A Bad Man Short Guide

A Bad Man by Stanley Elkin

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Contents

Characters

Many of the supporting characters in A Bad Man are effective representations of literary types; the names of Feldman's three victims — Victman, Freedman, and Dedman — suggest the allegorical qualities of the novel. Similarly, many of the prisoners represent essentially symbolic intentions rather than individually developed characterizations. The power of the novel as a representation of life rather than as thematic manifesto depends on the conflict between two powerful antagonists, Feldman and Warden Fisher.

These two apparent opposites are surprisingly similar. Their differences are obvious but their similarities are subtle and substantive.

When Feldman enters the prisonlabyrinth, he immediately becomes the Warden's special project. Ostensibly out to reform him, Fisher tries to convince Feldman that his belief, that people should seek the exceptional, the extraordinary, in their lives is wrong.

In repeated personal counseling, letters, and public harangues, Fisher tries to coerce Leo to "slow down, play ball, calm down. Life is ordinary, Feldman."

Fisher seems to aspire to be society's advocate in rehabilitating criminals to accept conventional norms, even if he goes about it with a zealot's determination. Two of Elkin's strategies deliberately undermine that assumption. First, Feldman suddenly discovers that "the warden. He's a bad man, too." Once we credit Feldman's intuition, we discover the central paradox of Elkin's characterization of the warden. Bad men are by definition obsessive, compulsive men whose actions represent their individual character. Fisher (critics often note resonances between his name and the Fisher King of the Grail legends behind such masterpieces as The Waste Land, 1922), although his gospel is moderation and accommodation, persecutes with zeal and sadistic tortures those who oppose his philosophy of moderation.

His methods, from placing Feldman in solitary confinement for reading a file on open circulation in the prison library to his declaring a pogrom against all bad men, betray his obsessive nature; Feldman, the most intractable of bad men, becomes the Warden's special obsession. He does not, as we learn, intend to reform Feldman — reformation is ruled -out by the assumption that he is a bad man who therefore cannot be reformed — but to discover and comprehend what makes him uniquely Feldman before destroying him. The zealot for moderation — "life is ordinary" — is actually obsessed with Feldman's obsession.

As critic Tom LeClair once noted, both Feldman's store and Fisher's prison are extensions of their compulsive selves, both run by "compulsive fiat, personal harangue, irrational definitions of policy." And Fisher's goal of dissecting, then destroying, Feldman takes him to grotesque ends — such as arranging for his wife to seduce Feldman, then locking him in a dark room with an electric chair, thus forcing him to confront his own death. Fisher's obsession reaches its apotheosis when Feldman has almost convinced the kangaroo court the warden convenes to convict Feldman that he is innocent, or

ordinary; Fisher intervenes and by the force of his personal charisma persuades his court to condemn, then attack, its nemesis. In Feldman's death, no principle is vindicated: what the novel suggests is the total suppression of creative individuality and the dangerous potential of bad men who turn their creativity toward suppressing other individuals.

Social Concerns

With his second novel Elkin established himself as one of the more defiant, socially challenging, writers of his time. A Bad Man takes up the traditional issues of incarceration, life in prison, and justice. The hero, Leo Feldman (critics often note the pun on "felled man"), is a bad man in many ways. He is an irresponsible father, a cruel husband, a manipulative friend, a sadistic employer, and a compulsive entrepreneur. Although guilty of many unethical business practices and several crimes, he is not technically guilty of the crime for which he is imprisoned. The novel thus raises questions about our assumptions concerning guilt and innocence, for Feldman is punished for being who he is, not for a specific crime he has committed. These questions are compounded by Elkin's portraying the prison itself, not as a realistic representation of an actual penal institution, but as an imaginative labyrinth that seems to follow no spatial or legal rules but its own. Certain inmates are issued uniforms that represent their image within the prison.

Instead of a striped or chambray shirt, Feldman must wear a clown's costume — because the prison authorities want him to think of himself in this fashion.

The problem of justice is framed by another cultural concern, the degree to which a man of business may be required to abide by ethical and cultural protocols. This "bad man" is a typically compulsive Elkin character who becomes so engaged in the art of making deals that he loses interest in profit (except as how we keep score when making deals) or in custom, convention, or propriety. A related concern central to the novel addresses the purpose of incarceration as a method of dealing with society's intractable individuals. Do prisons exist to punish, rehabilitate, or reform? Or are they self-contained institutions that operate by laws that are irrelevant to those by which the outside world works? If Feldman's fate has been decreed not by a judge or jury but by prison authorities, and if his fate is death a week before his release date, how is justice served by his incarceration?

Because the warden determines that Feldman must serve out his every week of sentence before his execution, a sadistic element is added to the notion of incarceration and justice.

Techniques

A Bad Man refines the traditional Elkin method of picaresque narration, in which the organizing principle is an episodic rendering of the character's life, beginning with his trip to the prison and recovering through memory or anecdote events that led Feldman to his illegal basement store. Like J. P. Donleavy in The Ginger Man, Elkin focuses our attention, through limited omniscient narration melding occasionally into first person central, on an antihero whose defiance of cultural norms we are to admire, but whose indifference to the needs and feelings of other human beings are repugnant.

Feldman denies his son, abuses his wife, takes advantage of friendships, ruins a partner's promising career, and even fires a sick saleslady for a trivial offense. Through episodic narration, internal monologue, and humor, Elkin compels us to contemplate the ideas and obsessions of a man whom we would not, in real life, tolerate — but we would probably fear him.

As is customary in Elkin's works, a unifying metaphor provides perspective on the theme and complements the rich, funny rhetoric of the narrative. In this book, a homunculus, which Elkin calls a "fossilized potential" or a "paradigm" of Feldman, is lodged near his heart. At key times in the book, Leo converses with this alter ego, and we see in these conversations a residual "normal" self Leo has suppressed to chart his course in becoming Feldman.

The metaphor, however, takes on ominous implications when we learn that this fossil Feldman, lodged over his heart, is the key to his death. Thus figurally Elkin implies both that Feldman has lost his ordinary, "decent" self, and that in a "bad man" or individual, such residual qualities may be terminal.

Themes

In addition to its disturbing inquiries into the possibility of justice in the American penal system, A Bad Man treats the fundamental Elkin themes of obsession and commercial ventures.

Feldman inherits obsessive vending skills from his lunatic father, an itinerant peddler who challenged Leo to sell the "unsalable thing." His career is one of re-defining the limits of what can be done with merchandising. As his enterprises succeed, he ventures further and further into the uncharted and exotic. Eventually, his "basement" store, which originated as serendipity, becomes a vending place for many illegal activities including abortion referrals, prostitution arrangements, firearms sales to fanatics, and illegal drug deals. For Feldman the motive is not profit, but expanding the range of his enterprise for the sake of adventure and entrepreneurship. His excitement is illustrated when he rhapsodizes about one of his most outrageous deals, "this is it. This is" — not the profit, but the excitement of making the unmakeable deal, of pushing the logic of dealing beyond its limits.

The theme of obsession is not, however, limited to Leo's dealing, which takes precedence over his loyalty to family or friends and becomes a definition of his very identity (he calls himself "the master of all I purvey").

Briefly the warden places him in charge of the prison commissary, where he again takes up the role of the obsessive entrepreneur, challenging himself to force the inmates to buy things they do not really want.

In fact the entire class of "bad men" in the prison prove to be, not repeat or intransigent criminals, but obsessive types whose crimes manifest their individuality. An habitual criminal need not be a bad man, but the class of bad men is defined by prison authorities as those whose crimes express their character. The trait all bad men share is that they are compulsive.

For example, one is obsessed with becoming the oldest inmate in the American penal system. Such bad men are segregated by their clothing, but more importantly by the harassment the Warden designs especially for them. The novel's dialectic can finally be identified as the a conflict between the exceptional (the class of bad men) and the ordinary (everyone else). Feldman's defeat, his trial and execution by a kangaroo court, manifest Elkin's despairing theme, that all society is conspires against those who have the will, courage, or arrogance to claim to be exceptional.

Key Questions

Like most early Elkin novels, this one challenges readers to identify with, or consider the fate of, an obsessive protagonist whose values we probably will not share. We might reflect on the ways in which the author causes us to evaluate Feldman and his personal obsession by framing that motif with contrasting characters and obsessions.

1. Does the story of Leo's mad father psychologically justify Leo's obsessive preoccupation with franchising? Does his having had such a family life create sympathy for Leo as a character?

2. Do the characterizations of Leo's wife, Lily, and son, Billy, compound our picture of Feldman as obsessive type? Is he responsible for their character?

3. Can Warden Fisher be explained psychologically? To what degree can psychology account for this character's zeal for the ordinary?

4. At the end of the trial, the Warden agrees to let Feldman's fate stand on his treatment of Dedman. Does his treatment of Dedman, as well as Freedman and Victman, justify his being branded an enemy of the people? Are these criminal or ethical considerations?

Literary Precedents

A Bad Man can be located within a long and distinguished tradition of prison literature. Dostoevski's Crime and Punishment (1866) and Dreiser's An American Tragedy (1925) studied the effects of incarceration on a criminal, and in each the process of suffering has been a movement toward self-discovery. More directly, A Bad Man can be situated in the recent tradition of existentialist prison literature, especially Franz Kafka's The Trial (1925) and Albert Camus's The Stranger (1942), books in which the hero is imprisoned for something he does not regard as a crime, but society does, and novels in which the hero's defiance of authority is a defining and admirable gesture.

Two novels of the decade also share concerns and techniques with this novel. Bernard Malamud's The Fixer (1966), which Elkin reviewed unenthusiastically, studies the effects of political imprisonment on a Russian Jew, and the eerie atmosphere of the prison and the sadistic tortures by authorities resemble those in Elkin's book. Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962) also examines the rebel in confinement, and resemblances between Warden Fisher and Nurse Ratched (who runs the ward in the asylum at which most of the novel happens) are obvious: both are neurotic authority figures whose control and dominance deserve to be overthrown. It is prudent, however, to resist pressing these comparisons without noting their differences. The Fixer and The Cuckoo's Nest are in effect political treatises, or calls to rebellion. The point of A Bad Man is somewhat more subtle. It calls into question what Hamlet calls "the insolence of office," but it does not suggest political or cultural rebellion as a solution.

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