The Shadow:
The Place for the Crimefighter in American Life

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It is Sunday night. Your ritual prayers are from a long ago morning and nearly forgotten. The cold, winter wind has been whistling all day, and now, with the dusk, is howling at your door. As the shadows grow longer, your stomach growls despite just being fed, and you settle down in your favorite chair. It is almost time. One grueling week behind you, you can begin to prepare for the next. Perhaps this week will be different. You turn off the light, allowing the darkness to overwhelm the room, and allow you to merge with it, losing yourself to the endless possibilities it holds. It is time. You turn on your prized possession, the radio, and call in your family. With the opening line and impressive cackle, you know you are in for another exciting and encouraging episode of--*The Shadow*!

On such a Sunday, September 26th, 1937, when the Depression was growing old but refusing to die, came a hero who embodied the suffering American's values, dreams and hopes. At the same time he taught them the proper behavior for a member of society. The radio gave birth to a program that would become one of the most successful of all time. The program's legacy can be measured in more than years and fans. *The Shadow* was a program that reflected the society of the late Depression by showcasing similar values while also attempting to influence the society through the show's messages and the moral lessons. *The Shadow* arrived at the perfect time. Historian T.H. Watkins wrote that "the Great Depression was the worst of times, a terrible, scarring experience that changed this country and its people forever" (Watkins 12). The Shadow was there through it all, whether on the radio or in a magazine.

About a year before *The Shadow* first appeared, the Stock Market crashed on October 23, 1929. According to social historian Dixon Wector's research, by the end of October about fifteen billion dollars in market value was gone, and before 1930 began, the losses were estimated at forty billion. Watkins notes numerous economic practices that precipitated the crash. After World War I, the entire world economy was left unstable, and the United States, which had made a policy of loaning money, now found itself unable to collect (Watkins 41). America also was overproducing goods; within ten years, from 1919 to 1929, there was a 43% increase in manufacture of goods. Normally, this productive spurt would have been healthy, but workers' wages had not increased to match it (Watkins 45). They could not

consume the products they were manufacturing. Watkins notes by 1929, half of all American industry was controlled by two hundred corporations; because of this, most of the country's personal wealth was owned by a small percentage of the entire population (Watkins 46). In this way, there was a sharp difference between the haves and the have-nots. The fall of the investors brought down the banks, the businesses, and the people.

Merged businesses fell like dominoes. Banks closed, unemployment rose dramatically, and the attitude of the 1920s shifted to adjust. Watkins illustrates reasons the people came to know fear. By November 1930, 256 banks failed, and public confidence in financial health and wisdom failed with them. "Bankers and business men, once seen as the pillars of the community, were now seen as being among the principal villains of the national disaster" (Watkins 13-14). At the end of 1931 eight million were without work, and that number would rise to twelve million within months. "A nation used to regarding prosperity as a habit found itself startled, then incredulous, more than a little helpless and finally resentful, it made the situation no easier that the adversary was invisible, and unlike a domestic or foreign foe, invulnerable to ridicule, ballots or bullets" (Wecter 15). Noted historian Robert S. McElvaine writes that worry and fear became dominant in the working family's life. An unemployed man would have trouble sleeping, and then have bad dreams when sleep came. Watkins adds that the public's belief in a government that would protect them disappeared, leading to depression, then fustration, and then to the ultimate form of discord: challenging the system. Thus, using Hoover as a scapegoat (Wecter 15), Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president, and the socialistic platform called the New Deal was constructed. Disaster helped Americans to realize they were one nation and that only through cooperation could they survive (Wecter 24). The trip down the rocky road began.

A year later The Shadow made his radio appearance. Although the hero became a dominant symbol of the mystery drama genre and old radioland, the man who could cloud minds began as a simple announcer and not even a part of the stories. The history of The Shadow is told in detail in the radio program *The Story of The Shadow*. In 1929 publisher Street & Smith, looking for a new way to sell

magazines, used this announcer for the dramatization of stories that could be found in the current edition of their publication *The Detective Story Magazine*. But it was the voice, the famous "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?--The Shadow knows!" line and the cackling laugh that became popular, so much so that readers were disappointed he was not even in the magazines. The publisher, quick to realize that it had created a new sensation, hired Walter Gibson to develop The Shadow into a full fledged character. In April of 1931, the man with the hypnotic eyes, hawk-like nose, black cape and slouch hat became a crime crusader who fought evil doers with the assistance of his network of agents. The magazine sold out almost immediately, and went bimonthly in a matter of months. Around the same time Blue Coal began financing the show but with The Shadow still as the announcer. The listeners were dismayed; now they wanted the show more like the magazine. Street & Smith agreed, but Blue Coal said that the show was popular and did not want changes.. While they hashed out an agreement, The Shadow was essentially off the air. Then in September of 1937, with new capabilities such as invisibility and telepathy and a faithful companion in Margo Lane, The Shadow was reborn as Lamont Cranston, wealthy young man about town. It was the hit of the year and would go on to be the longest-running radio program until it ended in 1954. This hero was born into a time of renewed economic problems, growing unrest in Europe, and unrest on the homefront--the prefect parents for this baby. They remodeled him to fulfill his fate as a hero.

In August 1937 the stock market crashed again, with the Dow Jones dropping from 190 to 115 by October (McElvaine 298). By March 1938, over ten million would be unemployed, around 20% of the working force. Schiffer notes that while production was good, unemployment was still high at five to six million, and that Roosevelt's New Deal had not delivered--it was putting the government in debt. Schlesinger adds that Roosevelt had sharply cut back on federal expenditures to small companies during the prosperity of the year before, but private businesses failed to expand and take in the unemployed. He goes on to say that while this recession was short and less severe than what happened in 1929, it still caused deep anxiety about the possiblities of returning to the depths of the Depression. Although the

government came to the rescue offering more expenditures, the fear did not dissipate. According to Watkins, it turned from domestic troubles to those abroad, and there was good reason to worry. Abroad, fascism was spreading.

There was a growing weed in Germany called the Nazis. The general American populace did not want to become involved; the memory of the Great War was still fresh in their minds. "Many came to believe that World War I had been a wasted investment on nations that could not control their own citizens" (Watkins 27). An isolationist from Massachusetts said "Let's keep out of this lousy war, It was made by a bunch of crooks on both sides. The poor soldier will be...asked to die for slogans as false as hell...we heard it all the last time." (qtd. in Ross 16). Ross reports those who supported American intervention were labeled liberals and communists, and those who opposed were called racists and Fascists. Fascism was not well received. "In the eyes of most Americans, the world of 1937, replete as it was with Hitlers, Stalins, and Mussolinis, had quite enough 'masters'" (McElvaine 285). However, people were beginning to realize it was time to move from the Depression into a confrontation of a different sort. "The isolationists continued to cry out for hiding, but to all but the most stubbornly blind it was becoming increasingly clear that if one era of national crisis was ending, another was looming quite literally over the horizon" (Watkins 348). Yet it was uncertain if the public, mentally and socially, was ready for a war.

People during the Depression had lost faith in many aspects of the society and were turning to options they would not have sought out earlier. A major blow, according to radio historian J. Fred MacDonald, was the public's loss of faith in the police because police scandals intensified as the decade closed. Scandals ranged from inefficiency to bribery to even conspiracy with criminals. Without the police to trust and look up to, the popular mood found it agreeable to romanticize the criminals, to see them as social bandits who robbed bankers and gave to the poor (McElvaine 211). McElvaine says they identified with them, and made them into the image they wanted to see: people who operated outside of a corrupt system to help the poor, common folk. This Robin Hood syndrome was seen in orators like

Senator Huey Long and Father Coughlin who called for the redistribution of wealth in the middle part of the decade. "The sounds were pleasing to the ears of multitudes of Depression era Americans" (McElvaine 249) who saw the rich as to blame for their suffering. However, Coughlin was a staunch fascist and a scoffer of democracy. Long was assassinated. With the state of the world in such a flux, the common values of the American people tried hard to keep up.

New values were born as old one were laid to rest. As Watkins notes, the concept of individualism was viewed as dangerous, because they were the greedy capitalists who only wanted to make a profit and did not care about the little people. "The self-interest of the poor coincides with justice, and that of the rich with injustice" (McElvaine 7). After all, such a mentality was how the Depression began. "The Depression confirmed what many intellectuals had been saying for years: an economy built upon acquisitiveness and competition was destructive economically, socially, and psychologically" (McElvaine 204). McElvaine illustrates that society decided these individuals and their corporation had too much power; to counter it, the general populace moved to community orientated values where power and support would be distributed equally to everyone. They saw that many were in need, and they realized that they faced a common predicament. "This shift from individualism to communalism made the 1930s the time in which the values of compassion, sharing and social justice became the most dominant they have ever been in American history" (McElvaine 7). There was a collectivist urge to join together in common cause for common good (Watkins 7). Yet, not even this value would go unchallenged. "The desperation of the early Depression years had been alleviated, but its memory remained fresh and the thin cloak of recovery could never quite obscure it" (MacDonald 306). After 1936, MacDonald notes bitter emotions grew from a growing sense of political confusion and division, economic unpredictability and fears of international violence. There was a rise in intolerance and impatience. Harry Hopkins in 1937 wrote "Americans had become bored with the poor, the unemployed and the insecure" (qtd. in Watkins 306). With domestic problems and evil stirring in Europe, now was not the time for dissolution of these values. Enter radio.

Radio was a big factor in American life. By 1938 more than ninety-one percent of urban homes, and nearly seventy percent of rural homes, had radio, and half of all those homes at least two (Sterling & Kittross 183). Radio broadcasting had the effect on the 1930s that television has on the 1990s: it played to their tastes and mirrored their values (MacDonald 2). "In a single stroke network radio standardized, entertained, informed, and educated its mass audience" (MacDonald 38). Radio had at its fingertips the ability to reteach the waning values to the American public through its entertainment. The most significant influence of radio was the effect its programming had upon the homogeneity of the nation (MacDonald 37). "Americans came to share certain values and outlooks promoted in radio shows; radio created a national consciousness as never before" (Schiffer 104). Ross combines all these statements to say that radio became a molder of practices and a reflector of attitudes of the era. Like a modern Barney or Mr. Rogers, radio would have to teach young and old alike what it means to be a compassionate, socially minded American. Radio was like this in general, and *The Shadow* was this in particular. Enter the hero.

The Shadow was a mirror for the values of society, and the program integrated them into the show's hero, plots and characteristics. The portrayal of The Shadow is the portrayal of many radio detective heroes. "Several scholars have suggested convincingly that detective heroes in the popular arts must be viewed as social and cultural symbols; that more than pure entertainment, such characteristics are important reaffirmations of the moral values at the base of the American civilization" (MacDonald 61). Sociologist Orrin E. Klapp, cited by MacDonald, notes that heroes have a singular importance. They possess socially desirable attitudes (eg. courage, devotion, prowess,) and they pursue significant goals (eg. overcome evil, champion justice, protect society). The Shadow, like all radio heroes and most champions in America, was a symbol of truth, justice, honor and other bourgeois virtues, and he embodied the essence of those morals and values upon which society was founded (MacDonald 42). While a radio hero represented society's values, the radio program had to follow the rules about how to present these values.

There was a values guideline that was imposed upon radio by the Hays Office and individual networks in the middle of the decade. The Shadow respected law and order, often giving the credit for a capture to Commissioner Weston and giving the police clues and advice. He was morally virtuous; usually he captures the criminal, gives him a brief lecture on morality, and then ships him off to prison. While his enemies might kill heartlessly, The Shadow was slow to do so, and if he did so he did not like it. In "Traffic of Death," he kills the evil doctor before the doctor kills him and Margo, but afterwards he prays: "May heaven have mercy on his soul." Rarely were greed, cruelty or selfishness reasons for a criminal's activity. They often dealt with revenge, or a psychological reason, as in the episode "Circle of Death" where a mad bomber hates crowds and so he blows them up. The Shadow did not show conceit or pride over the less fortunate. In one episode "Friend of Darkness," a blind man is being taking advantage of, and The Shadow takes the utmost care to bring the criminals to justice; the criminals are represented as being truly evil because they are taking advantage of a disabled man. Also protecting society and the people appears to be his main reason for fighting crime. In one episode titled "League of Terror," he refuses a reward, saying his true reward is knowing he's protected the people from those who have not learned that crime does not pay. The Shadow followed the rules when it came to his main purpose: taking on those the public labeled as social outcasts and villains.

The people he fought were mostly the kind of people the survivors of the Depression saw as immoral, those who went against their values. "The criminals were hiding behind the mask of upper class respectability" (Eisgruber 7). They were evil doctors, corrupt politicians, and demented hypnotists plotting to Rule the World (Dunning 543), an idea not so implausible with the rise of the Nazis and Japanese. "With his greatest weapon being his unique and secret ability to hypnotize men's minds so they were unable to see him, Lamont Cranston philanthropically turned his existence into a crusade to better society" (MacDonald 175). He was a wealthy individual, and thus he had no responsibilities to status and a job. Because he did not have to work for money, he could use his time in a form of charity work: to become a vigilante and bring justice where police could not.

He is molded in this common motif, written about by MacDonald and seen often in westerns, of an individual assuming the responsibility to bring justice to a small corner of a vast civilization. It is possible to see this individual becoming the outlet through which society takes action against those that wish to destroy it. In this case, there is a hero with the abnormal capability of invisibility who takes on criminals that are incarnations of the same invisible force the public felt was oppressing them down throughout the Depression. These incarnatons range to a chemist who deals deathy by putting poison in the water supply to a doctor who kills using a trained snake. Both times the villain is unseen or unrecognizable, manipulating the world from behind a disguise socially repsectable. This makes them hard to catch--like a banker or a CEO who's company fails--but The Shadow manages to squeeze a confession from them. In a one-on-one confrontation, The Shadow, the people's secret weapon, prevails. Yet individualism was not very well received, so The Shadow could not be completely on his own without assistance.

The Shadow also took on characteristics familiar with the value of communalism. There were situations where he needed Margo to get him out. Usually she served him in other ways, from typing to calling the police. Then there was the fact that he had a network of agents working for him, a chemist, a cab driver and others. They each brought a certain skill or trait he did not have. In this way, he is holding up the populace's communal value. He was effective, but even he needed people to fall back on, friends he could rely on. The simple lesson: you can't do things alone. This idea of individualism vs. communalism is also evident in the episode "Circle of Death." By working alone and sacrificing himself for the security of the population, their struggle of wits personifies this struggle of philosophies. The Shadow represents the public community, and the bomber represents a destructive individual who strikes unseen. In the end, the bomber's ego is out maneuvered by The Shadow's intelligence. Communalism is reinforced. The next value can also be seen as a lesson, as each episode from this time can be interpreted as.

Each episode has the basic narrative where a dilemma causing normality to change was solved with a sense of self-confidence and achievement. "When applying this to the listeners, such a narrative can be seen as a paradigm for effective social existence" (MacDonald 159): triumph should really result in self-confidence and not materialism. Here is the idea that materialism led them to the Depression, and thus is inherently evil. According to MacDonald, whether there were psychological or sociological threats in real-life, The Shadow presented a model as how to cope with them. He uses his scientific, rational mind over the villain's brawn, as in "Circle of Death," and he will also resort to a cleverly planned tricks, as in "Can the Dead Talk?". "He symbolized the direct action not affordable to most citizens" (MacDonald 175). A normal person cannot cloud men's minds and infiltrate gangster hotbeds. This is not plausible except in make-believe, a world children inhabit daily.

The Shadow and the other radio heroes also taught important values to children. "With emphasis upon recognizable heroes and moral purposes, children's programs were socializing agents, bringing youngsters the values and ideals of American society" (MacDonald 45). MacDonald goes on to say that with having the subtleties of fairytales, these programs taught children about truth, justice, honor and decency. Also, because "The Shadow knows!" everything in a man's heart, he became an omniscent figure. "In cast and story, *The Shadow* was designed to convince the listener that The Shadow was real, that he was earnest, and that he might be very near, lurking somewhere in the shadows, aware of the listener's every guilty secret" (Harmon 59). One can only imagine the effect on a child, listening in the dark, thinking that there was this superpowered being watching him or her all the time. Conceviably, The Shadow became an invisible nanny, the one that definitely cannot be fooled. This aspect probably ties in with the hero's most important goal to prove children and others the evil of crime.

The main lesson that the program taught through the years was that crime did not pay. It was incorporated in one of the catch phrases of *The Shadow*. Before the program, the announcer would say: "These half-hour dramatizations are designed to forcefully illustrate to old and young alike that crime does not pay!" The program can be interpreted as an attempt to stop the glamorization of gangsters and

to redirect the Robin Hood syndrome. "By 1936 movies, juvenile literature, radio serials and budding organizations of 'Junior G-Men' were attesting to the fact that law enforcement had at least grown more glamorous than law breaking" (Wecter 185). Their goal was to show how evil these types of people were so the children would not look up to them; it was, in fact, a stipulation they had to follow due to standards and regulations set down by the Hays office. Crime could not be glamorized; the exalting, as modern heroes, of gangsters, criminals, and racketeers could not be allowed (MacDonald 45). This stipulation was to counter such crime rates as reported by New York City in 1939 that half of all major crimes were being committed by people under 21 years of age (Wecter 185). Detective programs, like *The Shadow*, were created for this purpose. "Throughout its story and structure, the detective program communicated important moral lessons to the American society" (MacDonald 158).

The characters functioned as role models, suggestive to children and reassuring to adults (MacDonald 171). MacDonald records that the shows provided an important lesson by teaching young and old alike that to own things you must work hard. Those who steal are socially unacceptable because they do not work for their belongings, and thus must be punished for hurting those who do work. *The Shadow* demonstrates that these anti-social persons must be purged from society in order for it to be secure. Another catch phrase common to the ending of most episodes was: "The weed of crime bears bitter fruit. Crime does *not* pay!". The stories sandwiched between these two forceful lines demonstrated this point as the villain is constantly beaten, justice is restored, and the hero is triumphant knowing he has made his community a safer place. Yet there was a bigger challenge: making the world a safer place. To do this, he had to battle isolationism.

The show premiered at a time of crossroads, when isolationism was clashing with patriotism. The entertainment world seemed a good propaganda weapon. There was an increase in patriotic themes in popular culture in the last years of the Depression (McElvaine 321). Frank Capra movies are clear examples of this increase. These themes were mostly on a pacifism platform: fight only to protect your beliefs, love thy enemy and a hero always saves lives. All of these are evident in *The Shadow*. He

believed in protecting the citizens, protecting justice, stopping twisted villains, and he fought every episode with his science and rationale to see these beliefs upheld. He saved lives by stopping the criminals before they could blow up or otherwise kill more innocent people. Lastly, he showed compassion for his enemies simply by not killing them.

However, radio was also playing an instrumental role in rejuvenating national spirits following the Depression (MacDonald 61). The isolationists did not want to get involved in a war across seas, but in one episode titled "Sabotage" the war came to the East Coast. It aired January 1938 and dealt with an inspector for the U.S. Navy who is being paid by a Dr. Onheim, a person with a suspiciously German accent, to blow up naval ships. The inspector is told by The Shadow to break the engagement, but he does not listen, and is killed by Onheim. His last words are, like a good American who repents hurting his country, "I should've listened to The Shadow." Onheim knows about the hero's abilities, and says he does not allow himself to be afraid; he uses the same rational thinking The Shadow is famous for. But The Shadow outsmarts him in the end, using Onheim's own explosives to blow up his getaway boat. This episode deals with the possibility of the Germans attacking the United States not by face-to-face conflict, but by a clever sabotage. It throws back in the faces of the isolationists their belief that the Americas will be safe from the Nazis as long as the United States does not provoke them. Because in this episode, no explanation was given for why Onheim was blowing up the naval ships. He was German, and that was probably reason enough. Here again is the idea that evils are unseen, and it becomes justification for fearing the unknown. However, *The Shadow* also tried to fight the very idea of fear.

Another important lesson focused on aspects of fear. Fear was the debilitating emotion many faced during the Depression. According to Watkins, it was the great leveler, knowing no racial, class or gender boundaries, but the public did not know how to fight it. They did know how to cope with it. Comedy was the most consistently popular type of radio programming in the Depression (MacDonald 91). According to MacDonald, it prospered because Americans needed to laugh, and thus they tuned in to be amused and be swept away from reality by laughter. If a laugh could take them away from their

pains, then it could also conceivably help them face it. The Shadow taught them how. His laugh was not only to terrify the villains, but to prove to all fear-inspiring people that he was not afraid. His lesson: you must laugh in the face of fear to prove it cannot control you. There were times when it seemed this laugh would not be enough, when the villain was not afraid, but he continued laughing and eventually overcame. With this laughing victory, he proves communalism will overcome, that good shall triumph, and that Roosevelt was right: the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. In one episode in particular, *The Shadow*'s values and messages are clearly apparent.

In March of 1939 Hitler broke the "Munich pact," cosigned with Great Britain and France and seized the rest of Czechoslovakia. That same month, on the 19th, The Shadow battled a mind controller bent on ruling the world in "Can the Dead Talk?". The parallels are obvious. The villain, Anton Toskovy alias Voltan, was never given a country of origin, but has an apparent foreign accent and an Eastern European name. This man claims he has control over the minds of many oppressed people throughout the world, and that they will, on his command, overthrow their governments. He proves it by having a pawn in Europe wire to The Shadow with a message saying: "The down-trodden shall arise!". Worse, he knows who The Shadow really is and wants him to help create the new world. The Shadow, being a morally virtuous hero, refuses and hatches an ingenious plan to destroy him.

The only way Voltan can be stopped is if he feels fear; only then will his control over the masses be broken. To have this happen, Lamont fakes his death then comes back to haunt Voltan. The plan works. Voltan feels fear and loses his control over his people. One of them kills Voltan, and is killed by Voltan. Voltan is a clever pseudonym for Hitler. Both men rule through control of their masses by appearing invincible and invisible to the common man. With Hitler, his name was enough to control the downtrodden. Voltan used a form of telepathy from a distance. The moral behind the story is that if people could see how their leaders are afraid, are just normal human beings, they would no longer be so willingly controlled. The fact that Voltan's servant called him master exemplifies how the downtrodden see those who control them by offering hope as demigods or gods. The outcome of Voltan being killed

by his pawn Emil showcases the values of the lone individual seeking control over the community versus the power of the common people's communalism to overcome their controller. The story is designed to battle fascism, communism, and perhaps to open up the eyes of those who sought to isolate themselves from the troubles of the down trodden in Germany and elsewhere. Lamont sums it up nicely at the end. "There's quite enough unrest among nations today without the machinations of an insane mental genius. It's a pity that others with a like capacity for stirring up trouble can't meet the same fate." There can be little doubt that after hearing this episode few did not agree. The Shadow had saved the day, and with many peope experiencing the same thing despite grand expanse, it brought them all a little closer, in their values and thinking.

It usually only takes two things to bring a disunited society into unity. First, there is some catastrophe that threatens the survival of the race, and thus the individual who is dependent upon it realizes they are all interconnected. Second, there must be a hero the masses can identify with as embodying their values--someone they would be willing to follow. During the 1930s, the catastrophe was a world wide economic collapse known as the Great Depression. "Heroes" emerged all over the world. In Germany, Hitler used the Jews as scapegoats to unify the people. In Italy, Mussolini did his best to not relinquish his power. Russia had Stalin who ruled with a loaded gun. In America many people vied for the title. Roosevelt was a forerunner, even with a socialistic way of governing. Long and Coughlin used socialism and fascism to instill hope. Then there was The Shadow. His scapegoat was a justified one: criminals. He did not seek power over people; he sought to protect people. He did not rule with a loaded gun; he fought crime with a powerful mind. There was no fear of him becoming a dictator because he was only fictional. He did not preach socialism; he fought it to uphold something better--a combination of individualism and communalism. He was a distinguished character, embodying ideals that were socially desirable while telling them to those who might have forgotten what it meant to be an American. He might not go down in the history books as the hero who helped with the transition from the Depression into a brave new world, but to those he touched, he was definitely a hero.

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