

At Play in the Fields of the Lord Short Guide

At Play in the Fields of the Lord by Peter Matthiessen

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Contents

At Play in the Fields of the Lord Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Adaptations.....	6
Key Questions.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	8
Copyright Information.....	9

Characters

Matthiessen supplies a number of secondary characters here who offer a constellation of responses to the situation outlined above, and who provide a richness of texture to the novel. Some remain necessarily one-dimensional — the porcine Commandante Guzman, for example, or the fresh-faced and treacherous missionary chief Leslie Huben — but others transcend the boundaries of type, as with Moon's partner Wolfie.

The portrayal of Hazel Quarrier's gradual descent into madness, which could easily have turned into the stock response of white-bread Protestantism to an unimaginably hellish otherness, is so finely nuanced, at once horrible and hilarious, that it becomes one of Matthiessen's most deft fictional creations.

Perhaps most interesting is his portrait of Leslie Huben's wife Andy. Desirable, amorphous, ultimately ambiguous, she is the most fully realized woman, and the most sympathetic, in any of Matthiessen's novels.



Social Concerns/Themes

At *Play in the Fields of the Lord* combines several ideas Matthiessen had explored in his earlier novels — the ambiguous nature of political commitment in *Partisans* (1955), for example, and the quest for human recognition and belonging in *Radtzer* (1961) — reworked into a complex and intriguing totality. The novel tells the story of the Martin Quarrier family's abortive missionary expedition to the Niaruna Indians in the Peruvian wilderness.

Through the dissolution of this mission, and of the ideals that had impelled it, Matthiessen presents a powerful indictment of smug, hypocritical proselytizers, and of the pretensions to cultural superiority that underlie the white man's burden. But Matthiessen extends his project beyond the boundaries of a mere sociological treatise: As the social constraints bolstering the characters gradually dissolve in the heat of the South American jungle, the focus of the novel shifts from an analysis of cultural relativity to one of personal identity in relation to that culture. This shift is achieved by a progressive channeling of attention away from Martin Quarrier and toward Lewis Moon, whom the reader comes to recognize as the chief protagonist.

Moon, a half-breed Cheyenne turned mercenary enforcer, stands at the point of intersection between two competing cultures. Rejected by the white society of an America that will not own an "Injun," Moon adopts the stance of outlaw, until he is thrust into the dilemma of having to bomb the remnants of an Indian civilization in order to facilitate the expansion of the white culture he despises. His solution is to completely sever the ties to his conflicted past, moving among the primitive tribe as one of them and adopting their language, customs and beliefs.

But Moon's desire to lose himself among his true kinsmen is not to be: His parachuted arrival is taken as a manifestation of the gods, and his appearance as a divine savior becomes the seed of dissension that will ultimately destroy those he seeks to protect. While the death of Martin Quarrier is ironic in that it comes not at the hands of hostile natives, but in the duplicity of the "convert" Yoyo — a duplicity itself the injection of crusading whites — Moon's fate passes beyond the ironic to the level of paradox.

In order to fulfill his role as "savior," Moon is forced to kill Aeore, the one member of the tribe who refuses to relinquish his suspicion, and who, in the depth of his anger and sharp-eyed ruthlessness, serves as a mirrored image of Moon himself. What is lost in that killing is not only the hope of both attempts — Quarrier's and Moon's — to avert the inevitable collision of two hostile cultures, but the sense, however tentative, of belonging to something.

The reader is left at the end of this novel with the loneliness inherent in the destruction of community.

Techniques

At Play in the Fields of the Lord is the most firmly plotted of Matthiessen's fictions: The developing story line provides both a sense of suspense and a dramatic resolution of conflict. The experimentation in form that later came to fruition in *Far Tortuga* (1975) is already in evidence here, in the alternation of narrative sequences to portray simultaneous action, and especially in the depiction of Moon's dream/hallucination under the influence of the drug ayahuasca (an incident given credibility by Matthiessen's own experimentation with hallucinogens in the early 1960s). Most notable among "technical" features is the appearance here of the full realization of Matthiessen's power as a stylist, although it must be admitted that, everywhere in his work, style is inseparable from substance. The profound sense of loneliness found in Matthiessen's writings, the distance and solitude present in works as divergent in form and function as *Sal Si Puedes* (1969) and *Far Tortuga*, stems from the desperate rush of language to fill a vacuum, the gap left by the fatal disjunction between human beings.

Adaptations

A film version of *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, starring Tom Berenger, John Lithgow, and Daryl Hannah, was released in 1991. Although Matthiessen collaborated on the screenplay with director Hector Babenco, the film is curiously uneven and lacks the power of the novel. Coolly received by both critics and audiences, it is still worth seeing, however, in that given the narrative experimentation of Matthiessen's later novels, it is the only one likely to make it to the screen.



Key Questions

Peter Matthiessen's fictions ought to provoke lively discussion, in that the issues he recurrently approaches are of real and continuing importance in contemporary America. Although they may take different forms in different novels, questions regarding such issues as the competition of opposed cultures, the relative importance of nature versus culture, and the definition of American civilization, both from within and vis-a-vis others, arise in all his works.

1. Can Matthiessen's portrayal of the Hubens be read as a critique of American Protestant fundamentalism in general? Or is it larger than that, a critique of Christian values and religion more widely regarded?
2. What is the significance of Moon being a "half-breed," and why does he finally turn to one side of that combination?
3. How and on what basis can Martin Quarrier's mission to the natives be differentiated from that of his fellows?

What in his motives and perspective makes him more sympathetically portrayed by Matthiessen?

4. What cautions does Matthiessen give with respect to contact with indigenous peoples by outsiders? What dangers are involved for both sides, and what recommendations does he make on how to avoid these dangers?
5. Does the portrayal of the Niarunas here fall into a romance of the "noble savage"? Could such a people exist today? If they are romanticized, what qualities do they possess that we, the outsiders, desire?
6. Given their seriousness, in what sense are the characters here "at play"?
7. Consider the respective breakdowns of Andy Huben and Hazel Quarrier. Are they importantly "feminine" responses to their circumstances, or merely other options in the face of dangerous extremity?
8. How do the wide-eyed missionary and the cynical mercenary resemble each other, in motive, in action?

Literary Precedents

Matthiessen's work can be compared to any number of precursors. The evocation of the humid South American wilderness in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, where humanity is quickly reduced to the level of jackals, is reminiscent of a strain in literature appearing in such diverse creations as Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947) and John Huston's motion picture version of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948).

Matthiessen's dependence on native speech in *Far Tortuga* recalls Mark Twain; the rich diversity of his prose suggests Faulkner. Perhaps the most pertinent comparisons, broached even by early reviewers, are to Conrad and Melville. For example, Matthiessen's third novel *Raditzer*, a lean and disturbing tale, can be read as a peculiar inversion of *Billy Budd* (Melville, 1924), where the title character (also a sailor) is destroyed not because of his intolerable goodness, but because of his equally intolerable repulsiveness.

At Play in the Fields of the Lord, in its handy destruction of conventional morality deep in the jungle, bears conjunction with *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1902), and *Far Tortuga* speaks both to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (Conrad, 1897) and especially *Moby-Dick* (Melville, 1851). But tracings such as these must inevitably play themselves out: It quickly becomes ridiculous to compare the bellyaching of Captain Raib with the grandiloquent sufferings of Ahab, and to call *Far Tortuga* a *Moby Dick* of the forecastle is to do an injustice to both texts. Matthiessen's fiction, in its imaginative complexity, remains strikingly original.



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