Cities of the Interior Short Guide

Cities of the Interior by Anaïs Nin

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Contents

Characters

The five novels which make up Cities of the Interior chart the inward journeys of three women, Lillian, Djuna, and Sabina, in their search for a sense of self through their relationships with men and with each other. Lillian is the focus of the first and last volumes; Djuna is the central figure in Children of the Albatross (1947) and The Four Chambered Heart (1950); Sabina is the spy in house of love in the penultimate novel.

Each of the women makes herself felt, either by her presence or through flashbacks of the central character, in each of the novels. They are companions, competitors and alter-egos of each other. None are fully developed, fully rounded characters. Yet, taken together, they present a fascinating multisided view of modern woman: her desires, deceptions, inner strength, and struggle to achieve the proper balance between dependence and self-reliance.

The primary concern in each novel is the central character's struggle to understand her own nature. Often she finds male expectations and demands too confining or discovers that her own preconceptions of romantic love too limiting or unrealistic to allow her full expression. The novels are character novels, in that they are each primarily concerned with this struggle, but not in the usual sense. Although the novels differ, Nin is generally not concerned with the traditional mode of presenting a fully developed character with a believable personal background. Instead, through her lyrical description and avoidance of commonplace information, Nin concentrates on the emotional reality of her characters. In A Spy in the House of Love (1954), for example, Nin avoids presenting events in a strict chronological order. Sabina's character is revealed through a series of very intense, often very brief, affairs with a succession of men. These encounters are unrelated except for the fact that each satisfies, albeit only for a short time, her need for escape, adventure and danger. By beginning and ending the novel with the same scene, Nin emphasizes that Sabina's saga is an interior one and that her quest to reconcile the various sides of her nature, her need for security as well as excitement, remains unresolved.

More than one critic has noted that the three protagonists are essentially archetypes: Lillian is the Earth Mother, protective and nourishing; Djuna is the acquiescent, understanding female; Sabina is the femme fatale, passionate and unfulfilled. They often appear to be less individuals than different aspects of the same female psyche. In The Four Chambered Heart Nin effectively captures Djuna's sense of self by a comparison with Deschamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase," "the multiple selves growing in various proportions, not singly, not evenly developed, not moving in one direction, but composed of multiple juxtapositions revealing endless spirals of character." In A Spy in the House of Love, this same image is used again but this time it applies not to Djuna but to Sabina's character. This sense of all three characters as representative of modern woman is reinforced in the last pages of the final volume when Lillian reflects on the significance of the relationship of the three to each other and to men.

Social Concerns/Themes

In her 1974 preface to the Swallow Press edition of Cities of the Interior, Nin writes that although none of her novels were planned ahead, she conceived of Ladders to Fire (1946) as "part of a larger design." Her only preconception was that it was to be "a study of women." Indeed, the theme of all of these novels could be seen as the lyrical expression of the female sensibility, of women's views on, and search for, love, liberation and self-expression.

They are not novels of ideas or specific social protests. During the social unrest of the 1960s Nin was often claimed by various groups as a spokeswoman for their particular causes. But Nin's protest runs deeper. Her sharp disagreement with what she termed the "socalled realists," their too literal transcription of reality and their masculine bias, began much earlier and has ramifications which carry far beyond any specific political issue. Nin's work has its origins in her belief that there have been very limited expressions of the feminine perspective and sensibility in society in general and in literature in particular.

Each novel of Cities of the Interior focuses on the experiences of a different woman in her quest to discover a sense of self and achieve harmony between her needs and desires and the realities of the exterior world. All the major female characters appear in the first novel. As they are more fully developed in the later novels, they come to represent various aspects of the female psyche and convey a sense of development and self-discovery through their interactions with others and the acting out of their fantasies.

Nin herself has written that, "The quest of the self through the intricate maze of modern confusion is the central theme of my work."

How this quest is presented reflects another of Nin's major themes: Reality cannot be perceived or presented accurately solely through rational faculties.

The artist must weave the images and insights of dreams, fantasies and reverie together with the language of logic and literal description if she is to present a view of reality that is both true and open to the senses. Cities of the Interior is rich in suggestive imagery which eludes critical deciphering. She purposefully blurs the distinction between the characters' longings and their actions, between their daily lives and their desires, in order to present a reality which must be felt as well as analyzed, experienced as well as understood.

Techniques

Perhaps the most noticeable quality which runs throughout Cities of the Interior and all of Nin's fiction and diaries is her abundant use of evocative imagery. All of her writing bears her unmistakable flair for the lyrical poetic image which appeals to the senses more than the reason. She has noted that she hoped her writing, like painting and music, would make its appeal primarily to the senses. The inward journeys of her characters are not ones which can be comprehended fully by the rational faculties. They must be felt. She is eager to dissolve the distinctions between subjective and objective, fantasy and fact, poetry and prose, autobiography and fiction.

"Art," she writes in The Novel of the Future (1968), "is revealing to us the variety of levels on which we live." To be true to life a writer must reflect these various levels by suggesting the rich interior world which is only partially glimpsed by the conscious mind.

Cities of the Interior, like the diaries, is filled with poetic images of imprisonment — labyrinths, walls, veils — as well as dreamlike images of liberation, of sailing free from present responsibilities. Such writing is both illuminating and disconcerting. An arresting image can give new meaning to a well-worn abstraction such as liberation. Yet its significance often eludes understanding; once felt, it seems to melt away.

Nin's graphic imagery often vividly conveys the essence of a character or a situation but fails to provide a sense of the proper context or motivation.

The central characters in Cities of the Interior are emblematic in that they have an intuitive, artistic side. In Ladders to Fire, for example, Lillian is a concert pianist, Sabina is an actress, Jay — the man they both desire — is a painter. In Children of the Albatross Djuna becomes a dancer. They are engaged in creating their lives as well as their art. Both in their neurosis and their creative energy they are appropriate symbols for the interior drama Nin seeks to convey.

Literary Precedents

Critics are still debating the various titles which have been applied to Cities of the Interior. Surrealist is the title most often used to describe its lyrical, poetic imagery. Others claim, however, that the work is not Surrealist but Symbolist or modernist. Regardless of title, Cities of the Interior, like the short stories that preceded it, clearly comes from a tradition of introspective, autobiographical literature. Most noticeable is D. H. Lawrence's charged rejection of the intelligence as the only measure of understanding. Nin's early study of Lawrence is interesting for the light it casts on her own work. In D. H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study (1932), Nin notes that "Lawrence approaches his characters not in a state of intellectual lucidity but in one of intuitional reasoning . . . His analysis is not one of the mind alone, but of the senses."

Certainly this is one of Nin's objectives and there are passages in Cities of the Interior which contain strong echoes of Lawrence's language and vision. Both were students of modern psychology.

Nin was a student (and patient) of Otto Rank and draws heavily on the insights and language of psychoanalysis.

Both the subject and style of Cities of the Interior reflect Nin's strong rejection of the realist school of fiction. The documentary approach, with an abundance of exterior detail and description, was extremely popular during the years when Nin began to write. Yet there is no echo of it in Cities of the Interior. Her writing is a conscious rejection of what she described in The Novel of the Future as, "the supine taperecorder novelist who registers everything and illumines nothing."

At their best, the lyrical passages in Cities of the Interior recall the moving, richly descriptive passages of Lawrence Durrell's The Alexandria Quartet (19571960). The associative principle which lies behind much of Nin's fiction and her diary has caused some to note her indebtedness to Proust.

Related Titles

Cities of the Interior, 1959 includes Ladders to Fire, 1946; Children of the Albatross, 1947; The Four Chambered Heart, 1950; A Spy in the House of Love, 1954; Solar Barque, 1958 (later published as Seduction of the Minotaur in 1961).

A general discussion of Nin's fiction must include some discussion of The Diary of Anai's Nin. Although it is not fiction — at least not in the same sense as Cities of the Interior — it nonetheless plays an important role in her development and in an understanding of how her fiction came to be. A diary does resemble fiction in that it is extremely selective and inevitably distorted by the subjective approach of the writer.

Also, like fiction, its meanings and significance can change depending on what is written later. For Nin the keeping of a diary served as a "laboratory" which she could record, experiment and analyze. The process of keeping the diary helped encourage and refine her tendency to be impressionistic, spontaneous and associative. Once written it provided a wealth of incident and some perspective on the past.

Some passages in Cities of the Interior are taken almost word for word from the diary. Often these add a sense of authenticity and vividness to particular events. A danger in overreliance on a diary is that incident might substitute for imagination. Although, as with her work generally, critics remain divided, the majority agree with Nin that the diary was an invaluable resource which helped to inspire and refine her fiction.

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