

Gerald's Party Short Guide

Gerald's Party by Robert Coover

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Characters

Like *The Public Burning* (1977), this novel features a broad cast of generally thinly developed characters. This is appropriate, for one issue of the book is the characters' superficiality. It is also effective because Coover narrates the novel from Gerald's point of view, and for a narcissist like Gerald, others exist as extensions of the self. He therefore categorizes most people; his wife is "Betty Crocker," who vacuums and cooks while a bizarre party goes on; he can accept that Alison, the woman he has been planning to seduce, has been gang-banged and regrets that she may not like Gerald so much in the future; he can put his best friend Vic out of his misery with little regret, despite the fact that the cop shot Vic when Vic threatened Gerald because Gerald had sexual relations with Vic's daughter.

The one character who is not a projection of Gerald's personality is the inspector. Like most of Coover's compulsive rationalists, he is also a clown.

In *Pardew*, Coover articulates his characteristic concern with epistemology.

The inspector refuses to accept that Ros died because of some "arbitrary indeterminate and random act," but his procedures for solving the crime are completely irrational. He makes everyone surrender his watch, and later concludes from this evidence that the murder occurred half an hour after the police, summoned to investigate it, arrived. He allows his cops, Fred and Bob, part Keystone Kops in their bumbling and part Gestapo in their lethal sadism, to bully, harass, even to murder Ros's husband. He bags a killer who could not have committed the crime, then leaves Gerald with a houseful of bodies to deal with.

Despite *Pardew's* insistence that all crime is a cause and effect process and that detection is a rational process, he contradicts this in his confession to Gerald's mother-in-law. He had admitted to Gerald that his science is a "discipline" to prepare him as a "vessel for intuition," and he later confides that his great inspirations come as a result of his visions of a woman named Truth, whom he has fallen in love with and whom he saw incarnate in Ros — all of which may explain the zeal with which the inspector examines the body.



Social Concerns/Themes

At its most obvious level, *Gerald's Party* is about the insensitivity and cruelty of certain modes of social interaction. The entire novel covers a party given by the narrator, whose last name and occupation are never revealed, and his amazingly docile wife. During the evening, couples pair off in unexpected groupings, pretentious discussions of art and theater take place, a teenager loses both her virginity and her father, an actress is murdered, a painter commits suicide, a woman dying of cancer breaks a leg and must go to the hospital, a man is bludgeoned to death by police using croquet mallets, another is shot by an overzealous cop then put out of his misery by his best friend Gerald, a plumber is called in to fix a broken toilet, and a dwarf who cannot possibly have committed the murder is arrested for it. While all this is taking place, the party continues around the various bodies and reminders of the deaths of Ros, Roger, Tania, and Vic.

At the most elementary level, then, *Gerald's Party* suggests issues such as uninhibited hedonism and their implications for human relationships.

As is usual in Coover's fiction, however, much more subtle issues are at work. Critic Jackson Cope argues persuasively that the novel is about the "crime of memory" and those partial, therefore false, fictions memory dredges up. This seems particularly true of Gerald's constant preoccupation with incompletely recalled erotic encounters in Europe and sexual adventures with Ros, the first murder victim, while the present moment descends into chaos: his guests are being killed; another is bludgeoned by the police; his wife is sexually abused by officers questioning her; and his four-year-old son is exposed to gruesome scenes that will scar him forever. The idea that the novel is about the fictive tyranny of memory is further supported by such evidence as the allusion in both novel and its predecessor (the story "You Must remember This") to the film classic *Casablanca* and one philosophical victim's interpretation of *Lot's Wife*, one of many semi-pornographic plays Ros was in, as "only turning back is [a crime]; rigidified memory, attachment to the past."

Finally, *Gerald's Party* is about a theme that has been latent in Coover's fiction since the beginning: narcissism, or excessive self-contemplation and self-love. Ros, an actress with little talent for lines but who enjoys exhibitionism, whether on stage, in film, or in photographs, represents a literal form of narcissism which is mocked in her death, when her body parts are insensitively exposed and their lifelessness casts confusion on everyone. The painter Tania is narcissistic in that many of her paintings feature herself as the central subject and most are adorned with images from Tania's past works. Like Narcissus in classical lore, Tania drowns; unlike Narcissus, she dies by suicidal (not accidental) selfcontemplation. Nymph Sally Ann, in her campaign to seduce Gerald, sews patches containing prurient slogans to her jeans to call attention to her flowering sexuality and does not mind when she and Gerald are discovered in a compromising position.



The two most important characters are also narcissists. Gerald recalls Ros's appeal not merely as sexual but as a series of loving hugs and greetings that made him feel special; Alison, the woman Gerald has planned this party to seduce, appeals to him for similar reasons. He describes her eyes in narcissistic terms: "those beckoning pools of hers which yet reflected my own gaze." His party is planned to minister to his self-love, but he almost meets his match in Inspector Pardew, called in to solve the crime. Pardew pontificates on "holistic criminalistics" and the uniqueness of his position as a rational detective. He does, however, pin the guilt on someone who could not have committed the crime. The principal bit of physical evidence, an ice pick, was planted by the inspector. Although heroes of detective literature like Sherlock Holmes (whom Pardew imitates even while he reminds us more of Inspector Clouseau, the bumbling hero of 1960s and 1970s films) or Nero Wolfe are often eccentric and egocentric, their superior intellect and grasp of reality justify this. The primary reason for the inspector's eccentricity is narcissism.



Techniques

Gerald's Party is reminiscent of one of Coover's early stories, "The Babysitter," in that characters' fantasies superimpose themselves upon what is happening, to the degree that the reader is never certain whether an event that is described is real or a projection of a character's fantasy. This technique is compounded in that, in "The Babysitter," multiple points of view are used, whereas here Coover limits us to the observations, memories, and projections of an unreliable narrator who has trouble keeping his mind on what he is doing at any moment.

In another sense, Gerald's Party parodies the traditional detective romance.

This is an effectively ironic method for this story; traditional detective fiction celebrates the power of the rational mind to discover orderly processes like cause and effect in the chaos of human experience. Coover's fiction, as we have seen, warns us that imposing these rigid paradigms on the random flux of experience may result in epistemological nightmares like Gerald's Party.



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