

Lest Darkness Fall Short Guide

Lest Darkness Fall by L. Sprague de Camp

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Characters

"I want to prevent the darkness of barbarism from falling over western Europe. It sounds conceited, the idea that one man could do anything like that. But I can try," declares Martin Padway, the focus of all the action in *Lest Darkness Fall*. In 1939, he is an American archaeologist hoping to find material for his doctoral thesis. While visiting Rome, he is tossed through a weak point in time to the Rome of the sixth century. Italy is ruled by the Goths and is soon to be invaded by the Byzantine Empire and hordes of barbarians.

Fortunately for Padway, he has a sound grasp of Classical Latin and some knowledge of the language of the Goths. A strong-minded man, he sizes up his situation and sets about securing an income for himself. In the opening passages of *Lest Darkness Fall*, de Camp takes pains to point out that Padway is already separated from his wife and is without familial or other attachments that could motivate him to try to return to the twentieth century.

Instead, he "invents" brandy and becomes a successful sixth-century entrepreneur.

Padway is a well-drawn character.

He is sensible but no genius. Although he introduces brandy, a new technique for rolling copper, a printing process, and a primitive telegraph system that uses semaphore, he is a failure at creating firearms and time pieces. Much of the suspense of the novel depends on Padway's vulnerability. He is no more clever in politics than anyone else with no political experience, and although he has the advantage of an extensive scholarly knowledge of the ancient world and its technology, he is no superman who always has clever solutions for his problems. Failure, the Dark Ages, and death are constantly dogging his heels.

Vulnerability coupled with common sense make Padway an attractive character. When he is dropped in a world that is alien to their own, readers can see the world through his eyes as they themselves might see it if they were he.

It is a strange world in which "there was no such thing as nationalism in the modern sense. The ties that counted were those of religion and personal loyalty to a commander." In such a world, Padway's eventual involvement in politics makes sense; he needs to give the Goths and Italians a sense of national identity if they are to fight off their many enemies and prevent the extinction of Classical civilization. The emphasis on improving communications through the invention of newspapers and telegraph systems is sensible because improved communications between its disparate parts would serve to draw Italy closer together. So attractive is Padway's good sense that he serves as an ideal spokesman for de Camp's views, as when he declares his intention to improve the quality of Italy's educational system: "We have a flock of teachers on the public payroll now, but all they know is grammar and rhetoric. I'm going to have things taught that really matter: mathematics, and the sciences, and medicine."



Most of the other characters are goodhearted representatives of aspects of sixth-century Italian society. Nevitta Gummond's son is a hearty and friendly representative of the landed Goths.

Through him, Padway meets Thomasus the Syrian, a moneylender devoted to dickering about interest rates and prices. His habitual declarations that low rates and large loans are impossible because of dire calamities, even as he discovers himself attracted to Padway's plans, make him one of the novel's funniest characters. Fritharik, Padway's illiterate Vandal bodyguard; Cornelius Anicius, the social-conscious Patrician; and King Thiudahad, the dotty ruler of Italy, round out a wellconceived presentation of society. They and others provide readers with a "feel" for the ancient society; good and bad, full of laughter and tears, they represent the common characteristics of the age.



Social Concerns

In the introduction to his collection of short stories *The Wheels of If, and Other Science Fiction* (1948), de Camp insists that his stories are no more than entertainments, that "social significance ... is just the thing I studiously avoid in my stories." He goes on to say, "These yarns are meant purely to amuse and entertain, and neither to instruct, nor to incite, nor to improve."

From 1948 to the present, critics have usually taken de Camp's assertion at face value and have applied it to all of his fiction. For instance, in reference to the above quotation, fellow author Brian M. Stableford declares that the "manifesto might stand for all his work," with a few exceptions in his "later work." Such a view of de Camp's fiction is ingenuous. Note what Mark Twain says at the beginning of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884): "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot." Nonetheless, the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of the most powerful social commentaries ever written, and it is both moralistic and thematically complicated because of Twain's extensive exploration of the sham "civilization" of the pre-Civil War South.

Although de Camp has written no novels as rich in characterization and themes as the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, readers should note that his first novel, *Lest Darkness Fall*, has been plainly influenced by Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and that like Twain, de Camp is a humorist. Furthermore, de Camp has devoted his career to the study of mankind. He travels to study cultures other than his own, and he is a scholar not only in literature and engineering, but in history, archaeology, and social science, as well. It would be remarkable if his interests were not reflected in his writings and remarkable if his writings did not at least now and then express a judgment based on de Camp's relentless study of humanity.

In fact, *Lest Darkness Fall* has a significant social theme that unites all of its events. In Martin Padway's efforts to prevent the onset of the Dark Ages in the sixth century is the implication that a determined person can make a difference in how society develops.

Just in case a reader misses the implications of the events in *Lest Darkness Fall*, de.Camp makes his social theme explicit in Chapter IV: "Could one man change the course of history to the extent of preventing this interregnum [the Dark Ages]? One man had changed the course of history before.

Maybe. A Carlylean would say yes. A Tolstoyan or Marxist would say no; the environment fixes the pattern of a man's accomplishments and throws up the man to fit the pattern." Just as Padway decides to deliberately defy the teachings of social determinists like Karl Marx, so de Camp's fiction emphasizes the importance of individual efforts to better the lives of others.



In *Lest Darkness Fall*, the protagonist Padway decides that technological development is the key to creating an enlightened society and that, "Invention was the mainspring of technological development." Therefore, he tries to speed up the development of technology by "inventing" processes that would otherwise not be developed for many centuries. Christianity, too, has its role, because in spite of its sectarian quarrels in the sixth century, "its concepts of the Millennium and Judgment Day . . . accustomed people to looking forward in a way that the older religions did not, and so prepared . . .

minds for the conceptions of organic evolution and scientific progress." The outlook of *Lest Darkness Fall* is in the Western tradition; the idea of the importance of each individual human being may be found in the writings of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Thomas Jefferson, as well as Thomas Carlyle.

The belief that technological progress could bring with it social enlightenment was fundamental to the social policies of Victorian England, but by the middle of the twentieth century had become associated with America's climb to world prominence. Padway, an American from 1939, puts American idealism to work in sixth-century Italy.



Techniques

Perhaps the biggest problem de Camp faces in the writing of *Lest Darkness Fall* is making all of his scholarship readable. He does this in two principal ways: humor and the subordination of details to the plot. De Camp lightens his story with humorous situations and witticisms that highlight the incongruities of Padway's innovations in an ancient society. For instance, when the Gothic nobility gathers for the solemn occasion of electing a new king to replace the insane Thiudahad, Padway introduces Americanstyle electioneering. Florence is covered with posters declaring "Vote for Urias the people's choice! Lower taxes!

Bigger public works! Security for the aged! Efficient government!" Padway tops off his efforts on behalf of Urias with a free barbecue for the electors.

His other innovations also use the basic premise of the novel for humor.

For instance, his Rome newspaper introduces the concept of advertising with: "Do you want a glamorous funeral? Go to meet your Maker in style!

With one of our funerals to look forward to, you will hardly mind dying!"

The humor entertains because it flows naturally from the story.

Lest Darkness Fall could easily bog down in the description of sixth-century Italy, but it does not because de Camp lets his story create a picture of that society. Details enhance the pleasures of the novel by creating an extensive background for Padway's adventures. These details are only presented when they help to advance the plot.

For instance, the description of the armor of Gothic warriors helps readers to understand some of Padway's difficulties while guiding an army: The armor is so heavy and hot that it exhausts its wearers. Similarly, the description of a Roman library serves to introduce Cornelius Anicius and then provides the background for exposing the fuzzy thinking of the Roman upper classes. Such details are not allowed to crowd out the characters and story.

Themes

A major theme of *Lest Darkness Fall* is that of the "castaway." The archetypal example of this theme is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), in which the main character is shipwrecked on an island far from civilization and must use his ingenuity to survive on his own. Padway is a "castaway" in sixth-century Italy. Like Crusoe, he must find ways to feed, clothe, and house himself, and he must learn to cope with his strange new environment.

Throughout the novel, he uses his wits and common sense to survive the many surprises the ancient world has for a twentieth-century American.



Key Questions

Lest Darkness Fall can be fun to discuss because it invites people to do a bit time traveling to an exotic and exciting era. How would a modern-day person adapt to sixth-century Italy?

What if that person did not have Padway's advantages: a forewarning of what the time slip would be like and a knowledge of the era's languages and history? If one did not know how to make brandy, what other low-technology innovation could one introduce in order to make money and buy some security?

1. How well does de Camp make sixth-century Rome come alive? Are there implausibilities that interfere with the suspension of disbelief?

2. How successful are Padway's efforts to avert "the fall of night"?

How successful will they be in the period after the end of the novel? What else could he do? What problems should he anticipate?

3. What role does humor play in the novel? Note how the Rome newspaper is humorous by incongruously placing modern ads in a sixth-century setting.

Does the humor there and elsewhere advance the plot or themes? Does it help shape the tone of the novel?

4. In Lest Darkness Fall, de Camp seems to be writing more than an adventure, he seems to be satirizing aspects of fantasy literature. What aspects are these? What is the satirical point of view?

5. In what ways is Lest Darkness Fall superior to Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court? In what ways is A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court superior to Lest Darkness Fall?

6. Which provides a fuller picture of sixth-century Italy, Lest Darkness Fall or Count Belisarius by Robert Graves?

What details does each author select in order to move his plot forward? In what ways are the details each selects different?

7. In what ways are sixth-century Italian attitudes different from those of modern Americans? In what ways are they similar?

8. De Camp portrays sixth-century Roman society as sophisticated and civilized, with a complex economy that includes banking, wholesaling, and retailing. Does this match how people usually envision that time and place? Is it accurate?

9. How much history does one have to know in order to appreciate the novel?



10. Is technological development truly the key to developing an enlightened society? How does this notion affect the narrative of *Lest Darkness Fall*?

11. "Invention was the mainspring of technological development." How successful is Padway in coming up with inventions that push forward the technology of sixth-century Italy? What kinds of inventions work best? Which kinds fail?

12. Christianity's "concepts of the Millennium and Judgment Day

accustomed people to looking forward in a way that the older religions did not, and so prepared . . . minds for the conceptions of organic evolution and scientific progress." Is this true? Are we not in modern America accustomed to thinking of technology and religion as being in opposition, rather than aiding each other? Is Padway's view of Christianity appropriate for him? Is it appropriate for sixth-century Italy? Is it representative of his openness to ideas which will help avert the Dark Ages?

13. Does Padway represent American idealism?

14. How important is each individual human being in *Lest Darkness Fall*?

Where, in the novel, must individual rights be curbed in favor of society? Is Padway an individualist or a socialist?

Literary Precedents

Lest Darkness Fall contains many allusions to Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889).

These allusions serve to illustrate the differences between the two novels, even though their premises are similar.

In Twain's novel, the protagonist is Hank Morgan, an expert in manufacturing just about anything, including firearms, engines, and telegraph lines.

He is a nineteenth-century American who abruptly finds himself in sixth-century Britain, but not the historical Britain that was slowly descending into barbarism as the Roman Empire declined. Instead, Morgan awakens in the mythical Britain of King Arthur. The land of King Arthur lives in fearful superstition; Morgan is sentenced to burn at the stake but saves himself by predicting the total solar eclipse that he just happens to know is about to occur.

Twain's purpose is to satirize religious and social practices and to revile the "Age of Faith," as the Dark Ages are sometimes called. King Arthur, the paragon of Christian kings, is portrayed as an ignorant oaf. The wizard Merlin is depicted as a cruel, powerhungry charlatan. Hank Morgan's efforts to turn King Arthur's Britain into a country resembling nineteenth-century New England are grand, mad, and implausible. The evil that fears knowledge eventually overwhelms Morgan and his followers in a terrible battle that destroys Arthurian society. In the original medieval tales, a great Christian king and his just society in which the strong protected the weak were crushed in the terrible battle that marked the onset of barbarism. In Twain's novel, it is Morgan himself, science, and political enlightenment that are lost to superstition and ignorance.

Lest Darkness Fall lacks the grandeur of Twain's narrative, but it is a more serious attempt to realistically portray what a modern man could do in an historically accurate sixth-century nation. De Camp gets his coincidences out of the way in the first two chapters: Padway just happens to ride with a man who has a theory about people falling back from their own times into earlier eras, and he just happens to speak the important languages of sixth-century Italy. However, none of these is more incredible than Morgan's knowing the event of an ancient solar eclipse to the precise minute. Furthermore, Padway does not enjoy Morgan's incredible success in introducing advanced technology in a backward society. Padway's cannon is a dud; his clocks are mere jumbles that end up discarded in his basement. What he accomplishes, he does by trial and error. Technology that requires highly specialized knowledge or the complex materials that can only be created by industrialized societies is beyond his ability to reinvent.

Both novels have advantages over one another. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* develops its themes more thoroughly than does *Lest Darkness Fall*, and the earlier novel evokes stronger, more complex emotions than does the later one. On the



other hand de Camp's book, with its focus on the question of how important an individual person is to society, is every bit as sophisticated as Twain's book with its focus on the perils of superstition and ignorance. In addition, Padway is a better developed character than Morgan. Padway's portrayal invites intimacy; readers watch him work out solutions to his problems. Morgan is more remote than Padway; his conflicts are in the metaphysical realms of good and evil, not the more practical world of Padway.

A big hit in 1938 was the novel *Count Belisarius* by Robert Graves (please see separate entry). This novel recreates the era in which the events of *Lest Darkness Fall* take place, and it includes an account of Belisarius' invasion of Italy, which also occurs in *Lest Darkness Fall*. It is possible that Graves's depiction of Belisarius and account of his invasion were inspiration for some of the events in de Camp's novel.

Related Titles

The theme of the individual person making his own way in society is repeated often in de Camp's work, as is the "castaway" theme. Time travel is less common. In *The Glory That Was* (1960), de Camp reverses the premise of *Lest Darkness Fall* by bringing Ancient Greece into the future. This novel is an entertaining fantasy full of mystery as its main characters try to figure out how they ended up in Ancient Greece.

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