

# The Damnation Game Short Guide

## The Damnation Game by Clive Barker

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# Characters

Three characters form the dominant focus of attention in *The Damnation Game*. Of these, the least interesting from a purely literary point of view is Joseph Whitehead, the ambitious gambler who seeks out and ultimately loses the game which gives the work its title.

Whether it be owing to the seeming inevitability of the outcome (something to which readers have perhaps become conditioned through a long tradition of Faustian narratives) or the author's own lack of interest in the Promethean urges which create these situations, it is clear that the most powerful characterization is given to the tempter and not the tempted.

Mamouliau, known at times as *The Last European*, is not the Devil (he quite specifically denies this allegation at one point in the narrative), but he represents a vision of damnation of which the archfiend would certainly approve. Once a man, he relinquished his humanity to gain supernatural powers and a form of immortality which he now maintains through the absorption and annihilation of human souls. He represents the void, for within him there is an absence of all feeling, all sensation: He is, as Barker has noted, "nothingness personified." As a unique incarnation of evil, he belongs in the select company of figures as wide-ranging as Milton's Satan and Bram Stoker's Count Dracula.

Standing somewhat outside the central struggle between Whitehead and Mamouliau, but forced nonetheless to witness its horrors, is Marty Strauss, an ex-convict who is retained by Whitehead as his personal bodyguard.

His confrontation with and ultimate understanding of the essential nihilistic threat posed by Mamouliau functions not only to bring about his own humanistic revitalization but also is essential to the author's articulation of his central thematic issues, for it is primarily through Marty's point of view that the reader comes to recognize them.

Among the novel's numerous minor characters, one deserves special mention. Anthony Breer (aka *The RazorEater*), a creature controlled by Mamouliau, may well represent the most vivid depiction of sadomasochistic depravity to be found in all of literature. The revelation that he is, in fact, a reanimated zombie who has been slowly corrupting throughout the course of the action forms, strangely enough, an effective counterpoint to his role in engineering some of the novel's most violently exotic scenes.



## Social Concerns/Themes

Although portions of this novel are set in a prison and one of the major characters is a Howard Hughes-type billionaire recluse who controls a farflung economic empire, its focus is not upon larger social issues but rather, as is generally the case in Clive Barker's fiction, upon the struggles of individual people to achieve their own various forms of self-realization. Thus, the pattern of transformation through intense encounter with the horrific so prevalent in the Books of Blood (1984-1985) is also a central feature in this work's thematic framework, particularly insofar as it involves Marty and Carys, the characters who form, among other things, the love element in the novel. The other dominant thematic emphasis in the Books of Blood, that involving the symbiotic relationships between humanity as ordinarily defined and those who may be considered "others," is abundantly evident in *The Damnation Game*: indeed, it is the central struggle of wills between Mamoulia, the soul vampire, and Joseph Whitehead, his Faustlike acolyte, which provides the nucleus about which all other elements in the novel orbit.

At the heart of *The Damnation Game* lies a fear which, in Barker's estimation, overrides all others in the human experience — the fear of nihilism, of total, utter nothingness. It is the awful contemplation of such total nonexistence which brings him, in the course of the novel, to redefine damnation, and thereby Hell as well, as a state not of perpetual torment but of something far more horrible — the absence of all sensation, all cognition, all being.

Thus, he provides as a frontispiece to the novel a quotation from W. B. Yeats' *The Hour Glass*: "Hell is the place of those who have denied;/They find there what they planted and what dug,/A Lake of Spaces, and a Wood of Nothing,/And wander there and drift, and never cease/Wailing for substance." Beside this fear, all the visible, graphic horrors which existence can provide — and the novel gives examples of these in abundant quantity — pale in comparison. "The worst monster in the world," Barker has commented, "is better than a blank space."

Although the basic concepts of Hell and damnation are thus altered in *The Damnation Game*, the means by which one attains them remain, interestingly enough, the traditional ones emphasized in both theology and previous literary treatments. Joseph Whitehead assures his damnation through his own Promethean ambitions. Such arrogance, in fact, really needs no assistance in finding its way to its ultimate destination, for, as Mamoulia at one point reminds Whitehead: "Every man is his own Mephistopheles."

# Techniques

The basic technical features in Books of Blood are readily observable in *The Damnation Game* as well. The major difference, of course, is that the novel's greater length allows Barker to employ the more complex devices of plotting and characterization, including the use of subplots and multiple point of view, common to that form.

## Literary Precedents

The most obvious and consistently applicable literary precedent which lies behind *The Damnation Game* is, of course, the Faust parable as articulated in various treatments from Marlowe onwards. The complex characterization of Mamoulia, however, also suggests meaningful comparison to a number of mythical, legendary, and literary traditions, including those of the vampire, Tithonus, and the Wandering Jew.

Barker's fascination with the figure of the zombie — a recurring element as well in several of the stories which comprise the *Books of Blood* — is rooted in a long tradition, although his highly graphic treatments of them would seem to owe something to the "Living Dead" films of contemporary director George A. Romero.



# Copyright Information

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