

Mickelsson's Ghosts Short Guide

Mickelsson's Ghosts by John Gardner

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

Mickelsson's Ghosts Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters/Techniques.....	3
Social Concerns.....	6
Themes/Characters.....	8
Copyright Information.....	9



Characters/Techniques

Although several reviewers found Gardner's final novel self-indulgent, pretentious, or pedantic, Mickelsson's *Ghosts* is Gardner's most ambitious and complicated work since *The Sunlight Dialogues*. Its form appears to be very loose, partly because Gardner employs elements of five distinct subgenres, and its focus is on the protagonist's preoccupation with philosophers, especially Nietzsche, and his tendency to relate his actual experience with the ideas of the philosophers he has studied.

The five subgenres of fiction working simultaneously in Mickelsson's *Ghost* are: the mystery story; academic novel; novel of ideas; sociological novel; and ghost story. Some commentators have mistakenly associated this book with the detective story, but Mickelsson does not take on the task of solving a crime. The solution is in effect thrust upon him. Professor Warren of the Chemistry department at the university where Mickelsson teaches was murdered before the novel begins, and Mickelsson's problem student, the bright but tormented Michael Nugent, presses his mentor to discover information about the killing, which seems to have had something to do with the farmhouse Mickelsson has bought and is in the process of restoring. Nugent too is killed, but the murder is made to look like a suicide. A neighbor of Mickelsson is also killed, his house is burned, and his invalid wife dies in the fire. Mickelsson is aware that murders have taken place, but he takes no active role in solving them. His involvement with Nugent and the farmhouse forces the killer to come after him, and this leads to the solution of the crimes. It is therefore more proper to consider Mickelsson's *Ghosts* a mystery rather than a detective novel, especially because it does not have the tightly constructed plot essential to detective fiction, a form Gardner attempted in the posthumous *Shadows* (1986).

Combined with the mystery is the subgenre of the academic novel. Mickelsson's *Ghosts* is concerned with the intrigues of campus life and in this respect it is similar to Bernard Malamud's *A New Life* (1961) or Philip Roth's *The Professor of Desire* (1977).

Exceptionally slow chapters attempt to capture the mood of Mickelsson's seminars in Plato and Aristotle, but Gardner, although himself a teacher, does not effectively capture the classroom situation. He emphasizes the ambivalence in Mickelsson's mind, himself a professor of ethics but in a hopelessly muddled personal situation. More effective is his treatment of campus politics. Mickelsson's mistress Jessica Stark, a talented sociologist, is being forced out of her department by the Marxists who form a majority. Philosophy Chairman Geoffrey Tillson, who is also romantically involved with Jessica, is powerless to intervene because the sociologists are mounting a battle to take over courses traditionally taught by philosophers. Tillson and Dean Blickstein, a humanist, must allow Jessica's firing as a pawn in the interdepartmental struggle for survival.

Jessica cannot depend on Mickelsson either. Although a powerful figure on campus with a national reputation as a scholar, Mickelsson cannot bring himself to help the woman he loves. Jessica manages to use recent legal trends concerning sexual discrimination to work out an unsatisfactory compromise.



Mickelsson's *Ghosts* is also a novel of ideas. Because so many characters are philosophers, and many of the rest are intellectuals, the novel has many references to and quotations from philosophers of the past. Gardner openly acknowledges debts to Luther, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and others; Mickelsson teaches courses in Aristotle and Plato.

The protagonist is concerned that he cannot use his knowledge of ethics, a branch of philosophy in which he specializes, to bring order to his own tangled life. Yet Gardner certainly endorses Mickelsson's comment, the "world stood more in need of philosophy than it believed."

Mickelsson's *Ghosts* is so intensely topical that it is fair to add the subgenre of the novel of social criticism to the novel of ideas. The protagonist lives on the outskirts of a town that is dying because industry and the railroads have abandoned it, and he interacts with citizens from every level of Susquehanna, from a teen-aged prostitute to a county commissioner.

He works in a university town. One of the fascinations of the book is the difficulty Mickelsson has in finding connections between these two locations in his life.

Finally, as the title suggests, this is a ghost story. Its loose form is almost a parody of the tight plotting that characterizes the conventional ghost story and the matter of the ghosts is not brought to the clear resolution we normally expect in a ghost tale. Mickelsson's farmhouse is haunted by a brother and sister who had an incestuous relationship. After their child died, the sister harbored bitter resentment of her brother and eventually killed him.

The sightings follow the familiar pattern of ghost stories. At first, there are rumors that the house is haunted. Then Mickelsson hears noises and smells baking bread. His first sighting is tentative, but subsequent ones are definitive: The ghosts are there and they want something. The old man remains confused, but the sister gives off an unmistakable aura of wrath that persists after death. A few commentators have suggested that the presence of ghosts demonstrates Gardner's thematic confidence in an afterlife, but if this is true the afterlife is a dreadful projection into eternity of the frustrations one experienced in life. The sister eventually touches Mickelsson, and he is terrified by the fury in her touch, but he and the reader never determine exactly what the ghosts want. He also sees ghosts of Nugent and a fat man whose death resulted from Mickelsson's breaking into his apartment, but both of these are seen from a distance and they do not communicate with the protagonist. In the final episode, Mickelsson receives an invitation to a party and is handed a drink by the ghost of Buzzy Stark, Jessica's late husband.

It is possible that some, but not all, of the ghost sightings are hallucinations. The drink Buzzy hands Mickelsson is empirical evidence of actual presences, and a relatively psychic character, Mabel Garrett, faints at a party in Mickelsson's house after walking "into that room where all of us were standing and instead of seeing us she saw these two people holding a funeral all by themselves." It is nevertheless conceivable that



some of the sightings are projections. Mickelsson received a telephone call from Nugent after the boy was dead, and his seeing this ghost may be a projection of his guilt at the failure to respond to the boy's obvious need. Similarly, the sighting of the ghost of the fat man may be the result of Mickelsson's guilt at frightening him and causing him to have a heart attack. The principal ghosts, however, are real, but their presence is not completely explored in this long novel.



Social Concerns

Each of the subgenres Gardner incorporates in Mickelsson's *Ghosts* suggests social issues. The mystery story implies a concern with social order; the ghost story with spiritual order; the academic novel with the responsibility of those who live the life of the mind; and the philosophical novel with the relation of ideas to the actual life man lives. Other concerns are specific to the texture of Gardner's unique blend of these elements.

Set in 1980, this book reflects Gardner's concern with political order. The presidential contest between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan is viewed by many of the characters as a dreary but crucial choice for the republic. Although he fails to vote (and this itself casts doubt on his judgment), Mickelsson interprets the election results as "mounting evidence that the American people had gone mad." Gardner also treats the issues of toxic and nuclear wastes.

The book makes several references to mysterious trucks that drive at night with no lights on. These are hauling hazardous wastes for illegal dumping in the countryside. The former occupant of Mickelsson's house, Dr. Bauer, contracted cancer because the water supply was poisoned by toxic wastes, as did two neighbor women. There is some speculation that the hazardous waste dumpers encouraged the rumor that the house was haunted to prevent occupancy and discovery, and it is while seeking evidence of illegal dumping of hazardous materials that Professor Warren was killed. Mickelsson's son Mark is forced to go underground because of his active involvement in protests against the proliferation of nuclear power plants, and part of his concern is that there is no safe way to dispose of nuclear wastes. Tim Booker, a real estate agent and motorcycle enthusiast, is actively engaged in a campaign to sabotage the trucks that bring in the illegal wastes.

Although he agrees in principle with resistance to environmental contamination, Mickelsson does nothing to help.

His own drinking water is being rendered unsafe by chemical wastes, his realtor becomes a guerrilla in the war against pollution, his son puts his freedom on the line to protest irresponsible use of nuclear energy, a county commissioner encourages Mickelsson to get involved, and Mickelsson does nothing. His apathy is the result of a malaise of spirit, which also renders him unable to help Nugent in his struggle to find something to live for or Jessica in her fight against campus politicians.

Overwhelmed by his own problems, among them unreasonable demands for alimony by his wife who cuckolded him when they were married, a staggering tax bill from the Internal Revenue Service which threatens to confiscate his pay and his property, a pregnant teen-aged prostitute whose demand for an abortion forces Mickelsson to rob the fat man — a robbery that results in the fat man's death — and unable to produce anything of philosophical value, Mickelsson retreats progressively into apathy. He sleeps and drinks, ignores his responsibilities as he lets his mail pile up, and fails to respond to the nurturing love of Jessica. The specialist in ethics is overwhelmed by



what President Carter called a "national malaise of spirit," a sense that things are so out of control that nothing anyone can do will correct them.

Mickelsson's antidote to apathy is his project of restoring the haunted, cancer-causing house. This physical labor gives him aesthetic pleasure as it imposes order on a manageable chaos, but the labor, while temporarily successful, is an unsatisfactory substitute for dealing with his responsibilities.

While he planes and plasters, the dumpers pollute, Jessica is sacrificed, and the professor cuts his classes. Unless safe water can be found, the house is itself dangerous to live in, and there is still the matter of the ghost's intentions. Gardner underscores the futility of Mickelsson's creating an artificial order when the murderer forces him to undo most of his creation while looking for a secret document.

Some readers will be offended by Gardner's treatment of Mormons in Mickelsson's *Ghosts*. Mormons are seen by residents of Susquehanna as a mysterious, perhaps dangerous, religious cult. The murderer discloses that he is a member of the Sons of Dan, a Mormon hit squad charged with the preservation of order, and in his defense of his calling, Professor Lawler makes this group sound at least as bad as the Nazis. The cruel irony of the book is that the murders were caused by an error on Lawler's part. Because Warren was an apostate Mormon and because Mickelsson's house was once occupied by Joseph Smith, a founder of the Mormon creed, Lawler believed that Warren was close to discovering a secret that might discredit Smith as a prophet. He killed Warren and Nugent as well because Nugent was a close friend. He then killed the neighbors, the Spragues, in an attempt to discover what Warren had found. Finally he makes an unsuccessful attempt on Mickelsson's life. What Warren was actually looking for was evidence that the water supply was being contaminated because of illegal dumping of toxic wastes. At best, the series of murders in Mickelsson's *Ghosts* suggests the amoral and destructive potential inherent in religious fanaticism, a desperate and irrational way to bring order to chaos.



Themes/Characters

Although the social concerns are unique to Mickelsson's *Ghosts*, many of the themes are familiar to Gardner's readers. The most important of these are the liberating power of love and the need to come to terms with the past. Mickelsson moves, slowly but inevitably, toward recognizing his need for love and the ways in which his complete — spiritual and sexual — love for Jessica can offer purpose to his life, as opposed to the degrading and compromising lust he felt for the prostitute Donnie Matthews. At the end, Peter seems to be accepting many commitments based on love. He seeks out Jessica, whose forgiveness he needs, and is rewarded by the apparent approval of her former husband's ghost.

His son Mark has come home, and it is conceivable that the boy's activism will help Mickelsson out of the apathy that has plagued him. He decides to take care of his feeble mother for the rest of her life, completing the family design into the past as well as the future.

As a philosopher, Mickelsson has been fascinated by Luther and Nietzsche. He has seen Luther as an architect of a repressive moral system and Nietzsche, with his emphasis on the transvaluation of all values, as a liberating thinker. Central to Mickelsson's growth to accept community and love as viable ethical structures is his breaking "Nietzsche's Satanic hold" on him as he came to "see the great philosopher only for what he was: not the destroyer and absolute doubter he noisily, mockingly proclaimed himself, but as a man tortured by holiness, maddened by hypocrisy, stupidity, and cowardice." With this recognition, Mickelsson can accept his own sins, "namely Wrath and Despair." But he also recognizes that with humanity comes responsibility to others, and his revitalization of a family unit seems to be a first step toward accepting his role as a member of the human community.

As a guilty member of a human community, Mickelsson is obliged to subject himself to human laws. He needs a secular confession because he did contribute to the death of the fat man while he was himself committing a crime. He confesses to Sergeant Tinklepaugh, like Chief Clumly in *The Sunlight Dialogues* a philosophical policeman, who refuses to accept Mickelsson's version of the crime, not because it is not true but because it is counterproductive to subject Mickelsson to imprisonment. Tinklepaugh expresses in marvelously simple terms the commitment to community values in all Gardner's fiction: "We just all gotta be careful, I guess, keep things in perspective, watch out for each other . . . and watch each other." That he intends a warning as well as an insistence on community values is clear when he tells Mickelsson, "I would see that no crime does come to my attention."

Human community means helping one another — but it also means helping one another to control man's worst impulses.



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