

Shadows Short Guide

Shadows by John Gardner

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Characters/Techniques

In all detective fiction, the work proceeds from the characterization of the hero. Craine seems almost a parody of the traditional fictional detective: Whereas Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot forget nothing, Craine practices voluntary amnesia; whereas Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer has eagle eyes and subtle powers of observation, Craine is near-sighted; whereas Robert B. Parker's Spenser is physically fit, Craine is decrepit, out of shape, and recovering from an operation for colon cancer; whereas Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe is a two-fisted drinker, Craine is an alcoholic who is surprised in one of the fragments to discover that he has gotten through half a day without a drink. Like Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe (whom he in no other way resembles), Craine is an avid reader of esoteric texts. He buys a used Bible and a book on Sanskrit; he also steals one on clairvoyance. Unlike Wolfe, however, Craine forgets most of what he reads.

Craine, like many detectives, surrounds himself with individuals who complement or tolerate his eccentricities. His secretary, Hannah, exhibits a maternal care to protect him from his drunkenness; his associate Tom Meekins, as his name implies, suggests a kindly alternative to the tough world Craine inhabits. His other associate, pistol-brandishing Emmitt Royce, who threatens to kill Craine and resigns from his office, is a psychopathic version of the American television detective.

Why Gardner should write so deliberate a parody of the detective genre can only be guessed at, but it is likely that this was part of a vast meditative design approximating that of Mickelsson's *Ghosts*. The association of existential freedom and Craine's profession would seem to support this hypothesis.

Detectives are abnormally free characters in fiction; but poet-suspect Ira Katz challenges the freedom Craine and other fictional detectives claim for themselves as well as Craine's claim that as a detective he is a man outside time. The "problem" with existentialists, Katz sermonizes, is that they assume a freedom that does not exist; they obey "the age-old law of mammals, the law that precedes our particular existence: Try not to get hurt."

This idea, which Gardner may have been able to explore fully after he found a way to "fix" *Shadows*, might have proved a valuable synthesis of the techniques of detective fiction with the concerns of the serious novel.



Social Concerns/Themes

Unlike *Stillness*, his other unfinished novel, *Shadows* was never really abandoned. Gardner began work on it the mid-1970s, but not long before his death he told his fiancée, Susan Thornton, that he had "figured out how to fix *Shadows*." Editors and critics agree that he must have meant that he felt he would be able to complete the plot and to resolve the problems the text had created. What he left behind, two fairly complete sections and seven coherent fragments, suggests that this may have been, like his other two variations on the detective genre, another of Gardner's ambitious, "big" novels.

Both *The Sunlight Dialogues* (1972) and Mickelsson's *Ghosts* (1982) allude insistently to the conventions of detective romance. Officer Fred Clumly and Professor Peter Mickelsson must employ those ratiocinative skills and the tenacity associated with the detective hero to solve a mystery and thereby bring some order to a community.

Gerald Craine, the hero of *Shadows*, is a professional detective. Once extraordinarily successful in Chicago, he has, in semi-retirement, opened a small office in peaceful Carbondale, Illinois.

The name of the town, however, suggests something less than a pastoral setting, and both Craine and Gardner have fun punning with this name. It is no Eden in its recent crime statistics either. Although Craine has had only trivial crimes to investigate for the past few years, a series of six serial murders has recently disturbed the community.

Craine is dragged into these when a mysterious local character, Two-heads Carnac, warns Craine that he is being watched. He also has a paranoid suspicion that the local police may intend to pin the killings on him. The person watching Craine proves to be a client, a young lady who fears that she may be an intended victim of the serial killer.

Beyond the themes of restoring a fallen world, or a dale of carbon, which are not worked out fully because the crime is not solved, *Shadows* meditates on two themes, one traditional and even central to Gardner's fiction and the other new for his work. Unlike traditional fictional detectives, Craine is a deliberate amnesiac. His intentionally repressing memories is a rejection of his past and the experiences that have made up his identity; hence some of the "shadows" of the title, which one character defines as those healthy images children create for their future, which beckon them toward their ideal selves, while other "shadows," people's unworthy acts, haunt and oppress them.

This is an individuated version of a kind of estrangement that permeates Gardner's later fiction. For Craine, the ontology of human fear derives from this estrangement. He tells his client that human beings felt fear for the first time when they killed a creature and ate its flesh; for the second time when someone killed another person. In both cases, Craine argues, people invented gods to explain their sense of separation from the world. Eden, that archetype that images human existence before this estrangement took

place, Craine calls this "terrible, terrible place" because it reminds human beings, whether or not they repress the memory, of their fallen condition.

The theme new to *Shadows* has to do with computers and artificial intelligence. One suspect and one victim were associated with the Computer Center at the university, and a body has been dumped in a vehicle belonging to the center's director, who later dies in an accident or suicide. In the only section of which the "fragments" offer two distinct versions of the same scene, Craine discusses the technology and threat of computers with a specialist, Professor Weintraub. This seems to be an important clue to the mystery, and had the novel been completed, Gardner might have been able to pursue this concern with electronic information in the pastoral settings this novelist prefers.



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