instead, it provides a structure which Bradbury uses to establish the central aspect of the novel — its blending of fantasy and reality. Maximus Films, like other Hollywood studios, has been manufacturing fantasies for film audiences for decades. The novel takes the fantastic images of motion pictures and blends them into the real world, making fantasy and reality one.

Special effects artists such as Roy Holdstrom create monsters that seem alive in motion pictures; in *A Graveyard for Lunatics* these bizarre creatures come to life in the forms of the novel's various weird characters. A key to the success of this blend of fantasy and reality is the fact that the novel never fully becomes a fantasy. Bradbury shows how motion pictures shape people's lives by shaping their imaginations; if the novel were to slip completely into fantasy, this important aspect would be lost. The mystery format is essential, therefore, because the detective must slowly uncover the reality under the fantasy, showing the real human drama behind the man who plays Christ, the make-up genius, and the imagination of people who run the studio. The real mystery of *A Graveyard for Lunatics* is not whether Arbuthnot is alive or dead; the real mystery is how people create motion picture worlds that seem more realistic than the ordinary world. This is, along with the many interesting characters, part of the fun of the novel.

Also enjoyable is the humor which is present throughout. Death ordinarily is not a funny subject, but the humor in *A Graveyard for Lunatics* is black comedy.

The novel is written in two distinct movements, and the comedy follows two distinct directions. The first movement begins at the novel's opening and ends with Roy's hanging. During this movement, the comedy focuses on the narrator's attempts to make sense out of the confused world of the motion picture studio. There is a mystery to be solved, but it is not an urgent one.

There is time for the narrator to meet the important characters of the novel, and the humor evolves out of their eccentric personalities. For instance, Fritz Wong comically curses at everyone he meets, and the wiser ones curse right back at him. The second movement is darker and denser than the first, reaching its climax with the rebirth of Roy. In this movement, people die, and the studio itself is very nearly destroyed. The narrator ceases to be the outsider looking in on the world of movie-making; he has become another eccentric part of that world. As he explores it, he uncovers some of the deeper



mysteries of the imagination, such as the roots of fear. But these mysteries are presented humorously, so they do not become too weighty. For instance, the mad dash of the narrator, Crumley, and Blind Harry through the underground passage is at once scary and funny; they bump and bang into each other like the Keystone Cops.



# Themes

Death is pervasive in *A Graveyard for Lunatics*. Maximus Films is located "across the way" from Green Glades cemetery. The novel opens with: "Once upon a time there were two cities within a city. One was light and one was dark." The light city is the motion picture studio, the dark one the cemetery. As the novel begins, the studio is becoming like the cemetery: It is dying.

Buried in Green Glades are many former members of the motion picture industry. The cemetery had begun as a real estate scam, with the studio profiting from burying its people there. The most illustrious of the cemetery's dead is James Charles Arbuthnot, former head of Maximus Films, and the man who made the studio successful. He died in an auto accident on Halloween in 1934. The plot of *A Graveyard for Lunatics* accelerates when its narrator, a new screenplay writer for the studio, sees Arbuthnot on a ladder looking out over the cemetery's high wall on Halloween, twenty years after his death.

Death is a common theme in literature, and it is a challenge for any writer to present it originally. Bradbury's endeavor succeeds; many of the living characters in the novel are dying, and some actually die. However, he adds an interesting twist to his story by bringing the dead to life. Thus, not only is Maximus Films becoming like Green Glades, but Green Glades is becoming like Maximus Films. In fact, one of the occupants of Green Glades is actually running the studio, obscuring the distinction between the living and the dead.

The theme of death is further enriched by the novel's portrayal of those who should be dead but are instead vital, active, and lively. One such character is Constance, an aging former film star who skinny dips — and in fact, is naked most of the time — bounces about with vigor, and in general behaves as if she were a happy-go-lucky young woman. Instead of the clichéd actress mooning about her lost days of glory, Bradbury presents a woman for whom living well is what is most important. Constance, the detective Crumley, and Blind Harry all serve as reminders that the past is dead and that the present is for living.

Many of the people at Maximus Films are preoccupied with the past, another theme of *A Graveyard for Lunatics*. Employees, trying to get on with their work, nevertheless feel the burden of decades of tradition and the belief that the present does not measure up to the past. The past certainly has value; a film editor preserves classic films as they were originally made before studio hacks chopped them up to suit their audiences. But her collection sits on shelves gathering dust, unseen by anyone save herself. These classics could provide inspiration and spiritual uplifting to the studio, but the preoccupation with making money has caused the studio to cast aside the part of the past that could most help it survive in the present. The use of old films as symbols of the past is emphasized by their presence in the tunnels beneath Arbuthnot's crypt. These passages lead underground from the cemetery to the studio. When the narrator, Crumley, and Blind Harry race through the passage to the studio, fleeing the Beast, they

are surrounded by old films that resemble skulls and bones. The passage hides a terrible secret about the studio's past, and the dead reels represent this ugly past reaching up out of the ground and corrupting the present.





## Key Questions

Throughout his career, Bradbury has explored the regions of the human imagination, testing their limits. In general, he has presented a positive view of the imagination, presenting its enemies as vile, despicable people. In *A Graveyard for Lunatics*, he explores an industry that thrives on the imagination of its employees, yet often trivializes and stunts that imagination. A good discussion might begin with a discussion of the views of the motion picture industry presented in the novel. Do your experiences watching motion pictures at all parallel the experiences of characters in the book?

Another good way of introducing a discussion of the novel might be to examine how it works out the images of darkness and light, of death and life.

What is Bradbury suggesting by making the graveyard livelier and the studio, supposedly the home of imaginative life, more moribund as the narrative progresses? From there, a discussion might turn to how death becomes more like life and life more like death. This in turn could lead to a focus on the characters. What does Bradbury do to his themes by making characters defy their stereotypes? He has those who in the hands of other authors would be dying, awaiting death, or mired in self-indulgent memories of the past — for instance, the aging motion picture actress who is constantly trying to recover her lost days of youthful glory — instead be paragons of zest and love of life — for instance Constance. What is the point?

Yet another way to approach the novel is to begin with the narrator. He is naive, sometimes surprised at what surprises no one else. He lives by his imagination and is captivated by the imaginative works of others. How much of what he narrates are we readers to believe? When does his imagination seem to defy his common sense?

Why does he seem to mix well with the novel's many off-beat characters? How does Bradbury work out the novel's themes through him? A dangerous — because it can be misleading since the narrator is fictional — but tempting question to explore is whether the narrator should be taken for Bradbury himself, who seems to use much of his own personal experience in Hollywood in the period of the narrative to provide background for the novel's characters and events.

1. Bradbury presents characters who are reminiscent of real-life figures.

How does this affect the tone of the novel? Is it fair for him to use real-life celebrities as inspiration for his characters, particularly since those characters are objects of comedy?

2. What is the meaning of the reels of film that appear in the novel? Do they consistently symbolize anything?

3. Why does Bradbury invite us to laugh at the chaotic destruction of the studio?

4. Are his characterizations appealing, or are they so bizarre that they are repelling?



5. Does reading *A Graveyard for Lunatics* make you wish that he wrote more novels like the ones he wrote in the 1950s and 1960s such as *Fahrenheit 451*, or do you like the direction his long fiction, such as *A Graveyard for Lunatics*, has taken?
6. What does Bradbury have to say about imagination in this novel? The subject of the imagination appears throughout, and people with active imaginations seem to have more fun than those without; but are not some of the characters made unhappy by their imaginations? What does imagination mean in the context of the novel?
7. What does the figure of Arbuthnot represent?
8. Is *A Graveyard for Lunatics* a nostalgic novel? Does it represent a yearning for the past?
9. Does the mystery enhance or sour the novel? Should the mystery have been more difficult to solve? Why have a mystery at all in the novel?
10. People die in the second movement of the novel. To what end? Is there a theme at work in their deaths?
11. What is the point of Roy's death and rebirth?

## Related Titles

In *Death Is a Lonely Business*, the same narrator as that in *A Graveyard for Lunatics* finds a corpse in a lion's cage.

As in the later novel, the plot of *Death Is a Lonely Business* is thin. It is a mystery about someone possibly murdering society's lonely misfits, but its interest lies in its evocation of the post World War II era and in its many zany characters.



# Copyright Information

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