Back Roads Short Guide

Back Roads by Tawni O'Dell

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

O'Dell develops Harley so completely that readers can begin to anticipate what his reactions are going to be, but there is little physical description of him. We know that he is a poor boy from the backwoods of Pennsylvania, that he is tall and in good shape, that he wears a baseball-style cap, tee shirts, and blue jeans; but that is about it.

The lack of physical details allows O'Dell to present Harley as more of an Everyman, and readers can envision themselves or someone they know engaging in essentially the same actions that Harley does, based on his rough-and-tumble personality, his handto-mouth existence, and his violence-plagued childhood. He is a fully realized, sympathetic character who inspires empathy and understanding, rather than simply some guy in a tragic news story.

O'Dell succeeds in giving readers a richly detailed glimpse into the mind of a troubled youth, and that glimpse is both horrifying and fascinating. Harley is not a harlequin but a "real" person. While he occasionally resembles such forerunners as Holden Caulfield in looking askance at adult behavior, there never has been anyone quite like him. Harley is an original creation, and more than anything else, his persona drives the events of the novel and the echoing effects of O'Dell's art, while ironically he often seems to be tossed by winds of circumstance that would knock anyone down.

His ultimate strength, though, is based on his own brand of individuality, which is by nature indomitable, persuasive, and entertaining, though at the same time fragile, prone to mistakes, and sometimes irritatingly shrill. Harley's humanity wins the battle against the dehumanizing effects of the cherished sameness of an orderly society, and O'Dell's message of tolerance shines through his eyes.

As is the case with most of the other characters, Harley's name is both fitting and ironic. He has the physical strength of a motorcycle but is also dangerous to himself and others; he tries to be macho but does not succeed enough to fit his name. He cries several times, and when confronted with heartbreaking, gut-wrenching events, he throws up and nearly falls apart emotionally. Thus, he is both like a motorcycle and very unlike a mechanized creation.

His sister Amber's name matches the color of a caution light, yet the character is anything but cautious. Harley is occasionally impulsive, but Amber makes him look like a Boy Scout with her wild, provocative rebelliousness, which is somewhat normal for a sixteen-year-old attractive girl, but Amber goes well beyond the bounds of normal by the time the story reaches its climax. Like the rest of her family, she has been seriously damaged by the physical, emotional, and verbal abuse that her father inflicted.

Perhaps no one feels that damage as deeply as Misty, the middle sister, who is on the verge of her teenage years but is much too old inside. Like her name, she is vague and dimly outlined. O'Dell spends comparatively little time on describing Misty, but this character proves to be the most important in the unraveling of the plot, which includes

more shock and more revulsion than most readers could possibly anticipate. Events and revelations spring up like unimagined monsters, and Misty holds some of this harsh reality within her young, impressionable, twisted mind, though she appears to be the most normal and calm of all the characters throughout most of the novel. Like Harley, she works to bring in money, and she sometimes chides him when he fails to keep the family foremost in his thoughts and actions.

The youngest sister, Jody, is the most emotionally compelling character in Back Roads, for she likely will be the one who feels the most pain from the events of the story, and she probably will feel it for the longest time. With an androgynous name, she represents all children. Jody is too young to have much of a detailed memory of her father's abuse, but her meticulous writing of her daily "to-do" lists is a powerfully effective indication of her need to control her future and deny her past, as is her kicking, screaming aversion to emotional therapy. Jody also has a need to understand things, as most six-year-olds do, so Harley feels a corresponding need to explain them to her. His love for her is one of the most touching aspects of this tumultuous, unflinchingly realistic story. To any reader who would condemn the novel for its occasional obscenity and somewhat graphic (though not pornographic) sex scenes, the relationship between Harley and Jody, as well as the one between him and his dog, tends to balance out the uglier facets of the book, in which O'Dell is after all describing the way people really are, not the way one would like them to be.

Callie, for example, is a wonderful mother and a dutiful wife, but she is also (appropriately for her name) callously selfish and irresponsible in her seduction of Harley. He and she share an appreciation for impressionist art, and the novel itself is impressionistic, especially when O'Dell is describing the passion between this woman in her mid-thirties and her teenage lover. Callie and Harley initially make love at a creek outside her home after he has discovered a horrible truth, has begun to weep uncontrollably, and has ended up at her house more or less by accident. Their relationship is not simply a tabloid affair, and its ending is one of the most memorable in American fiction. Their conversations best show O'Dell's deft ear for dialogue and include one of Harley's funniest lines. In the year and a half that his mother has been in prison, he has only been to see her two times, and Callie asks him how often he goes to visit her. "Twice every life sentence," he replies deadpan.

The secondary characters are effectively drawn, and O'Dell avoids presenting only stock characters to play the bit parts. The sheriff, though he allows his deputies to be brutal and though he is correctly seen by Harley as a conniving small-town politician, does show intelligence and compassion. Harley's mother is presented as fairly simple, although her motives and her mental life turn out to be much more complicated than first meets the eye. In that sense, she is symbolic of the story itself, which has a smooth, almost pleasant surface but has whirling currents underneath, and which begins in a deceptively simple fashion but develops into an emotional tornado.

Betty, Harley's Behavioral Health Services counselor, tries to help him deal with the events and emotions that threaten to destroy him, and she is an interesting, though secondary, character. Although she relies too heavily on theory she has learned by rote

(what Harley calls "her textbooks") and the comfort of distance, she is also humane and effective in her professional relationship with Harley. He notes that her house is expensive and that she must not financially need the government job she is doing, and she is honest with him when she says that she does need the job, but not financially.

Brad, Callie's husband, who is at first perceived by Harley as a typical well-to-do banker, eventually says that he hates bankers and that he wanted to be a teacher, and Harley is forced to admit to himself that this rival for Callie's affection is really a pretty nice fellow. Like Brad, the other secondary characters also show quirks that lift them out of any easy stereotypes that readers might have formed.

Social Concerns

this classic yet contemporary Inbildungsroman (coming-of-age novel), Tawni O'Dell implicitly includes a great deal of social commentary in a novel that seems, on the surface, to be the poetic, sarcastic, and often comic musings and rantings of a boy becoming a man amid the pressure, tension, and fatigue forced on him by the fact that his mother is serving a life sentence for the murder of his father.

The protagonist is nineteen-year-old Harley Altmyer, who is trying to take care of his three younger sisters, and O'Dell's choice to write from the point of view of this emotionally disturbed teenager offers her opportunities to deepen the effect of her fiction by using all the forms of irony, especially dramatic irony, wherein the audience knows what the character does not know.

Thus, Harley, even with all his faults, becomes a sympathetic character with whom the audience can relate and for whom they can feel pity and empathy. Readers are taken into the mind of a young man who is being taken in by most of the other characters. Though he is mentally unbalanced, sexually adventurous, occasionally selfish, and recklessly impulsive, he is still the moral center of the novel, and he becomes the spokesperson for all those who are striving to do what they think is right while surrounded by what can sometimes seem a venal, corrupt, and nonsensical society that focuses on the quotidian and sensual at the expense of the eternal and spiritual.

Tempestuous, poignant oppositions abound throughout the novel and have broad, important social implications: youth versus adult; truth versus dishonesty; passion versus love; self versus family; duty versus desire; sanity versus insanity; justice versus the law; the poor versus the rich; parent versus parent; sibling versus sibling, and history versus the future, to name only the most obvious ones. O'Dell subtly explores each of these conflicts as they threaten to tear apart the mind and life of Harley, who learns, as most readers already have, that life is not fair and that ultimately the best one can do is try to value and protect one's self and one's family, even when those entities may be at war with one another.

The adults in Harley's life tend to push him around (his bosses and the legal authorities), seduce him (Callie), or attempt to pigeonhole him (his counselors). They often think he is kidding when he says what is on his mind, and he constantly has to tell them and the reader that he is serious. Yet his sardonic sense of humor is one of his greatest strengths, even though it is more internal than external. Like Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye (1951), Harley readily can see the phoniness and the selfishness in the adults around him, and he never hesitates to skewer them, at least in his mind. Even so, their power over him is sometimes frightening and is always real because it is built into the social structure. Moreover, adults tend to devalue or undervalue the thoughts and feelings of younger people, as clearly can be seen in Back Roads.

Throughout the novel, Harley wrestles with the concepts of love, desire, and duty, tries to square his definitions with those of society, and finds that these concepts and conflicts can intermingle into horrific knots of destructive power, strangleholds that threaten his very existence. For example, he is torn between his love for his sister Amber and his instinctive drive to protect her. As she pulls away and rebels from him, he is drawn closer to her, and eventually this closeness proves unhealthy and disastrous for both of them.

Harley's methods of coping with poverty and the unusual burden brought about by his suddenly becoming the head of the Altmyer household are ingenious and industrious: he juggles two full-time jobs while effectively caring for his sisters and sensitively looking after even the emotional needs of his dog, Elvis. When Harley gets into trouble with the law, he wants to use his only phone call to comfort his youngest sister, Jody, and he is worried that Elvis will think of himself as a "bad dog" who has been rightfully deserted. Even though Harley is brutalized and manipulated by the police, he cares more about his family and his dog than he does about himself. Thus, no matter what readers may think of his nontraditional sense of morality, they must eventually see that this protagonist is a hero in the full sense of the word, not just in the literary sense. He represents the oppressed as well as the young.

The system seems to be against him. In order not to lose his sisters to Social Services and foster homes, he must constantly prove to a psychologist that he is sane, while he sees the counselor's questions and probing during his regular visits as usually irritating and occasionally ridiculous. Even so, the reader can understand why Harley needs such counseling and can see how the past is threatening to overwhelm his future.

Therefore, the practice of psychology is both ridiculed and shown to be valuable, though flawed, and history is presented as not so much a guiding light but a blinding fire that can consume the future if not understood and held in check.

The strikingly appropriate symbol of Harley's tragic family history is the jagged pipe left over from his father's ripped-out TV satellite system. Harley is obsessed with the cutting down and covering up of that danger, with protecting his sisters from hurting themselves on the rusted metal, so he thinks of various ways to deal with it, the pipe being anchored in a large mound of buried concrete. Temporarily he covers it up with an old couch, but symbolically the brutal reality of his father's abuse of the family is always lurking below the surface, ready to tear into anyone who recalls it fully, just as the rough-edged pipe would lacerate anyone's feet and legs should they stumble across it.

The most important social concern of the novel centers on such abuse and the need to face its reality and come to terms with its consequences, with the ripples in the social pond that occur when child and spousal abuse explode and blow apart the placid surface. The abuse in Harley's past will damage many generations to come unless he and others can find effective ways to prevent such damage, which often takes the form of more abuse, causing a vicious cycle that tears away at the core of civilization.

Techniques

O'Dell effectively uses the first-person point of view and retroactive development to draw the reader into the novel. One can readily identify with Harley's humanity— his frailties, temptations, failures, and successes (the "I" becomes our eye)—and can easily enjoy his sense of humor. By thrusting the reader immediately into the story at an emotional and violent point, O'Dell creates interest and suspense, then fills in what screenwriters call "the backstory" by means of an extended flashback. The novel begins and ends in the present tense; in between, Harley narrates his story appropriately in the past tense.

Playing against what appears to be an almost stereotypical, melodramatic, soapopera plot, O'Dell uses impressionism, realism, and shocking plot twists to create something original. In an early conversation with Callie, Harley accidentally provides a good definition of impressionistic art when he says that it represents not what is there but what the effect of the scene is on the viewer, and often throughout the novel, he describes only bits and pieces of what he sees, just enough to create a vivid impression for the reader. For example, when Harley is hiding his uncle's rifle, he is interrupted by Amber, who has walked barefoot across the muddy yard to the shed. He describes her painted toenails in the black mud as looking like "grape jelly beans," and readers are not only visually drawn into the scene but also presented with a picture that embraces both the grotesque and the beautiful almost equally, as in the art of Vincent van Gogh, among others. At one point, Harley focuses on the sunflowers at the prison where his mother is incarcerated, and O'Dell's allusion to one of van Gogh's most well-known paintings is clear.

At the same time, O'Dell's realistic portrayal of Harley's world is unflinching and engrossing. Nothing is too vague; nothing is unduly distorted. When Harley discovers the body in the old mine office, O'Dell gives almost a photographic view of what he sees, so that when he gets violently ill, we can readily understand why. Throughout the book, O'Dell clearly is presenting the facts and setting the scenes but also using poetic, evocative language to do so, and such an approach is traditional in the best literary novels.

Another effective technique in Back Roads is irony, and all three forms are used: dramatic, whereby we understand or anticipate what the character does not; verbal, in which the speaker says one thing but means another; and situational, wherein the characters are placed in a situation that is especially fitting or telling, or may reveal a contrast between expectation and fulfillment or between appearance and reality.

Dramatic irony is usually rife in a firstperson novel, especially a bildungsroman, where the main character is not as mature as the average reader. For example, we can see that Callie, who is often scantily dressed, is attracted to Harley and is open to having an affair with him long before he catches on. "Harley," she says early on, laughing and touching his shoulder, "You're great."

"I didn't know what that meant," Harley writes, but the readers are well aware.

Verbal irony is used most often when Harley is disgusted with something and is being sarcastic. When Amber announces that she is going to move in with one of her boyfriends, Harley says, "Oh, great. That's just great," but of course what he means is that such a move would be unwise and irrational, especially since this particular boyfriend wants her to live with him and two other guys in a trailer.

Perhaps the best example of situational irony is the main setting itself, a small, impoverished former mining town called Laurel Falls in the mountains of western Pennsylvania, the region where O'Dell herself was raised. On the dust jacket of the novel, she refers to the area as "a beautifully ruined place where the rolling hills are pitted with dead-gray mining towns like cigarette burns on a green carpet." Ostensibly the town is named after a nearby waterfall, but symbolically the name is deeply ironic. Laurel wreathes were bestowed on heroes, poets, and athletic champions in ancient times, and the inhabitants of Laurel Falls seem defeated and resigned to their fate, as if their laurels have fallen and they have no prospect of recapturing such success, if indeed they ever had it or even the possibility of it. The exception is Harley, whom readers come to know as poetic and heroic but whom most people would probably overlook as simply an awkward young man working in menial jobs in the middle of nowhere. Thus, the title of the novel is symbolic: Harley lives among the back roads, even though he has qualities of greatness.

O'Dell is calling attention to the plight of the ignored and the undervalued by placing her vividly realized and intensely human characters in a backwater town that is almost invisible to the outside world. Look, she seems to say, there are real people living inside those "cigarette burns," people as worthy of our attention as those who live in Hollywood or Washington, D.C.

Themes

The social conflicts that Harley Altmyer endures and attempts to understand are inextricably woven into the themes of Back Roads, so that it is impossible to separate them neatly, and Harley bemoans those English teachers who take the pleasure out of books by "breaking them down into themes and sentence structure." However, the best novels do have important themes, and this one is so well written that its pleasures are indestructible. By definition, the most vital theme of any bildungsroman is the process of, and the necessity for, maturity. Harley's progress can be summed up by two especially riveting scenes: the one in which he seeks and accepts the help of Betty, his first counselor, and the one in which he confronts the authorities after he is arrested. No longer does he fantasize that he is capable of complete independence; he allows his counselor to take him into her home and comfort him because he knows he needs her and that she is good at her job.

At the jail, when the sheriff makes a snide remark about Callie, Harley yells for him to shut up, knowing that this outburst will bring even more physical abuse from the deputies. A bit earlier when Harley is talking to his uncle Mike on the phone from jail and Mike asks incredulously if Harley is sure that he wants to use his only phone call to talk to his sister Jody, a six-year-old girl, Harley simply and assertively says, "Right."

He has grown up a lot, not completely, not without scars, and not without severe damage, but by the end of the novel, he is very nearly an adult, and he can accept both help and responsibility.

He is also no longer a teenager. At the conclusion of the story, Harley is twenty years old, having "celebrated" his birthday by having a few beers and hiding his uncle's rifle. Harley has come to realize that the rifle, which was used to kill his father, is more of a danger to the family than an instrument of protection.

Another important theme is the pull of family, the primeval drive to react emotionally to one's parents and siblings, even when those reactions can be tremendously, irreversibly destructive, as in the case of incest, which figures prominently in Back Roads. A subtheme here is parental responsibility versus the selfish, id-driven desire for pure pleasure and the need to vent one's anger. Harley's father has abused his family, and this abuse has led to his murder.

Harley feels compelled to provide for and to protect his family, yet he also has the strong and often self-centered sexual desires of any normal adolescent, desires that pull him away from his family and into the adult world of sensuality. Callie, who has an affair with him, feels both a strong obligation to her family and the powerful desire to satisfy her sexual needs with a younger, more virile man. These contending forces lead to ecstatic pleasure and shocking violence.

Perhaps the largest, most overarching theme is the self against society. The young feel injustice more strongly because it is new to them; adults must become somewhat jaded in order to survive and be happy.

Harley is stung by every arrow of misfortune, and there is usually someone, often an adult authority figure, to blame. Of course, what he is beginning to realize as the novel closes is that he himself has made the choices that have led him to where he is, and that he is the one who can provide the hope that he needs to become whole again. No one is perfect, least of all those in Harley's deeply dysfunctional family, and no one is always honest, but everyone is human and is individual. This humanity and uniqueness is occasionally at odds with a society that seems determined to preserve order even at the cost of justice. When Harley protests to various legal authorities that he knows his mother is innocent, they simply tell him that, innocent or not, she has been convicted, and the case is closed.

By the end of the story, Harley has come a long way toward, accepting society the way it is: "This place is not so bad," he says, specifically referring to the institution in which he resides but generally perhaps speaking of the world. His illusions that happiness is simply a matter of taking care of your family and being in control, and that good sex is virtually the same thing as love are replaced by the realities that hardly anyone is completely in control, that no one always pleases his or her family, and that the passion involved in sex can veer suddenly into hatred and death just as easily as it can lead to love and fulfillment. Thus, one sees that the common theme of illusion versus reality is also prevalent, as is natural when the protagonist is youthful and has a vibrant imagination. Harley is often stunned by the wide variance between what he expects and what actually happens, and between what he perceives and what really exists.

Adaptations

An abridged audio cassette recordingof the novel, narrated by Dylan Baker, was released in 2000 by Harper Audio.

Key Questions

Tensions between youths and adults and between children and parents are common because young people naturally rebel while going through the formation of their personalities. There have to be some differences between youths and adults because, given the nature of individuality, children cannot become exactly like their parents or other authority figures, even if they wanted to, which most of them do not. Another reason for this emotional battleground is that the mores of the older generation have been tempered by experience and usually tend to be more conservative than those of the younger generation, whose ideas are more influenced by current trends and by peer pressure. Harley Altmyer is forced to play the role of an adult because he is thrust into being a surrogate parent to his sisters, but his social role does not fit his emotional maturity. Therefore, normal adolescent tensions become virtually overwhelming for him when amplified by the pressures caused by his present and his past. Ultimately, though reluctantly, he seeks and receives professional help from his counselor, Betty, but by then the events surrounding him have spun well beyond his control. When he finally phones her in desperation, she asks who is calling, and he shakily says, "I don't know," thereby showing the importance of personality formation in the process of mental growth and also indicating that he has become wise enough to know that he does not know. He has taken the most important step toward self-knowledge and maturity by admitting that he is not independent or omniscient.

Just as important as the theme of maturation is that of the primacy of the family in the life of the individual. Implicitly, O'Dell shows that families are the glue that holds society together but that family history is like gravity and just as hard to fight. Though Harley's father is dead, his influence on the family is enormous, and the events surrounding his death will continue to scar the family well into the future, just as his abuse of his children will emotionally scar them for life. Rising above the negativity, though, are the huge, life-changing sacrifices that Harley and his mother make for their family.

1. To what extent does Harley's family get in the way of his process of maturation and self-discovery? How does the family help him on that journey?

2. On one hand, Harley attempts to rid himself of the awful legacy of his father by hacksawing down the pipe that held his father's TV satellite, yet on the other hand, Harley often wears his father's camouflage hunting jacket. What are some of the characteristics he shares with his father? How is he clearly unlike him?

3. As Harley explores his individuality and becomes more comfortable with his personality, he seems at odds with the conformity that he sees around him in Laurel Falls. Is this conflict always necessary in personality development?

How does Harley's case differ from those of other youths who are going through the same difficult years in their lives? How is it similar? Compare and contrast Harley with other young characters you have experienced in your reading or in movies.

4. O'Dell's use of the first-person point of view may strike some readers as odd, courageous, or both, because she is writing from the viewpoint of a young man.

William Styron was criticized when he wrote from the point of view of a slave in The Confessions of Nat Turner; some African-American readers were upset that a white man would think that he could understand and fully empathize with the plight of a black man enduring the horrific conditions of slavery. Could O'Dell be criticized in the same way, in the sense that she could never really imagine what it is like to be a young man? Do you find her account of Harley's actions and feelings accurate and believable? Why or why not?

5. The profanity and the sex scenes in this novel will offend some readers. What would have been the effect on the impact of the novel had O'Dell left out such scenes and such language? What would have been the effect on your impression of Harley's character?

6. Identify and discuss examples of irony not covered in the essay above. For example, the old mine office is the setting for several scenes. How are they related in terms of situational irony?

7. Tawni O'Dell's college degree (from Northwestern) is in journalism. How does her writing in Back Roads show her training as a reporter? How does it go against and grow beyond any stereotypes you may have of newswriting?

Jack Turner, Ph.D.

Literary Precedents

Similar novels include The Catcher in the Rye (mentioned earlier), S. E. Hinton's The Outsiders (1967), John Irving's The Cider House Rules (1985), Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (1884), Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage (1895), Henry James's What Maisie Knew (1897), and other such novels that present impressionable young characters facing adult situations and often being horrified and deeply changed by what they see. Especially relevant comparisons can be made between Back Roads and The Catcher in the Rye because both protagonists are presented very effectively via the first-person point of view and tell their stories in extended flashbacks, both are often sarcastic regarding adults, both have a strong emotional bond with a younger sister, both are in psychiatric care at novel's end, and both go through a process of maturation.

However, there are important differences: Harley is lower middle class at best, Hoiden is upper middle class; Harley has important responsibilities, Holden has few responsibilities; and perhaps because of Harley's obligations to his family, he exhibits more selflessness and has more ties to the community than does Holden, who seems isolated, selfish, and contemptuous of society in general. The major exception to this stance is his openness and genuine affection for his sister, Phoebe. Their relationship is comparable to Harley and Jody's, except that Phoebe sometimes seems to be more mature than Holden, seems to take care of him, rather than vice versa, notwithstanding his altruistic fantasy of being the "catcher" who saves children from falling off an imaginary cliff into the corruption of adulthood.

Holden's and Harley's styles of expression are also quite different. Although both show signs of high intelligence, Harley's manner of speaking and writing is more poetic and sensitive, whereas Holden's often seems bitter and cynical, even though he attempts to appear breezy and cool.

Humor is important in both novels, though, and both protagonists find strength in it.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994