

Acres and Pains Short Guide

Acres and Pains by S. J. Perelman

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Characters

Although there are minor characters such as the attorney Newmown Hay, the real-estate agent Dewey Naivete, and an abundance of hired hands all named Lafe, together with the protagonist's wife and two children scattered throughout the tales, there is really only one predominant character, the protagonist. The Perelman persona is a version of the "Little Man" character which was to a large extent developed in tandem with Robert Benchley and James Thurber in the pages of *The New Yorker* during the 1930s and 1940s.

The Little Man figure is average, usually a victim of an illogical outside world that he cannot control and which is epitomized by that frightful generic monster, Woman. Perelman's Little Man is at once jaundiced and hopeful, expecting the unexpected as well as the expected, and encyclopedic while selfcentered.

Social Concerns

The first of the humorist's thematic collections, *Acres and Pains* is an anthology of pieces that, according to Perelman, were "the by-product of a dozen years of country living." Each of the twenty-one stories is set on Perelman's farm, which he called the Rising Gorge (in 1961 he published the volume entitled *The Rising Gorge* which was another collection of tales about life on his farm). All but one of the segments were initially printed in the *Saturday Evening Post* (the other appeared in *The Country Book*), and each details a particular aspect of country living. Perelman's topics range from interactions with his neighbors to experiences with architects and remodeling his farmhouse, from swimming pools to maids, from milk cows to country doctors, and from hoboies to dogs. His chapters on vegetable gardening and on the effect of solitude on the country dweller are the funniest and most representative.

Only in the largest sense is Perelman interested in social concerns in this volume. While there is certainly commentary on people's relationships and on individuals coming to terms with themselves and their world, his primary focus is on the everyday experiences faced by a city dweller who moves to the country to live on a farm.

As is traditional with humor, however, one purpose of Perelman's satirical writing is to point out social and individual foibles. As much as anything else, Perelman's work is typified by his constant attempt to puncture pretension.

Techniques

The use of the Little Man persona is a technique in itself. Perelman's writing also is characterized by an ironic tone, first-person narration and monologue, a sense of values, parody, dialect humor, incongruous juxtaposition, a mixture of literal and figurative usages, and a combining of two or more fragments by superimposing one upon the other.

In addition, there are four principal stylistic components that are evident throughout virtually all of Perelman's prose: his use of cliches, his allusions, his use of puns, and his Yiddish background. In the humorist's writing some cliches are used as though they are literally true, some are used figuratively, and some start in one mode and finish in the other. The wide range of allusions that abound in Perelman's writing reflects an arcane knowledge in his reference to cultural figures and styles of the past, obsolete words, and oddities of architecture.

Perelman's felicity with puns, which many consider his trademark, is enhanced by his immense vocabulary and extensive storehouse of cultural tidbits.

In fact, many of his puns evolve out of cliches or allusions, a feature that is exemplified by his titles — another well-recognized trademark and a source of humor in themselves (A Child's Garden of Curses rather than verses, for instance). Finally, Perelman's Yiddish background, the American-Jewish culture in which he matured and functioned as a professional writer, is apparent in the device of the schlemiel and the stratagem of the shpritz, a free-form eruption of fantasy, nonsense, and satire that feeds upon itself. Perelman has said that he likes Yiddish words "for their invective content."

Themes

The basic theme in *Acres and Pains* is that civilized man and rural life are not compatible. In what starts out as a journey back to nature, the author discovers that there are no Rousseauistic noble savages among the locals — who constantly take advantage of his pocketbook, gullibility, and inexperience in a rural environment. The reality of chiggers, dry wells, cracked walls, dying trees, termites, and mosquitoes soon undermines his idealized vision of country life.

Literary Precedents

There were several major influences on Perelman's themes and style. A voracious reader throughout his life, Perelman publicly admitted to having been influenced by popular fiction (the Toby Tyler books, Graustark, Girl of the Limberlost, Trail of the Lonesome Pine, The Woman Thou Gavest, The Mystery of Fu Manchu, The Winning of Barbara Worth, Three Weeks, Scaramouche, Polyanna), the Horatio Alger success story, the novels of Charles Dickens, and the writings of H. L. Mencken, George Ade, Stephen Leacock, Max Beerbohm, Ring Lardner, Robert Benchley, Donald Ogden Stewart, Frank Sullivan, Flann O'Brien, W. Somerset Maugham, T. S. Eliot, Raymond Chandler, E. M. Forster, Henry David Thoreau, George Jean Nathan, and James Joyce. The humorist's early interest in cartooning also clearly affected his writing and scholarly analyses have demonstrated the impact of Yiddish and American humor traditions and Hollywood films as well.

There is even some evidence of an association between Perelman's humor and the American frontier humor tradition in his utilization of those elements of straight-faced exaggeration and journalistic humor in the tradition of Mark Twain, Artemus Ward, Henry Wheeler Shaw, Finley Peter Dunne, Mencken, and Lardner.

Related Titles

In tone, technique, and the use of the Perelman persona, *Acres and Pains* is similar to the collections that preceded it. The primary difference between this volume and those collections of miscellaneous stories that the humorist had already published is that *Acres and Pains* is thematically oriented by virtue of the author's focus on his life at the Rising Gorge farm.



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