

Shade

By Neil Jordan

Reading Group Guide

The discussion questions that follow are designed to enhance your group's conversation about Neil Jordan's *Shade*, a vivid, haunting tale of forbidden love, war, murder, and enduring legend set in Ireland in the first half of the 20th century.

About this book

"I know exactly when I died" (3), says Nina Hardy, murdered by her friend George's nine-fingered hands. Nina's spirit continues to inhabit her childhood home by the Boyne River in the Irish countryside. She watches her young self throughout her life, and also observes her half-brother, Gregory, return to the decrepit estate to plan her funeral.

Nina was a lonely girl, with a stern nanny who died just weeks into Nina's instruction. Her childhood brightens with the arrival of Gregory, her father's illegitimate son, who is a year older than Nina but her twin in spirit. Nina and Gregory befriend a less privileged set of siblings, Janie and George. The foursome remains close through their school years; the hulking George quits school, yet participates tangentially in the school play, *As You Like It*, by reading the part of Touchstone during rehearsals in the Hardys' greenhouse. Nina, playing Rosalind, finds her calling in acting. Gregory and George enlist in the army. Before they leave for war, Nina loses her virginity to George, and soon after succumbs to Gregory, too. Nina's subsequent abortion mirrors the horrors of war that Gregory and George face in the Dardanelles. Ostracized, Nina leaves home to begin her acting career.

After the war, George, who is "becoming one of the malfunctioning, inarticulate ones" (235), is thrilled to watch his beloved Nina on the silver screen, without her laying eyes on his war-ravaged face. In middle age, Nina retires to the house on the Boyne River. She retrieves George from his current home, a mental institution, to be her groundskeeper. George discovers a long-buried secret on the grounds; the next morning, he kills Nina and drops her body into the septic tank, never to be found.

For discussion

1. Legends and storytelling play a large role in *Shade*. How do the tales that David Hardy, Nina and Gregory's father, tells about the characters' surroundings, such as the legend of the river's birth, become ingrained in their childhood?
2. Compare Miss Shawcross, the ill-fated nanny, to Nina. Does Nina as an adult share any similarities with her former nemesis? What does Miss Shawcross's "waking dream" (22) of Nina's face, before she's even met the girl, signify about her and Nina's destinies?
3. Nina's spirit says, "I am your perfect narrator, inhabit then and now, dance between both, am nothing but my story and my story seems already endless" (84). Is Nina truly an ideal narrator, or is her perspective limiting within the story? Why is Nina joined by other character's points of view, particularly Gregory's?

4. The name “Hester” refers to many presences in Nina’s childhood: her favorite doll; her ghost and guardian angel; and the insularity of her relationship to Gregory. What does Gregory mean when he tells Janie, regarding the legend of Hester, ““The story changed... as we did”” (115)? How do the various incarnations of Hester reflect changes in Nina’s life?

5. Nina discovers acting as Rosalind in her school’s production of *As You Like It*. How does the character Rosalind, who ““pretends to be a beardless youth, who in turn allows the lovestruck Orlando to pretend he is Rosalind”” (132) resemble Nina? Does the role of “Touchstone and his galaxy of fools” (132) suit George? Is Gregory a fitting Orlando? To what degree do Nina and her friends model their relationships after those in the play?

6. Review George and Gregory’s elegies for George’s finger on the battlefield in the Dardanelles, on page 197. What do the speeches reveal about George and Gregory’s personalities? How do the speeches exemplify the differences between these two friends? Does the tone of each elegy relate to each man’s mourning of Nina years later?

7. Nina tells Maggie, her pregnant actress friend, ““There are other ways of falling... I’m something of an expert in all of them”” (212). Recall the occasions of Nina’s falls, both physical and moral, and discuss the consequences of each fall.

8. Consider the pearl that George finds in a river oyster and gives to Nina. What does the pearl come to symbolize for Nina and George? Do Janie and Gregory have an inkling of the pearl’s importance?

9. How does Nina both escape and utilize her life’s pain through her acting technique? Does Nina’s film work, under the soul-stealing “reflective gaze of the [movie camera] lens” (219) complement her acting method?

10. How much do George’s physical transformations – his fall from the Maiden’s Tower, his sudden puberty, losing his finger, the burn scars, and the beating he suffers at the hands of his neighbors – determine his psychological evolution? Had he not become a “giant child” (153) in Nina’s eyes, or not been transformed by war, could his sad fate have been avoided?

11. How does the relationship between Nina’s parents, David and Elizabeth Hardy, evolve over the course of the novel? How does the name “Velasquez” shed light on the different stages of their relationship?

12. What is the significance of the recurring motif of the finger? Consider the relationship among these instances: the stone monument the Lady’s Finger; the Celtic goddess’s statue with her fingers between her legs; and George’s finger lost in the war.

13. Discuss the role of the Abbott, a character never introduced but fancied to be the invisible dreamer conjuring Nina’s very existence. How does the Abbott relate to Hester, of whom young Nina says, ““When the dead dream... they dream of the living. If they’re good, like Hester, they become our guardian angels”” (69). Why does Nina later cast George Bernard Shaw in the role of the Abbott, who ““If he did [wake]... what existence would I have?”” (240).

14. *San Francisco Chronicle* reviewer Sara Ivry comments, regarding Nina's death, "Ultimately, her death seems not so much tragic as ordained, and George's action, tempered by his forays into delusion, seems nearly understandable" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 10/24/04, p. M-2). What elements of the novel create a feeling of predetermined fate? Is George's grisly act comprehensible, given his horrific discovery on the grounds, or does his psychology remain a mystery?

15. Jordan casts a film director as a minor character in *Shade*: "The director with the drying skin knew he would sleep with me that evening" (233). What does Nina's dalliance with the director suggest about her choice of career? As a film director himself, why would Jordan create such an unseemly character that shares his profession?

16. Consider the multiple meanings of the word "shade," how the title *Shade* reflects the subject, mood, and themes of the novel.

17. How does the circular structure of the narrative – described by Nina's ghost as "the end began it and beginning ending it" (66)– shape the story? Does the structure sacrifice suspense, or add to it? Neil Jordan's most famous work, the film *The Crying Game*, is largely remembered for the shocking surprise midway through the plot. Does *Shade* hold any surprises? If you have seen *The Crying Game*, discuss similarities between the structure of that film and *Shade*.

Suggested reading

Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy* and *Breakfast on Pluto*; William Trevor, *The Story of Lucy Gault*; Roddy Doyle, *A Star Called Henry*; Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair*; Ian McEwan, *Atonement*; George Bernard Shaw, *Plays Unpleasant*; Shirley Hazzard, *The Great Fire*; James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*; Edna O'Brien, *In the Forest*; Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*.

Neil Jordan is the author of three other novels – *The Past*, *The Dream of a Beast*, *Sunrise with Sea Monster* – and a short-story collection, *Night in Tunisia*. He is also the award-winning writer and director of such films as *Mona Lisa*, *Interview with the Vampire*, *Michael Collins*, *The Butcher Boy*, *The End of the Affair*, and *The Crying Game*, for which he won an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay in 1993. He lives in Dublin.