

My Secret History Short Guide

My Secret History by Paul Theroux

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Characters

My Secret History follows the tradition of a bildungsroman (a novel concerned with a youth's education and maturation), in which the protagonist, Andre Parent, changes from "innocent" to "experienced" in reaction to his environment. This transformation begins when his friend and confessor, Father Furty, dies. At a time when Andre's involvement with the Catholic Church is motivated by greed (as altar boy, if Andre serves for three funerals, he is "given" a wedding and money from the groom) or by guilt ("I had so often felt punished — ashamed and afraid — in the glare of God's sight.")

Father Furty restores the humanity of the church for Andre. For example, Andre says that Father Furty "made happiness look natural and right," a much-needed balance to the extreme repression Andre had always associated with Catholicism. But when Father Furty dies and is considered a failure by the parishioners because of his alcoholism, in Andre's eyes the church has devalued a man whom he has loved. Ultimately Andre breaks from the church and remarks of the freedom he experienced "then I walked away and was aware in those seconds that my life had just begun — like a wheel slipping off an axle and rolling alone, and already it was spinning faster."

Andre eventually takes decisive steps to change his life and escape the drudgery and stupidity that he sees around him. As he says in the opening statement of the book "I was born poor in Rich America, yet my instincts were better than money and were for me a source of power." Rather than depending upon the church for guidance now, Andre begins to establish his own rules. After reading a poem by Baudelaire about a lover ("naked except for her jewels, wearing make up. Gleaming buttocks. Moorish slave. Like a captive tiger . . . she was black, and she yearned for him"), he is encouraged to escape America and its repressive atmosphere and go to Africa. There his desire to live a dual life becomes a dominant force in his plans.

For the remainder of the novel Andre is a divided character. Although he returns to a type of unity when he first meets his wife, he ultimately returns to the dual lifestyle, keeping a mistress in America and a wife in Britain. In the end it is only as a writer that Andre seems able to find contentment without deception. The creation of a third self, the self of the writer, frees Andre. He now keeps his literary ideas to himself, as "secrets" that he finds so vitally important. It is a transformation that Andre revels in. Speaking of a novel that he was working on, Andre explains that his wife "had not seen a word of it; no one had. That secrecy made me strong." Likewise, merely acting as an observer in his own life seems to him a viable continuation of his secret history. In the final scene of the novel, when Andre is faced with choosing his wife (who represents security and rationality) or his mistress (who represents eroticism and irrationality), he declares: "I know exactly what to do." Although his choice remains ambiguous to the reader, it seems likely that Andre will settle into a monogamous relationship since his writing can now fulfill his need for mystery.



Social Concerns/Themes

A common theme in the modern novel is the sense of alienation among people in contemporary society.

My Secret History takes up this theme.

The novel focuses on the life of Andre Parent, a Catholic who grows up in Boston during the 1950s and who copes with the repressive environment of his early life by living two lives — one open and conforming, the other secret and reckless. Through this novel, Theroux makes dual comments on modern society: that repressive and judgmental forces are driving everyone to hypocrisy and that such secrecy can go unchecked because of extreme isolation.

Theroux suggests that people compartmentalize their lives to accommodate the conflicting demands of society and self. Because people are judgmental and dictatorial regarding the behaviors of others, they turn to secrecy in order to fulfill themselves without jeopardizing their status in the community. As Andre notes, "as soon as someone else's eyes are on us we are diminished — made into ugly miniatures of ourselves."

In the novel, Andre avoids social censure by ostensibly behaving in a respectable manner as a Peace Corps volunteer and headmaster of an African school. Simultaneously, he lives out his fantasy life of uninhibited sex with a variety of African girls whom he picks up each weekend at a local bar.

Other characters have secrets as well.

When Andre is a young man, he and several women from the Catholic church accompany one of the parish priests, Father Furty, on his boat where the women flirt with the priest and drink "bug juice" (alcoholic punch). On one trip, when Father Furty jokes that he hopes that "the Boss" (the Pastor) does not find out about their drinking, Andre notes that these "secret words seemed scandalous to [the women] and they laughed hard." With the seed planted in his mind as to how to live his life of hypocrisy, Andre eventually pushes this basic precept of secrecy to the limit, actually setting up two households (and two lives): one in England with his wife and son, and one in America with his mistress. As Andre notes while he sits in a hospital waiting room in Africa: In this waiting room no one is what he or she seems. The man with the little girl is not her father — he is a child molester. The married couple are actually saying good-bye — she is going to meet her lover, he's off to visit his mistress. The cowboy is a homo.

The prevalence of these secret histories underscores human isolation. Because Andre and these other characters live during a time when people are increasingly less connected with others, their secrets escape notice. At one point, for example, Andre states: I had two lives but I had intimations today that because there were two they were



both incomplete, I lived in the cracks between them — had only ever lived in that space. Outside it, among others, I was not Myself, and so no one knew me. Was that everyone's condition — that we were each of us unknown?

My Secret History answers "yes" to this question. The novel depicts contemporary society, worldwide, as failing to care for the individual, causing many to live fragmented and alienated existences.

The novel also addresses, although only cursorily, censorship (during a discussion about the ban of Henry Miller's work, a character responds "Imagine preventing people from reading something — as if reading is going to make us into monsters!") and abortion rights (two different characters describe the horrors of their illegal abortions). American elitism is also explored as Andre experiences prejudice from the wealthy who frequent the swimming pool where he lifeguards; Andre comments, "I had no money, and it seemed as if, having none, I did not exist."

Literary Precedents

Theroux has written in the Author's Note to *My Secret History* the following disclaimer: "Although some of the events and places depicted in this novel bear a similarity to those in my own life, the characters all strolled out of my imagination." Despite this statement, Andre Parent has a surprisingly large number of parallels to Theroux: both were brought up as Catholics in Massachusetts, both went to Nyasaland (Malawi) as Peace Corps volunteers, both married British women, became successful writers, and eventually set up dual households in the United States and in Britain.

Like Saul Bellow in *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), and John Irving in *The World According to Garp* (1978), Theroux is writing in the semi-autobiographical fictional tradition. Although this method is widely acknowledged, Theroux's disclaimer hints at his discomfort with personal revelations.

Another literary influence on *My Secret History* is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and his treatment of the theme of the foreign exploitation of undeveloped countries. The character of Rockwell, for example, illustrates the tendency of foreigners to reshape an existing culture, to "improve" it, without considering the effects on the people. Rockwell, a Peace Corps worker, demonstrates his social insensitivity by creating an elaborate latrine for the African school based upon the architecture of the Alamo, while Andre's desire for unlimited and guiltless sex leads him to exploit local women.

The character of Andre has literary precedents at various stages in his life.

The young Andre is reminiscent of James Joyce's character Stephen Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Both Andre and Stephen are constantly oppressed by the consciousness of guilt because of a Catholic upbringing. At fifteen, Andre is reminiscent of J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye* (1951): full of anger, rebellion, and indignation. For instance, Andre enjoys shocking people by declaring that he is a Communist.

Finally, as a man with two lives, Andre resembles the anonymous author of the Victorian novel, *My Secret Life* (1890). In *My Secret Life* the author recounts his rebellion against Victorian sexual repression; ostensibly he acts normally, but secretly he indulges in sexual exploits that are excessive and perverse. Although Andre is living in America during the 1950s, his statement that "everything enjoyable made me feel guilty" strongly connects him with the repressive lifestyle of the Victorians. Ultimately Andre, like the author of *My Secret Life*, escapes, not by abandoning what he considers sinful, but by living a dual existence.

Interestingly, in *Riding the Iron Rooster* (1988), Theroux mentions reading a Chinese novel, *Jin Ping Mei* (*The Golden Lotus*), similar to *My Secret Life* in that it was banned due to its eroticism.



Theroux explains that he marveled at its blend of "manners, delicacy and smut" and suggests that if the Chinese were allowed to read the book, "they would discover a great deal about themselves": that what a society chooses to hide can be very revealing.

Related Titles

My Secret History has many ties with Theroux's travel stories, as well as the novel, *The Mosquito Coast* (1982). Like the travel books, *My Secret History* incorporates Theroux's experiences in other countries and his belief that human nature is essentially the same worldwide. As he did in *The Mosquito Coast*, Theroux lambastes missionaries and all forms of narrow-mindedness, from egoistic foreign attempts to transform native cultures to the censorship of books.



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