

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Publications and Research

CUNY Graduate Center

---

1984

### Sin and Guilt in the Fiction of John Gregory Dunne

Michael Adams

*City University of New York*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_pubs/118](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/118)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

# Sin and Guilt in the Fiction of John Gregory Dunne

MICHAEL ADAMS

John Gregory Dunne was already an established writer when his first novel, *True Confessions*, appeared in 1977 because of his articles, essays, and columns published in a variety of national magazines and such books as *The Studio* (1969), an hilariously devastating inside account of machinations at Twentieth-Century Fox. *True Confessions* and *Dutch Shea, Jr.* (1982) offer clear proof that Dunne is not just a veteran journalist who decided to have a fling at fiction but an important contemporary novelist who happens to have been a reporter. Dunne examines the angst of our age, just as his wife Joan Didion does in her novels, but with much more humor and less ennui. Dunne mines his Irish-Catholic background in depicting his characters' obsession with guilt, their struggle to exert some control over chaos, and the self-knowledge they discover, sometimes without seeking it. His protagonists want to be heroes but find it difficult to be virtuous in an increasingly decadent world.

*True Confessions* opens with the discovery of a prostitute's cut-in-half body. *Dutch Shea, Jr.* begins with the protagonist's daughter being blown apart by an IRA bomb in a London restaurant. Also in that novel, a drunken woman accidentally runs a lawnmower over her infant granddaughter, and lawns are covered with parts of corpses, including that of Dutch Shea, Sr., when rain causes a cemetery hillside to collapse. Throughout each of Dunne's two novels<sup>1</sup> occur murders, suicides, and rapes, violent acts of crime, passion, and desperation which mutilate bodies and lives. This violence represents the chaos confronting Dunne's three protagonists, a cop, a priest, and a lawyer, who discover that law and religion are relatively ineffective weapons against both the chaos around them and

that of their mutilated lives. These characters also learn that by examining this chaos closely even more disorder is uncovered. Dutch Shea, Jr., comes to see the events of his life as being like Chinese boxes, a series of secrets hidden within secrets. The typical Dunne character, who is guilt ridden and feels he has evaded most of his responsibilities, tries to improve his life by having some positive effect on what goes on around him but is never satisfied with the little success he finds. The amount of control he thinks he has is only an illusion, as Des Spellacy, the priest in *True Confessions*, realizes: "I was always the one who connected the lines before. Not now. The pencil had a power of its own. No one had any control over it."<sup>2</sup> Without the illusion of control, the forces of chaos seem even greater.

The Dunne character with the most apparent control is Des's policeman brother Tom who seems to be a cynical wisecracker but is more of a sentimental moralist. Like Des and Dutch, Tom does not try to fool himself about his flaws, never forgetting that he has been a crooked cop. "Once a bagman, always a bagman" is a refrain in *True Confessions*. Such self-knowledge in Dunne's world seems more of a burden than an advantage, driving Des into a kind of exile and Dutch to suicide. The burden is magnified by his characters' inability to share it with anyone. Tom's alienation from his brother is increased because he cannot explain his feelings to him. He would like to tell Des why he feels guilty about the suicide of a convict but thinks that the priest is incapable of understanding such emotions or anything connected with Tom's sordid world. Tom cannot find consolation in women either. His wife is in and out of a mental institution because she talks to imaginary saints, and his mistress becomes pregnant but keeps it from him, telling Des, a stranger, instead. He slaps his former mistress because "she was always in control. And always had been. Like all the women he had ever known" (103). Tom is off balance around women because they take the time to understand him. Corrine, his mistress, tells him, "you're afraid of fucking and dying and feeling guilty and doing the wrong thing and even doing the right thing" (206). (This observation, like so many in *True Confessions*, could also apply to Dutch Shea, Jr.) Dunne's characters are afraid to feel and to act and afraid not to.

Tom enjoys police work because he can control it: "He was not certain of many things anymore, but he was sure of one thing: he was a very good cop. Maybe not always honest, but always thorough. He liked the trivial detail work of an investigation . . . . It gave an order and purpose to his days" (205). Because police work is what Tom knows and does best, he uses it as a weapon against the chaos of his personal life. Gangster Jack Amsterdam has corrupted Tom and Des and uses Brenda, Tom's ex-mistress, indirectly causing her suicide, so Tom arrests Amsterdam for the murder he is investigating even though he knows who did it and that the gangster is dying of cancer: "The headlines would wipe the slate clean" (321). Someone must

pay for the labyrinth of corruption, all in some way connected to Amsterdam, which Tom has uncovered. Amsterdam must also be punished for his sins so that Tom can exorcise this minor part and Des's major one in the corruption by exposing it. Dunne insists throughout both novels that our sins will be discovered and we will be punished for them or that we must punish ourselves. Guilt is as terminal as cancer.

Des Spellacy, as much as Jack Amsterdam, is a victim of his brother's outrage. Because Des has awarded seventeen million dollars in construction contracts to Amsterdam and once innocently met the slain prostitute, his career, which was assumed would reach a cardinalship, is over, and he is exiled to a poor parish in the California desert. Des does not see his exile as a downfall, however, because he has questioned how faithful he has been to his calling, realizing that he has lost touch with or failed to develop his true nature through his intricate manipulations of people and finances. Alienated from the spiritual side of the priesthood, Des decides that realizing his ambitions in the church hierarchy would mean "Living out his death" (125).

Des seems almost paralyzed at times by his self-knowledge: "The impulses of the flesh were the darkest sins in Tommy's canon. How wrong he was. Those impulses could be sublimated. Pride was a substitute. Power. The urge to manipulate. Vices that I possess in abundance" (191). Even though Des is aware of how corrupt he has allowed himself to become, he is unable to do anything about it. He almost seems to be waiting for some kind of divine intervention either to destroy or to save him. His brother, in a sense, does both.

Tom and Des are presented as different sides of the same character. Tom "sometimes wondered how much he really liked Des. It was as if he was always waiting for you to stumble, and after you did, it proved some kind of point that only he could understand. Until he found the opportunity to use it. He was like a cop that way. Maybe that was it. They understood each other too well" (141). Des also recognizes, if not direct similarities to his brother that his attitudes are not what those of a clergyman are supposed to be: "It occurred to him that he had no real interest in right or wrong, only in the ambiguities and ambivalences of any moral question. A strange attitude for a priest" (196). Because of his sense of ambiguity, Des feels unable to do anything completely moral.

Des finally sees that the morally unambiguous corruption he has allowed the church to become involved in through its connections to Amsterdam and the salvation he has, subconsciously for the most part, been waiting for are ironically the same: "My faith is being tested. My vocation. Such as they are. Every priest expected the test at some time or another during his priesthood. Usually in a way where the choice was heroic" (331). No such unambiguous heroism is in store for Des or any Dunne character. Des is

heroic only in the way he accepts his punishment and his fate. Tom is heroic for punishing a criminal, even though the punishment is only a symbolic gesture and ruins Des's career. Twenty-eight years later, Des thanks Tommy for saving him because with his exile in a poor desert parish he has found himself: "I am useful to these people. There's a kind of peace in that, Tommy" (339). Man can defeat chaos in a sense by reducing it to something he can control.

The protagonist of *Dutch Shea, Jr.*, however, is unable to find any means of control. In varying degrees, family, religion, and profession have failed him, and he must find a reason to live. As cynical as Tom Spellacy seems to be, Dutch, nevertheless, like Des, waits for something to happen. He thinks that nothing could be as bad as life seems to be, but it grows agonizingly worse, leading to his suicide. Haunted by memories of his disgraced father, his failed marriage, his dead adopted daughter, Dutch becomes a prisoner of his past. He is tormented not only by what he knows to be there but what he suspects — correctly, as it turns out — may be: "My life is a Chinese box full of uninvestigated mystery."<sup>3</sup> Like Tom, he seeks release in the details of his work — "a means for him to avoid the contemplation of his own life" (93) — but with pimps, thieves, and murderers as his clients, he only finds more evidence of man's inhumanity, more cause for despair. Nothing appears to exorcise his demons.

Dutch, who considers himself a good lawyer used by unworthy clients, does not see the law as a moral system upholding society's natural order. He likes it for more complicated reasons: "The superior court building was home to him . . . He felt comfortable here, even safe . . . Everywhere he looked there were knots of people, the guilty and the bureaucrats of guilt, the retinue of the law-abiding dependent on and supported by the guilty. . . . Even the innocent took on the tainted look of the guilty. . . . The building reminded him of the system of justice itself. Why do I love it? Why do I love the assumption of guilt?" (87). He is attracted by guilt because it defines him. He feels guilty because of the sins of his father, the embezzler who took the rap for others, went to prison, and hanged himself. Dutch is also guilty of embezzlement and feels that his father's crime made his easier. Lee, Dutch's infertile wife, tells him that he only wants a natural child because of his father: "All a baby really meant to him was something to prove the blood was not all bad. A new generation that had nothing to live down" (209). Dutch sees his adopted daughter as untainted by Shea's sins only to learn that she is the illegitimate daughter of his former mistress and his best friend, a priest. Dutch also feels guilty about the failure of his marriage. Lee says that the problem may have been that he never believed she loved him. Anyone so burdened by guilt has to consider himself unworthy of love. Dutch even feels responsible for Cat's death since he recommends the restaurant where she is killed.

Because his father's body is among those washed up in another minor scandal, Dutch is certain that he cannot escape from his memories, from his guilt, real and imagined: "when the earth yielded the faithful departed . . . I lost the right not to investigate the uninvestigated mysteries of my life. A rather fragile right in the first place. Not even a right. A choice. A wrong choice? A practical choice. At least until the earth moved and surrendered the remains of John Shea, Sr. Now the Chinese boxes *must* be opened. One by one. Each to yield the surprise that was not quite a surprise. Like the Christmas present one always knew one was going to get" (324). This decision leads to his discovery of Cat's parentage and to his suicide.

This Chinese-box theory of universal guilt is also prominent in *True Confessions*. Tom Spellacy has "a feeling that everything was connected in some way he did not understand. Except that it was a maze and he was in the middle and he had a feeling he was not going to get out" (210). Tom gets out by discovering the intricate ways in which the sins of a myriad group are connected and finding the person most guilty, Jack Amsterdam. Dutch Shea discovers a similar series of implausible, ironic connections. In defending an accused arsonist, he learns that the building in question, a run-down hotel, was once owned by his father and his guardian, D. F. Campion, and realizes that his father was in part punished for D. F.'s sins, that D. F.'s feelings for him result somewhat from guilt. Because all these connections are inescapable, because he cannot face the truths the opened Chinese boxes reveal, Dutch tries to close them by killing himself, again imitating his father.

Catholicism is clearly an important element in Dunne's treatment of guilt. He presents religion as something, like the family and the law, which has failed because of the hypocrisy of its exponents and practitioners. In *True Confessions*, a priest dies in the arms of a black prostitute, but this is nothing compared to the corruption of power in the hierarchy of the archdiocese. His cardinal considers Des an "Irish Medici" (117), but he is also the cardinal's Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Kissinger. In *Dutch Shea, Jr.*, priests and the church have become more trivial. An Irish priest will not allow a Puerto Rican priest in his country club. A suburban church includes an image of George Patton in its stained-glass windows. One priest conducts mass while wearing Adidas running shoes and another while wearing a golf glove. (Des Spellacy conducts much of his business on the golf course.) The latter priest builds a sermon around golf: "I don't want you to think of heaven as a par three hole, my brethren. Heaven is a par five with a dogleg. A lake in front of the green. Sand traps all around it. Tough cup placement. Over a gully and a bad break near the hole. In other words, heaven is very easy to bogey, my brethren. The saints are the only ones that birdie it. And I don't see any saints sitting in front of me this Sunday morning at St. Robert Bellarmine's" (339). Like Des, Dutch wants to be a good Catholic, occa-

sionally has a "faith attack," but ultimately sees religion as too weak to withstand the onslaughts of contemporary banality: "In general, he felt about God as he felt about the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories: he was willing to believe" (129).

Dunne's Irish-American world is not a completely dark one, however. He balances his characters' angst with wit, creating as much comedy as tragedy. Dunne is constantly satirizing, as the golfing sermon indicates, the banalities we choose to subject ourselves to, banalities we create to shield ourselves from the horrors we dare not confront. In a conversation in *Esquire*, Dunne was accused by film writer and director Paul Schrader of having his characters use wit "to avoid dealing directly with life."<sup>4</sup> Dunne did not defend himself but could have said that his characters can survive only through faith or humor. Des Spellacy weathers his disgrace because he thinks he has found something better than what he had. Tom Spellacy's cynical, tough-guy wit is his only possible armor against the decadence he must deal with every day. Dutch Shea kills himself because wit becomes insufficient protection. Dunne does not condemn anyone's using crutches to survive; anyone who sees the moral ambiguities which threaten to suffocate him needs some protection.

## LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

### NOTES

1. Dunne considers *Vegas: Memoir of a Dark Season* (1974) to be a novel, but this partly fictional account of a few weeks Dunne spent in Las Vegas, with flashbacks to his youth, is more of a memoir than a novel. It deals with alienation and decadence similar to that in the two novels but does not explore its themes as deeply.

2. *True Confessions* (New York: Dutton, 1977), p. 261. Subsequent references are to this edition.

3. *Dutch Shea, Jr.* (New York: Linden Press/Simon & Schuster, 1982), p. 240. Subsequent references are to this edition.

4. "The Conversation: John Gregory Dunne and Paul Schrader," *Esquire*, 98 (July 1982), p. 86.