

# Shadow in the North Study Guide

## Shadow in the North by Philip Pullman

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## Overview

*Shadow in the North* is first and foremost an adventure story—fast paced, exciting, and melodramatic. The conflict between Sally's inherently twentieth-century beliefs and the time in which she lives propels much of the story's actions. Within this frame, however, Pullman interjects serious moral questions of right and wrong and good versus evil, as well as social issues that are as relevant today as they were in Victorian England. By having his characters discuss and act upon these issues, Pullman manages to let the reader know his views without preaching or talking down to his audience.

One point Pullman makes in his story remains true in both the past and the present: life is not always fair.

While many authors would not kill off a successful main character in the middle of a novel, Pullman chooses to add this piece of tragic reality rather than write a conventional happy ending where all the mysteries are solved and the detectives blithely go on to their next case. He also shows that life goes on after a personal tragedy. For Sally and the others, nothing stops when Fred dies—the business must still be run, new living quarters must be sought, and all the equipment must be replaced. Pullman's characters successfully pull themselves together afterwards and manage to continue with their lives.



## About the Author

Philip Pullman was born in Norwich, England, but spent most of youth in Rhodesia, Australia, London, and Wales, and to this day retains a love of travel. As a child, Pullman enjoyed reading Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, finding the "combination of rich, incantatory language and mysterious evocative pictures . . . irresistible." He attended Oxford University, finishing in 1968 with a degree in English, and has been a teacher there since 1973. His young adult writings are supplemented by a novel for adults, *Galatea* (1978) and one for younger children, *Count Karlstein* (1982), as well as several plays, *Sherlock Holmes and the Adventure of the Sumatran Devil*, an adaptation of *Frankenstein* (1990), and an adaptation of *The Three Musketeers*.

Pullman enjoys music and keeps a saxophone and a guitar in the shed where he writes. In a questionnaire from his publisher, he stated that one thing he would like to accomplish is to play the saxophone well enough to be allowed in the house with it. He finds that some of his best training for being a writer came from his teaching experience in various middle schools in Oxford from 1973 to 1986, "because by telling a story aloud (without the aid of a book) you develop a sense of shape and structure and timing which are basic to all storytelling." Imagination also plays a strong part in storytelling, and Pullman keeps photographs of "long-dead people whose names" he does not know to look at in order to hear their stories. Currently Pullman lives in Oxford, England with his family.



## Plot Summary

Sally Lockheart is a woman detective in Victorian England. A case comes to her that seems simple enough but will soon lead her and her friends on a dangerous path to find the truth. There is much more at stake than any of them could guess. Sally begins to look into the business of the Anglo-Baltic company. The man who caused the company to falter is named Axel Bellmann. As she is doing her detective work to find out what is going on, she begins to get threats warning her that her reputation and her life may be in danger if she doesn't stop looking into Bellmann's affairs. Her friend Jim Taylor and Fredrick Garland are working an opposite end of the case concerning a man named Alistar Mackinnon. He claims to have psychic abilities and to have seen a murder that occurred but can't tell them the man's name, when, or where it occurred. Mackinnon states that this man is trying to kill him. Jim and Fredrick begin questioning a medium named Nellie Budd who tells them she has no connections to Mackinnon. Sally finds out that Bellmann has started a new company named North Star Castings. As they continue to look into the case they are able to find out that North Star Casting is working on making a gun that rides on the railway. It looks like a plain carrier box except for hundreds of tiny holes on both sides. It is steam powered and has the capability to fire five bullets per second from each hole. Sally realizes that the only reason to have a weapon like this would be to use on your own people. They find out that Bellmann is trying to force Lady Mary Wytham to marry him because she owns graphite mines that would be useful to Bellmann's steam gun. She is secretly married to Alistar Mackinnon and Bellmann is the person who is trying to have him killed. The inquiries continue and there are attempts on Sally's life. She moves in with Fredrick. She sleeps with Fredrick, but after they are asleep the house is set fire to and Fredrick dies trying to save one of the girls in the house. Sally goes to Bellmann with the intention of killing him and stopping his machine. When she gets there he decides she would be a suitable wife and asks her to marry him. He gives her a sum of money to give to Miss Walsh who was Sally's original client. She asks to see the gun and once inside she blows up the building, though she and Bellmann are in it. Sally manages to survive and restarts her business and that of Fredrick. She tells his friends that they had intended to be married and that she is carrying his child.

## Setting

The story takes place in London, England during the late nineteenth century, the Victorian Era. During this period, industrialists and inventors expanded society's capabilities, creating great progress in the fields of transportation and industry but also laying the groundwork for future problems like pollution. The middle class rose to great prominence, and families became smaller with fewer numbers of children, who tended to live longer.

Queen Victoria ruled her empire with political acumen and used her personal life as an example of how she thought an Englishwoman should behave. The ideal Victorian woman was expected to be feminine, moral, and devoted to her family and children. Intelligent and independent, Sally Lockhart acts contrary to this example. While faithful to her extended family, she serves more as a protector and authority figure to them. She runs her own financial consulting business, is a partner in a successful photography studio, and lives alone, things that, for a woman, were unusual.

# Social Sensitivity

Pullman brings up two issues in *Shadow in the North* that will generate much discussion: women's rights and how fear can control society. In regards to women's rights, Pullman's leanings towards this issue can be found in his characters. Isabel and Lady Mary are products of their society, weak and unable to act for themselves. They rely on others to act for them, without testing to see if their trust is misplaced.

Pullman writes them as fairly lifeless characters. The stronger female characters clearly have more of his interest and sympathies. In addition to Sally, Pullman introduces two other strong, independent women. Miss Lewis is a "vivacious, bright-eyed Lancastrian girl who'd come to London to study" and Miss Susan Walsh is a retired teacher with a good memory for facts and a strong belief in female emancipation.

While each appears for only a brief time, Pullman creates a much more positive image of them than of Lady Mary or Isabel, who occupy a greater part of the story line.

Bellmann's view of society strikes a dissonant chord in the novel. He describes to Sally a future where a few powerful people run the world, keeping the populations occupied with good jobs, health care, recreational facilities, and peace, while their leaders remain cowed by the ultimate weapon that each possesses. He argues that the people of the world would not care if such a weapon was built so long as they continued to live a good existence.

To Sally in the Victorian age, this idea seems horrible, but Pullman is actually providing her a vision of the world of our own present. Bellmann's Steam Gun represents modern nuclear weapons, machines of such massive destructive capabilities that it has been hoped that governments would be too afraid of the consequences of using them to do more than aim them at targets. The one thing Bellmann does not figure into the equation is human nature. He assumes that the people who hold the real power in the world will have the same altruistic views as himself, an assumption not supported by history.

# Literary Qualities

Pullman employs various literary techniques in his work, the most notable being his use of symbolism, the suspense that permeates the story, and his narrative style. The symbolism used places Bellmann and Sally as polar opposites of evil and good, and their descriptions highlight this. At one point in the story, Charles jokingly says that Mackinnon must be being chased by Mephistopheles, and it would appear that this remark is not too far from the truth. Bellmann resembles Mephistopheles in his quest for power. Bellmann controls peoples lives and, in the case of Lord Wytham, their souls. He maneuvers politicians with financial incentives, decides who shall live and die according to his desires, and believes himself to be a savior. Outwardly, Bellmann maintains the appearance of polished, genteel goodness—he aligns himself with charities and builds recreational facilities for the towns that house his factories. His outer facade does not fool everyone, though; when Fred first sees Bellmann, he finds "something brutal about him . . . no . . . because that meant animal . . .

this man was mechanical." Sally is neither polished nor well-connected, but she possesses an innate honesty and clarity of vision that Bellmann does not. As evidenced by her bargain for Miss Walsh's lost money, Sally believes in tangible justice, not an exaggerated sense of the needs of the many outweighing those of the few. Flawed and human, Sally represents the good that exists in humanity.

While in many respects *Shadow in the North* is not a conventional mystery story, it still generates a great deal of suspense. Pullman accomplishes this by periodically shifting the focus of his story from one character to the next. At one time or another, Jim, Sally, Fred, Lord Wytham, or the shadowy Mr. Brown can be perceived as the narrator. By changing the narration from one character to another, the reader gains bits of information about the characters and the investigation at hand that must be put together like a puzzle. While knowing that Bellmann will be defeated in the end, the reader has no idea how it will happen, and these bits of data provide the suspense.

Pullman uses a third-person limited omniscient narrative style in *Shadow in the North*, shifting the focus of the narrative from one character to another during the course of the novel. This provides the reader with multiple points of view and gives a fuller picture of the story's details. In addition, it enables the reader to know the narrator better, because each section takes on the thoughts and tones of its teller.

When Sally or Fred narrates, their thoughts shown to the audience appear smoother and more controlled when dealing with the mysteries at hand but appear somewhat flustered when they consider their relationship. Jim's sections are more action-oriented. Whether Jim is thinking of fighting, his dislike of and anger at Mackinnon, his writing attempts, or his feelings for Lady Mary, his sections feel slightly more scattered, less organized and more active than those of Sally and the others. Perhaps the most interesting section of narration is the one told by Lord Wytham. Through his thoughts





the reader experiences the feelings of fear and humiliation that he tries to hide from Bellmann: ". . . it was the sensation . . . of coming into unexpected collision with something . . .

more powerful than himself . . . Lord Wytham felt as if he'd sold his soul and found . . . the price he'd gotten . . . was . . . a mouthful of ash."

By using the literary techniques of symbolism, suspense, and narrative style, Pullman draws his audience into the story. The use of Victorian England as the setting provides the reader with a framework to understand some of the conflict between Sally and society, and Pullman's vividly descriptive language creates an intriguing tone.

## Themes/Characters

Shadow in the North has a large cast of characters, some of whom play briefly prominent roles and then fade into the background. Theater stagehands, street urchins, and titled members of British society intermingle freely with the main characters, each adding some color to the story and filling in another piece of the puzzle. The main players in the story remain the focal point, however.

Most prominent in Shadow in the North is Sally Lockhart, a forthright young woman with a background in "firearms and finance," but not possessing the skills to "make small talk, dance gracefully, [and] flirt with a stranger at dinner while unerringly picking up the right knife and fork."

Sally insists on being in the center of the action, but she would rather not rush into a situation blindly. Before confronting Axel Bellmann, she researches his firm and puts together her own conclusions from the information gathered. In many ways, Sally is a modern character, possessing a keen sense of right and wrong that does not fit with her society's views but strong enough to defend her beliefs and fight for them when necessary.

Frederick Garland alternately loves Sally and feels infuriated by her. Honest, moral, and resourceful, Fred is always ready to take on a challenge.

While investigating Nellie Budd, he enters into an assumed role as a professor studying spiritualistic phenomena, but he just as easily becomes her friend and then her avenger when Bellmann's hired thugs attack her. While averse to violence—he tells Mackinnon at one point that he will investigate Bellmann, but won't be "bodyguarding you . . .

I've had my fill of brawling"—he will fight when necessary. Overall, Fred is a good and decent man, courageous and self-sacrificing to the end.

Perhaps the most interesting and realistic of the main characters is Jim Taylor, Sally and Fred's best friend.

Coming from London's working classes, he can get access to some places and information that the others cannot.

His network of acquaintances includes barmaids, stagehands, jockeys, pickpockets, and a myriad of others.

Through this network, he locates Alistair Mackinnon in a seedy section of London and, in a humorous scene, verbally spars with the landlady's young daughter for the information he needs.

Clever, intelligent, friendly, and protective, Jim is completely faithful to his friends. When he learns of Fred's death, he cries unabashedly, "Men didn't cry in the fiction Jim read



and wrote, but they did in real life . . . Jim's father had cried when consumption had carried off his wife . . . when Jim was ten . . . There was no shame in it.

There was honesty." Then knowing Sally will be hurting more, he seeks her out, despite his own emotional and physical pain.

Lady Mary Wytham and Isabel Meredith are two versions of the same person. Both love Mackinnon, protecting and hiding him from Bellmann, and both are connected with beauty in some way. Pullman describes Lady Mary as "a wild bird or young animal . . . all delicacy and shy fire" in her etherealness, while Isabel creates delicately beautiful garments with her needle. Neither enjoys "doing things," as Lady Mary tells Jim while they walk in the park. Isabel refuses to save herself or Fred from the house fire, preferring to let him die with her than to take any action with her own life. Lady Mary chooses a similar course of action in regards to her family. Although she knows that publicly acknowledging her marriage to Mackinnon would save him and her family from Bellmann's control, she finds it easier to agree to marry Bellmann and accept the consequences of her inaction.

In many ways, Alistair Mackinnon and Axel Bellmann are the two most complex characters. Each has an abhorrent aspect to his personality; Mackinnon is a womanizing coward with little respect for honesty, and Bellmann commits ruthless acts of murder for what he believes is the greater good. Both also appear to be two separate people.

On stage Mackinnon mesmerizes people with his powerful personality and control, but Jim finds him weak and indecisive, preferring to let others fight his battles. Bellmann, on the other hand, is a powerful man, but his callousness towards people who stand in his way contrasts sharply with his compassion for those who suffer—both Sally in her grief for Fred and the multitudes of people around the world who live in poverty. In the end, however, Mackinnon redeems himself by giving himself to the others while Bellmann, who can only think of himself, must be destroyed.

The main theme of the novel is that in the struggle of good against evil, good does not always win an absolute victory. While Sally does defeat Bellmann and rids the world of his deathmachine, it costs her happiness and love. Sally is seen as being much stronger than Bellmann in her suffering. For Bellmann, most things seem to fall into place with very little prodding—he manages to escape the controversy surrounding his match factory with little damage to his reputation as a businessman, he effortlessly ruins his shipping company, and he cows Lord Wytham in agreeing to all his demands. Sally must struggle for everything she has, her reputation, her work, and her place in society. Pullman makes the point that the hard-working moral aspects of society will defeat the evil ones not without sacrifice. In this case, Fred is the sacrifice, for his death prompts Sally to act as a decoy to lull Bellmann into a false sense of winning before she repudiates him. Pullman also shows the resultant good that comes from these actions, that part of Fred will live on in his child.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Considering the historical setting of the novel, is Sally a believable character? Why or why not?

2. Why does it take Sally so long to realize she loves Fred? Would marrying him really curtail her freedom?

3. Compare the three young women in the novel: Sally, Lady Mary, and Isabel. How does each react to adversity? Are these believable responses?

Who do you like the best? Why?

4. Why does Sally not hate Isabel? 5. Mackinnon and Jim share many of the same characteristics—a love of theater, a sense of the dramatic, and a knack for flirting with women. Why does Jim initially dislike Mackinnon?

What changes his mind?

6. Is Bellmann insane or is he simply a ruthlessly misguided idealist? Could there have been a way for him to redeem himself?

7. Bellmann's proposal of marriage to Lady Mary sounds more like a business deal than anything else. Is this right?

Does the answer to this question change when it is Sally who makes the bargain?

8. Is it fair that Fred dies attempting to save Isabel? Should he have left her in the house?

9. How much have women's rights progressed since the Victorian Age?

How far must they go? Will they go far enough?

10. Would the novel work if the story was told through the eyes of only one character? Whose perspective would you choose? How would it change the story?

11. While tragedy occurs during the story, *Shadow in the North* ends on a note of hope for the future—Bellmann's weapon has been destroyed and Sally is pregnant with Fred's child. What impressions do you have of the novel?

Did you like it? Why or why not?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Jim, the budding playwright, regularly sends manuscripts to the Lyceum Theater for perusal but always receives polite rejections from Henry Irving and Bram Stoker. Who were these gentlemen and what is their connection to England's literary tradition? (In regard to Bram Stoker, look at the publication date of his most famous work, *Dracula*, and compare it to the date of *Shadow in the North*'s action. Is Pullman sharing a joke with the audience?)

2. One criticism of Pullman's *Ruby in the Smoke* trilogy has been that while they use Victorian England as a setting, some of his ideas and characters—Sally, in particular—are too modernistic. Read Gillian Avery's *A Likely Lad* (1971) and compare the characterizations and actions. Which appears more accurate? Which is more interesting?

3. Jim spends a great deal of time at London's music halls, which ran revues very much like those on the Vaudeville stage in America. What kind of acts appeared on each stage? Who were their great stars?

4. One of the reasons Sally gives Fred for not marrying him is that no comprehensive Married Women's Property Act exists. What was this law?

Was it ever passed by Parliament and if so, did it accomplish its objective?

5. In one way or another Sally, Isabel, and Lady Mary each fit a stereotype of women in fiction. Describe these stereotypes. Is there any way to counter them?

6. When Bellmann describes to Sally his vision of the future, he speaks of a world where people reap the benefits of a society built on the fear of an ultimate weapon. Compare Bellmann's objective to the worlds seen in the novel *1984* and the film *Brazil*. Is he right to assume that for the majority of society the world would become a utopia?

7. Fred and Jim go to the seance to prove Nellie Budd false as a spirit guide. The great magician Harry Houdini indulged in similar pastimes for different reasons. What were they?

8. At the charity event where Mackinnon performs, Charles comments to Frederick that "Disraeli's moved him [Lord Wytham] out of the Cabinet . . ."

Who was Disraeli and what were his major political coups?

9. Read the passages of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* that refer to Satan and the fallen angels. How does Bellmann compare to these characters?

## Further Study

Pullman, Philip. "The Place Where I Write." In *From the Inside Out: the Author Speaks*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991. In this humorously interesting pamphlet distributed by his publisher, Pullman describes where and how he writes—the processes and decorations that occur and exist in his shed.

———. . Special Author/Illustrator Questionnaire. New York: Random House, Department of Marketing, n.d. Pullman answers several questions about his childhood and his goals in this insightful questionnaire.

Vasilakis, Nancy. Review. *Horn Book* (May/June) 1988: 361-362. Vasilakis offers a detailed, but not too revealing review of Pullman's book. She discusses his characterizations, setting, and the fine line between young adult and adult literature in regards to several scenes in the novel.



## Related Titles

*Shadow in the North* is the second in a trilogy by Pullman that features Sally Lockhart. In the first book, *The Ruby in the Smoke*, Sally arrives in London from India to discover her father is missing.

Her search for him leads her into great danger and introduces her to Webster and Frederick Garland, who assist her in exchange for her help in reviving their photography business. When Sally learns of her father's murder and her true identity, these new friends become her family. *The Tiger in the Well* (1990) completes the series of books.

Sally, now in her late twenties, finds life busy with her business, her daughter, and an investigation into an organization that is cheating Jewish immigrants, but when an old enemy reappears with a questionably legal marriage license, she must use all her wits and abilities to keep her life from falling apart while also discovering it is possible to love again.

In Pullman's latest novel, *The Tin Princess* (1994), in which Sally appears as a peripheral character, the action revolves around Tim Taylor, who follows the girl he has loved for years to a tiny German kingdom to keep the crown from falling to an unscrupulous dictator.

While not included in the Sally Lockhart trilogy, the novel *Spring-Heeled Jack* (1991) also uses Victorian England as a setting. In it, three children escape from an orphanage to go to America but are instead captured by an evil villain and hope that Spring-Heeled Jack will rescue them.



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