

The Avatar Short Guide

The Avatar by Poul Anderson

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Characters

Some of the characters in *The Avatar* have their own special kinds of unhappiness. For instance, Ira Quick is a government official who seeks fulfillment through public power—a fulfillment he does not enjoy in his personal life. "On the crudest level," he muses, "hearing a crowd cheer me, seeing them adore me, beats taking a woman to bed." Even so, no amount of public acclaim makes Quick feel complete, a whole man.

On the other hand, Joelle Ky yearns for simpler fulfillment: companionship with intellectual equals. She has the ability to link her mind with that of a computer and feels that ordinary human beings are not fit companions for her. Whereas Quick wants to curtail Brodersen's activities because he views them as threats to social stability, Ky hopes that through Brodersen's efforts she will meet *The Others* and find in them sympathy for her unusual intellectual abilities. Her ultimate discovery that she must remain lonely transforms her from an egotistical figure into a tragic one that evokes pathos.

The only character who seems comfortable with himself is Brodersen. He is courageous and self-confident. Just as Quick and his ilk have unrewarding sex lives, Brodersen is sexually dynamic, a lover so good that he brings out the best in the women who love him. It is he who dominates the pursuit of the mystery of the ancient *Others*, and through his efforts other characters learn more about themselves as they overcome obstacles and come face to face with reality, which is different from their hopes and expectations.

In Anderson's view, it is the Brodersens of the world who make society dynamic, and their independent, even antisocial ways are far better for those around them than the controls on human nature created by governments and overly complex societies. Brodersen also illustrates an important difference between Anderson's views and Huxley (*Brave New World*, 1932) and Orwell's views. All three authors expressed dismay at how government power and mindcontrolling drugs could wreak great evil on people—eventually destroying even strong spirits, but Huxley and Orwell are limited in their depictions of solutions; in their work, the struggle of the human spirit to be free usually seems hopeless.

In Orwell's case, a devotion to socialism may have clouded his ability see solutions for justice and happiness beyond what governments could offer. Anderson plainly see hope for humanity, a way out from under oppressive societies; for Anderson, Brodersen's free spirit is an example of how any human being can make his or her own life better. In addition, he does not depict technology the same way Aldous Huxley and George Orwell do in *Brave New World* (1932; see separate entry), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949; see separate entry), and *Animal Farm* (1945; see separate entry). Technology crushes life and is among the tools of oppression. In *The Avatar*, too, technology can be used to oppress people, but it also can be liberating; for those who know how to use advanced technology, it can be a tool of liberation, an opportunity to open up frontiers where the human spirit can expand to its fullest capacity. It would seem that in *The Avatar* what

matters most is who controls the technology, those who would rule over others or those who would create new opportunities for others.



Social Concerns

The Avatar echoes the social themes of most of Poul Anderson's fiction. The protagonist, Dan Brodersen, is a daring entrepreneur, handsome and sexually attractive. Officials of government and organized religion are hypocritical and sexually inadequate. As in *Trader to the Stars* (1964; see separate entry), society benefits from the actions of those who love freedom and who respect the economic needs of others. This is a familiar theme in Anderson's writings, and in *The Avatar* it is forcefully stated.

Like the future depicted in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949; see separate entry), *The Avatar's* future world looks disturbingly like our present one, changed in significant but plausible ways. Earth is ruled by sick-minded politicians for whom power over others is the only goal worth having. Those who live on Earth are slowly having their freedoms constricted and their burdens to the government increased. Bit by bit, liberties disappear and the belief that individual people can make better decisions for themselves than can the government is ridiculed. The ability to leave Earth is almost the only avenue to a free life left to humanity—and most people have no hope of leaving Earth.

The migrations of people to faraway planets recall a familiar theme in American literature: The frontier as a place for people to make their own destinies. In *The Avatar*, exploration of other worlds is essential to human survival—the constricted, government oppressed life on Earth is doomed to misery and possibly extinction. In this sense, Brodersen is a symbolic figure—a representative of the pioneer who makes life better for others by blazing new trails into open, free territory. His expedition is a display of the wonders awaiting humanity if humanity will but shake itself loose from social restrictions and embrace its instinct for exploring; among the wonders depicted is liberty—the ability for people to make their own destinies and to seek their own answers. Even when the answer is no, as in the case of Joelle Ky, the seeking out of the answer for oneself is far better than having the answer dictated by government or an oppressive society.

This point of view is a seductive one, and it is well presented by Anderson. Ira Quick and his minions are all too familiar to most people, and the destruction of the human spirit wreaked by their struggle to force others to believe as they do and to behave as they want finds parallels in countless government endeavors, from excessive taxation to imprisonment for political dissent. In the life represented by Brodersen, people have the chance to break out of their social confinement and to explore as far as their spirits will take them. Brodersen is a great leader because he makes opportunities for others to be as free as he is; he and his companions have little use for social and government rules that prevent the full expression of their hearts. His is a life many would wish to emulate, and in spite of some of the hardships such as broken hearts and failed aspirations that necessarily come with one's free exploration of one's potential, the ability to explore is in and of itself far better than lives restricted by unnatural codes of conduct.

Techniques

The Avatar is an exceptional novel because it is beautifully written, with extraordinary imagery that evokes the immensity of the universe. For instance, a galaxy is described as a "wheel" that "burned across a quarter of the sky. From where Chinook was it appeared tilted; vision crossed an arm, then the nucleus from which it curved, then an arm beyond that. It shone, it shone: the heart red-gold, the spirals blue-white, clusters scattered throughout like sparks. Elsewhere gleamed a few cloudy forms, attendants upon its majesty, and remotely the light from its kindred." Such imagery evokes the majesty of the universe; and it succeeds in the narrative because it is unusually inventive as well as being essential to the unraveling of the mystery of The Others.

In Hindu mythology, an avatar is an Earthly manifestation of a deity. In Anderson's book, this means that The Others have representatives among humanity.

Dedicated to studying life everywhere, The Others created star gates that enabled them to travel through space and time. When Brodersen chases their secrets, he uncovers many wonders, from neutron stars to alien spacecraft that are almost impossible to understand. The avatar of the title is the human observer who unconsciously helps The Others learn about humanity. By creating such a character, Anderson unites the novel's mystery, characterization, imagery, and plot into a coherent whole. Therefore, The Avatar transcends the conventions of science fiction and becomes a profound statement on the human condition and on humanity's place in the immensity of the universe. The characters in The Avatar are wonders in and of themselves. By inference, so are all human beings.

Themes

The theme of happiness unites the characters of *The Avatar*, and is tied to the social concerns. Underneath the exciting adventure of the novel is the continuous search of characters for meaning to their lives. Most of the characters feel as if they are missing something essential for their happiness. When Brodersen takes off on a quest to find The Others who built the star gates that lead to worlds scattered throughout the universe, some of his companions join him in a literal search for happiness. They hope that The Others will bring them companionship or spiritual fulfillment. It is this search, not the finding of happiness, that is essential to their well being. Brodersen the expansive explorer, the doer who makes opportunities for others, is in this a stark contrast to Quick and others who believe that people must be controlled. This difference is very important to twentieth-century thought—wars have been fought over this difference. Many social philosophers and psychologists have advocated total outside control over people's lives as the only way to ensure that people behave in good ways: National socialism and communism are two examples of social constructs in which the government controls what people do. Anderson's view is essentially American, with its foundation in Thomas Jefferson's declaration in 1776 that the "pursuit of happiness" is an inherent right of every human being from the moment of birth onward.

It is the pursuit that is crucial, rather than the having of happiness. Even the saddest of Brodersen's companions is much better off for being able to pursue happiness instead of having had no chance at all to search for it.



Key Questions

The potential for discussion of *The Avatar* is almost limitless. It is a joy to read, filled as it is with mystery and wonder, and its depiction of the majesty and beauty of the universe is worthy of thought and speculation. How does the novel capture a distinctive vision of the universe and humanity's place in it? What seems to be Anderson's fundamental conception of the universe? Is it complete? What is missing? What should Anderson take into account? Many novels portray humanity as a small, insignificant aspect of the universe. For instance, Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968; see separate entry) portrays humanity as subject to the whims of forces far beyond its comprehension. Does *The Avatar* do the same? According to the novel, what is humanity's relationship to the universe? Do the schemes of Quick and the daring of Brodersen matter at all?

Another tack to take in discussing the novel is to focus on its mystical aspects.

The title is suggestive of the mysticism; the concept of the avatar is borrowed from Hindu beliefs, hinting at a Godlike presence in the narrative. Why would any alien being want to study humanity? Why use an unwitting avatar? What is Anderson saying about life in general through *The Others* and their practice of studying humanity from the inside out? Many descriptions in the novel are almost mystical, and ideas such as that of life on a neutron star border on the religious. Is it possible that Anderson finds humanity's nearly universal religious impulse to be a good vehicle for conveying his views of how the cosmos works, as well as of his views of humanity's role in the universe?

1. Does Anderson try to fit too much philosophizing into a simple narrative of adventure?
2. Are the ideas in *The Avatar* profound or shallow?
3. Each character seems chosen to represent an aspect of humanity. What does each represent? How do these different aspects of humanity enhance suspense through conflicting personalities?

How do these characters fit into the novel's resolution? Are there any surprises in how Anderson fits each character into the climax? What points does he make with each character?

4. Characters in *The Avatar* have symbolic significance. For instance, Quick symbolizes government bureaucrats; Brodersen represents the spirit of free enterprise. Is this symbolism too intrusive on the story line? Is it repetitive? How does it fit into the novel's themes?
5. What does the avatar herself represent? Why is she the avatar and not one of the other characters?



6. Who are The Others? What kind of culture do they have?

7. As with many great novels, *The Avatar* has layers of meaning. The upper layer would probably be that of the simple adventure story, in which wandering characters have wonderful and exciting experiences. Just below that might be the structure of the quest. At bottom might be Anderson's speculation on the fundamental nature of the universe. Elsewhere in between would be the layer his socioeconomic criticism and another layer developing his views of humanity's place in the cosmos. There are other layers.

What are they? When looking for a layer of meaning, search for a plot line or theme that is developed from the beginning to the end of the novel, often independent from (but concurrent with) the main adventure story. How well are the ideas of each layer developed? Are Anderson's insights worthy of further study?

8. By the time he wrote *The Avatar*, Anderson was a very accomplished master of popular forms of fiction, especially of the science fiction and mystery subgenres. He had by then been experimenting with literary forms (see especially *Trader to the Stars*, 1964) and had been adding symbolic significance to his characters. The efforts of any author to blend straightforward entertainment with demanding philosophical speculation is bound to be controversial, especially in the case of an author whose work is likely to be picked up by an audience expecting a pleasant but undemanding read. In *The Avatar*, has Anderson erred by yoking complex themes to a popular form of entertainment? Is this an abuse of his readers? Does it make the novel more entertaining to read? Is it confusing?

9. How does Anderson evoke wonder in *The Avatar*? What are some of the most wondrous passages? Is wonder a good reason for reading a book? Can wonder substitute for plot as an attraction for readers?

10. What insights into the human condition are offered by *The Avatar*? Are there any universalities that might elevate the novel above conventional science fiction?

Literary Precedents

The English writer Olaf Stapledon (1886-1950) is usually credited with writing the first novels that successfully depicted the immensity of the universe. His books *Last and First Men* (1930) and *Star Maker* (1937) have narratives that span the cosmos, as does *The Avatar*. Other precedents extend at least as far back in the past as 1776, when the Declaration of Independence made explicit the idea that people are born with the right to seek their own happiness and that oppressed people have the right to overthrow oppressive governments. The American view of the frontier as a place where people could truly seek their own ways in life has a long history in literature, including the novels of James Fenimore Cooper such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) in which society is depicted as destructive of not only aspirations for freedom, but of the environment in which modern people had to live. Brodersen goes beyond Natty Bumppo's individualism and honorable spirit to create ways for others to share in his achievements; Brodersen helps to create a society in which people's ability to pursue happiness is expanded.

The views expressed in *The Avatar* resemble some of those found in Isaac Asimov's Foundation series of novellas and novels, both written before and after the publication of *The Avatar* (see the entry on *Forward the Foundation*, 1993). In the Foundation series, an old, corrupt central government slowly collapses as it increasingly fails to meet the needs of its people and increasingly embraces criminality and deceit. The solution to the problem presented by the old, oppressive government and the prospect of 30,000 years of social chaos and misery is the founding of a free state on the frontier of the empire, where people may create a society of opportunity free from the interference of the empire. Again, it is by discovering and developing new worlds on or beyond the frontiers of civilization that people may best hope to find liberty and to create open societies.

The idea that there may be an old space-faring race that is interested in humanity is a common one in science fiction. In *The Avatar*, the ancient beings use an avatar, a human that serves them as a living observer of human society. In Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968; see separate entry) the ancient beings set up monoliths that when disturbed serve as beacons to let them know of humanity's technological advances. In sequels, a lost astronaut serves as a spiritbeing who appears to some characters, letting them know a little about the ancient beings' wishes. Neither Clarke's nor Anderson's ancient beings are particularly benign, having purposes of their own that may not coincide with human happiness, but they are not evil, either. Ancient alien observers can take other forms, as in the television series *X-Files* (1993-), in which the ancient observers use their representatives on Earth to prepare for their colonization of the planet, as well as the likely annihilation of humanity.

Related Titles

The character Brodersen resembles Nicholas Van Rijn and David Falkayn of Anderson's stories and novels about the Polesotechnic League. The theme of the free human spirit as the advancer of civilization is common in Anderson's writings, as is the notion that governments seek to inhibit free spirits. At about 175,000 words, *The Avatar* is much longer than most of Anderson's writings.

Publishers of popular fiction prefer novels that are between 60,000 and 75,000 words long because that length is ideal for the paperback-book market. The professional's professional, Anderson has usually met publishers' length requirements. Such short novels have little room for the detailed imagery and thorough characterizations that make *The Avatar* remarkable.



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