

SHOOTING AT HEAVEN'S GATE

Reader's Guide

THEMES: The complexities of family relations, destructive secrets, suffering, brutality, and forgiveness.

BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There is no denying that we have the ability to influence the people in our lives. This is especially true in families, where we actually show our loved ones what is important and true by our own everyday actions. Spouses influence each other. Mothers and fathers teach and influence their children. And older children influence younger ones, many times pulling the younger ones along with them. Think about the families of Edmund, Alma, Mal, Angelina, and Jose. What is similar about these families? What is different about each of their responses to the influences in their lives?
2. Moral theology addresses the different methods of moral discernment, the definitions of right and wrong, good and evil, sin and virtue. It deals with the goal of life and how it is achieved. Due to our free will, each of us has the capability to act in immoral ways. We may be sorry and ask God for forgiveness. Amorality, as it pertains to humans, usually refers to words, actions, or attitudes. Choices usually have moral judgments applied to them in some way, and a person who shows blatant disregard for any morality associated with his or her choices is said to be amoral. An amoral person seems to have no conscience, no concern about whether an action is right or wrong. An amoral person will do whatever it takes to retain his/her power—lie, steal votes, pay hush money, murder, etc.—with no compunction about his actions. Discuss Mal, the narcissistic manipulator, and Edmund, the mass-murderer—how are they different from each other? Both do awful things, but are both amoral?
3. Suffering in all its forms is almost inseparable from man's earthly existence. Since suffering is, has been, or will be a challenge we each face, this novel looks at suffering from the standpoint of redemption and examines reasons for understanding and accepting suffering's redemptive value. Discuss Angelina's acceptance, or not, of her long-term disease. Discuss Jose's reaction to it and how it transforms him. Discuss how Angelina's suffering affects Alma.
4. Would you classify *Shooting at Heaven's Gate* as a Theology of the Cross novel? (Suffering plus Faith equals Salvation.) Why or why not?



5. We all hold secrets. Every main character in the novel has secrets to be exposed. Choose one character at a time (Moline, Mal, Edmund, Jose) and reveal her/his secret. How do their individual secrets affect the lives of the other characters? Which do you think is the worst secret?
6. Discuss theater symbolism in the novel. Edmund acts in two plays; the gravedigger in *Our Town* and as the lead in *Macbeth*. How is he like each of them in real life?
7. Discuss Alma's goodness. Why would she visit Edmund in prison? How can she choose to remember only his innocence as a child after he has murdered so many people? Which do you most identify with: Pauline, Alma, or someone else in the novel?
8. Why are the scenes at Heaven's Gate Graveyard important? Discuss the symbolism, as it applies to the novel, of the Civil War, the lost children buried there, and the chinaberry trees.
9. Discuss Pauline's statement in light of God's gift to us of free will. "That's the lesson in all wars, especially the ones that go on in our own heads, where good and evil get all mixed up just because they can."
10. Despite the tough issues in this novel, does it leave you with hope and a chance to heal? Why or why not?

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Quotes for Discussion

The world is full of suffering, boy. Overcome it or live under Satan's foot!—The Old Preacher, Edmund's grandfather

The whole is not always equal to the sum of its parts. —Alma

I am a noble man, Edmund. I said I would help you with your problems, and I will. But on my terms. —Mal

What good was he to Angelina? He could clear a field in a day, put up a fence in a week. In even a few seconds, he could play yet unheard music on his guitar and sing words that simply came to him as if from God. But he was not God. He could not cure his daughter and could not fathom a reason for his beautiful child's affliction by such a dire disease. —Jose

The house is important, not because it is the building in which she lives, but because it is, itself, an idea. It is home. —Angelina

Shakespeare keeps before his audience the consciousness of choice between good and evil, which is at war in the soul of every human being. Each of us is both a child of God and a sinner, Edmund. —Ginnie



The god of most people is their own pleasure. —Mal

Good and evil do not exist when human nature wants the best way to scratch an itch. The only pertinent question then is, Can I get away with it? —Mal

A tiny ray of sunlight puddles on the pew just in front of her. She reaches for it as if to grab her place in something bigger—just in case the something bigger turned out to be more important than she was. Immediately, her hand and arm are immersed in the glow. She feels as if the regular Moline has absconded, leaving behind only the part of her the sun has lit. —Moline

Why do you say you're worthless? You're not! I love you, Mama, and I wouldn't love someone worthless. —Alma

This is life, after all, and it is a risk. Sometimes it will hurt and won't go the way we want it to. But you and I? We won't quit living because of it. —Moline

Today, she said there was foulness inside him. She said she wouldn't make love to him anymore until what he loved most was her. —Edmund

I'll tell you one thing for certain, Alma. That boy knew what he was going to do when he walked up to your counter, and he used your inexperience to do it. So, next time, don't be so naïve. Never let down your guard. —Moline

Yet there were moments during his childhood when Edmund was certain he felt God's desire for him. God's longing to covet him. And he would shout back, "Thou shalt not covet!" Immediately, he would be sorry he said such a thing to the God to whom his grandfather said Edmund belonged. —Edmund

Do you think you're at Heaven's Gate? Do you think God wants you enough to allow you to climb the ladder? Well, you'll never climb it unless you're pure as fallen snow. Unless you leave room for God's wrath, not your own. Repent! —The Old Preacher

Pauline felt as if she was holding something of God in her arms. And then, it was so obvious! This time, the person who would save Moline from herself wouldn't be Pauline but this God-given child, Alma. Pure and simple. —Pauline

It's not God who sends us to heaven or hell. We determine where we end up by what we do here on earth. It's why we pray for each other. —Edmund's mother

Some people forget that the price of restoration sometimes takes the pain of a crucifixion. —Ginnie

A confusing light from the ceiling falls on the flawless glass of the counter, and within it is the girl's reflection, all crystal clean and golden. He sees goodness in it. He sees innocence. He thinks he sees what he once was, and what he is meant to be. And it scares him. "You keep the gift," he says to her, and quickly walks away. —Edmund



He rubs his perspiring forehead, driving his thoughts back to the old pictures on the end table beside the sofa. In his mind, the picture glass lights up like diamonds, and the tarnished brass frames turn to gold. He lowers his head in memory of his parents, the priest, and the missal he gave him. If only he could be like he was back then. An innocent child with none of time's fractures. —Edmund

He'd seen the kid before, paddling around downtown Bethel, grinning at anyone who would grin back at him. Funny thing, the kid seemed happy and even had a following. People actually liked him. But Mal couldn't stand him. The creep was always in his way, grinning and looking at Mal as if he would grin back. Of course, Mal never did. He usually put a shoe to the back of the wheeled board and shoved, sailing him down the street. —Mal

He sees Mal staring at the gun, the color draining from his face, and the man he has come to for help, suddenly looks shriveled and small. Is Mal afraid of the gun in his hand? Does Edmund hold the power now? He smiles; that would be something grand. —Edmund

The first thing he'll tell Ginnie is that he loves her more than anything. "You don't have to worry about Mal or the drugs. They're gone now. I've been cured of them," he will say. And she will open her arms and gather him in, all the wayward pieces of him, until he is whole again. —Edmund

You are just like the rest of us. We are all sinners. Every sin, no matter how great or small, nailed Jesus to the Cross, so we're all a bunch of bums, unworthy of God's forgiveness and mercy, yet he bestows it upon us. —Fr. O'Hara

We have become like paper cups instead of treasured earthen vessels, not recognizing that our short, fleeting lifetime is barely a speck in eternity, and only a part of the whole. —Pauline

When we see ourselves mirrored as phonies, of course, we don't like how we look. But we don't expect reincarnation to change us into somebody else. We try to fix the self we're born with. And when we do it, that's the true makeover. —Pauline

One battle won't end the war. There will always be more to come. Evil never gives up. —Pauline

