

The Old Dick Short Guide

The Old Dick by L. A. Morse

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Contents

The Old Dick Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Copyright Information.....	8

Characters

Most of the important characters in *The Old Dick* are recognizable detective fiction figures of the 1930s who have survived into old age. In addition to Jake Spanner, these include Sal Piccolo, a once-powerful underworld figure who has spent thirty years in prison; Barbara Twill, formerly known as "Bubbles," who now supports herself as a bookie; and Patrick O'Brien, a retired cop of the desk-shunning "tough but straight" variety. These and other characters find their declining years economically stringent and stultifyingly boring when they recall their better days, and all welcome the excitement when Spanner's case provides something novel for them to do.

Some characters, such as a rising psychotic hood and his moronic muscleman, are exaggerated versions of standard detective fiction types, but others are caricatures brought in to satirize specific aspects both of detective fiction and of old age. For example, instead of having a virile detective constantly enduring the attentions of a luscious young female neighbor, the novel reveals that Jake constantly tries to evade the unwelcome attentions of Mrs. Bernstein, a house-owning widow in her sixties whose cabbage rolls are notoriously bad. Monica Eustace is a well-meaning but incredibly naive social worker from the North Hollywood Senior Community Center who deplores Jake's ostensible helplessness, and Mr. Bemelman, manager of the Center, intending to help Jake overcome his "paranoid delusions" of fighting criminals, winds up as the hostage of the hoods with whom Jake is having considerable difficulty.

The major characters, particularly Jake, Sal Piccolo, and O'Brien, are well-drawn, active men who have lived past their prime but who refuse to retreat into meek insignificance simply because they have grown old. Piccolo, released from prison after a thirty-year stretch, first resorted to running a three-card monte swindle at senior citizen centers (unsuccessfully — his hands were too slow to make the queen disappear). O'Brien, once the terror of his beat, now maintains a verbal feud with the female manager of the nursing home in which he resides, focusing his antagonism on his intense dislike for anyone who refuses to treat him seriously as a human being. Most of the older characters are appealing because their response to the indignities of old age is anger rather than self-pity or surrender.

Social Concerns

The Old Dick is hilarious in its treatment of detective fiction conventions and various social concerns. The most unusual feature of The Old Dick is the age of its protagonist, seventy-eight-year-old Jack Spanner, whose concerns include his health, his worry that he might end up in a nursing home, his observations of how society treats the elderly, and his recognition of the ultimate humiliation of old age.

His emotions and character have not changed much during the four decades following his prime, but because he is old, society stereotypes him as senile, incompetent, dirty, helpless, and disgusting.

As he moves through Los Angeles, Spanner comments sardonically on other social problems, including pollution, urban blight, proliferating pornography, modern youth ruined by too early an exposure to the seamier sides of life, the pretentiousness that pervades Hollywood, the ineptness of social workers who try to help their targeted populations, and the general decline of the quality of life during the past few decades. From Spanner's viewpoint, modern life is squalid, with most human beings either selling themselves very cheaply or retaining some vestige of integrity and pride at great personal cost.

Techniques

The Old Dick employs three techniques which are primarily responsible for its success as satire and as detective fiction. First, the novel combines several traditional aspects of the genre with Spanner's trenchant observations on the disparity between his 1930s performances and the case on which he has recently so incredibly embarked.

Like many detective novels, The Old Dick includes chase scenes, encounters with old enemies, visits to trusted reliable sources for information, and a plot sufficiently complex to require considerable ingenuity on the part of the detective, as well as episodes of sex and violence. However, each of these appears in an altered context in the novel to make the satiric depiction hilarious. For example, one chase scene consists of Jake fleeing on foot from a seventy-five-year-old in a park, commenting as he runs that the scene must be hilarious to those watching as his exertions in his slow-motion sprint cause him excruciating pain. Spanner's frequent deflating comments on his limitations ridicule traditional features of the genre. However, continuous emphasis on the limits imposed by his age adds suspense as the reader wonders all the more how Jake will manage to succeed.

Another technique which reinforces the satire of the novel is Spanner's frequent reference to detective fiction in general and to an apocryphal work, Red Vengeance, in particular. The novel opens with a description of a detective who has finished eliminating some underworld menace and who is about to receive the grateful favors of the scantily clad woman whom he has rescued, making one believe for a page that The Old Dick is a typical detective novel. However, this narrative breaks off when Spanner reacts with disgust, and the reader learns that the episode comes from a paperback that Spanner is reading. Throughout the novel Spanner comments ironically on the lack of realism in Red Vengeance and on the disparity between the adventures of Al Tracker and the adventures of Spanner.

The contrast between the implausible adventures in Red Vengeance and the implausible difficulties in The Old Dick adds to the ironical effect of the story.

A third technique is Spanner's constant undercutting of the reality of his own role. He comments that his method of tracing one automobile from a list of hundreds of partial license plate numbers rests on too many assumptions to be sound, that his rescue by helicopter at one point is "deus ex machina," that his searching for clues at one point is absurd because only in detective fiction would there be a clue to be found, and so forth. Spanner's undercutting adds plausibility to his role when he points out incongruities to the reader even as the reader begins to wonder at the incredible nature of Spanner's adventures.

Themes

The Old Dick includes themes common to detective fiction, such as the value of the private eye's independence and the unmitigated villainy of his major antagonists, but much of the novel emphasizes what Mark Twain has called "the wanton insult of old age." Throughout the novel one encounters characters who are intelligent, perceptive, competent, and skilled, but whose age renders them insignificant in society's view. Spanner resolves an incredibly difficult case, at one point tracing hundreds of "partial license plates" to discover one vehicle, with the assistance of senior citizens. One reason they succeed is that they are virtually invisible to those around them. Their age has canceled their humanity.

A more general theme is the tendency of many to place more emphasis on a person's appearance than on individual worth. At various points in the novel, in addition to the indifference shown to the elderly, Spanner comments humorously on stereotyping, as when he notes that no one is easier to hustle than a hustler and when he informs a police lieutenant that a beaten-up Mexican has been ignored by the desk sergeant for more than two hours.

More important than various social comments uttered in passing throughout the novel, however, is the humorous perspective of Spanner. Despite society's view that Spanner's age has reduced him to being a mere cipher, the reader responds to Spanner's devastating sarcasm as he utters trenchant remarks about society in general, individuals he encounters, and even himself. The most memorable aspect of Spanner's adventures is that he recognizes and exploits their absurdity even as he grapples with the complexities of his last case, simultaneously offering a cynical outlook on the world at large and a sneering rejection of unrealistic detective fiction. The major theme of the novel lies in the appeal of Spanner's attitudes as he ridicules the irrational features of modern life and parodies detective stories.

Literary Precedents

There are several literary allusions in *The Old Dick*, including references to Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" and to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), but the tradition in which Morse works in the novel owes a great deal to mystery writers in general and to Raymond Chandler in particular. At one point Spanner realizes that he is in a situation straight out of Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), and he soon realizes that his recognition of the parallel is more precise than he might have wished. Like Chandler, Morse describes the seamier side of life in Los Angeles from the point of view of a detective whose associations are almost exclusively with the less savory elements of the city, and Spanner's character tends to exaggerate several features of Chandler's Philip Marlowe as well as of Spillane's Mike Hammer.

Dashiell Hammett's influence is also evident to a lesser extent (the *AI Tracker* novel, *Red Vengeance*, seems to owe its title to Hammett's *Red Harvest*, 1929).



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