Djinn Short Guide

Djinn by Alain Robbe-Grillet

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".

Contents

Characters

The characters in Djinn are no more fully delineated than in Robbe-Grillet's previous novels, and may be even less coherent. Names are given, but the individuals to whom they belong seem to shift. The names Boris and Laura evoke the characters in Un Regicide (1978), but here, Boris might be Simon, and Laura might be a mannequin, or even Djinn/Jean, whom she resembles.

Djinn/Jean is not only the name of the American female, but also the name of the young boy who is hurt, or dead (he "dies often" according to Marie), and a later version of Marie — now called Djinn — tells Simon "all little boys are called Jean." Simon himself may be Djinn; the name, like its equivalent, Jean, is masculine in French. Also, according to the anonymous narrator of the prologue, Simon/Boris/Robin was known by his students as Yann "which they spelled Jan . . . none of them could say why." Robbe-Grillet seems again to be mocking the very idea of character as a coherent entity who can be pinpointed in time and space. The fact that some of the "characters" in this story may be nothing more than lifeless mannequins echoes Henri Peyre's assertion in French Novelists of Today that Alain Robbe-Grillet treated character as if it were a "mummy just good enough to be discarded." The mannequin Djinn/Jean is indeed discarded, "mortally wounded," although no wound is visible, oozing blood, even though mannequins do not bleed.

Readers trying to get a clear sense of who is who in this novel may find themselves in the position of Simon's female alter ego near the end of the novel: "reason tumbling, into the void, in a vertiginous fall."

Social Concerns/Themes

In Djinn, readers familiar with RobbeGrillet's work once again find themselves in a Kafkaesque world in which objects are so painstakingly described as to seem significant, although what they signify is never clarified, chronology is disordered, and events which seem to be taking place later appear not to have been "real" at all. Like The Erasers (1964; Les Gommes, 1953), Djinn is the story of a quest, although the object and purpose of the quest is far less certain here than in the earlier work. The narrator (he is called Simon LeCoeur, but his very identity is called into question throughout) enters a hangar at the appointed hour of sixthirty where he is to meet someone.

Seeing a man dressed in hat and trench coat, like a detective from "some old . . . movie of the thirties," he presents himself and recites the coded message.

When the "man" answers, Simon realizes that "he" is a she. Shortly afterwards, however, the narrator again makes a discovery: "she" is not even a person, but a mannequin. The voice he has heard is coming from a tape recorder placed somewhere out of sight.

Ordered by this disembodied voice to proceed upstairs, Simon then meets the "real" woman, an American from Boston named Jean (Simon first pronounces it "Djinn" and is corrected), and her double, Laura, who may or may not be a mannequin. As Simon is about to receive his first instructions, Jean/Djinn tells him, in what might just as well be a directive to the reader, that for reasons of "security" and "efficiency" she cannot reveal "the exact purpose of [the] mission nor the general goal of our undertaking."

The novel then proceeds to demonstrate — if it demonstrates anything at all — the veracity of that remark. The narrator follows his orders without knowing what is to be achieved; he often finds himself thwarted in his mission by seemingly random events (for example, missing the appointment at the Gare du Nord when a young boy crosses his path, trips, and falls unconscious, perhaps dead), but is unable to discern whether such events are, in fact, part of the plan. In the room where he takes the young boy, he encounters a mysterious girl-child, Marie, and is later told he is their "papa," but whether this is so is never clarified.

Perhaps the strongest image of this narrative uncertainty is that of the blindfolded Simon, sitting in a room in an unknown place, listening to Djinn, who is once again only a disembodied voice, and peeking out of his blindfold only to find himself in a room full of blindfolded men. If readers look to authors to make sense of the fictional world for them, Robbe-Grillet seems here to be asserting that author and reader are equally blind; indeed, he seems to mock the very notion that there is a discernible truth to be found in the world. Perhaps he means to say of this fictional world what he once said of the real one: that it is "neither significant nor absurd — it is, quite simply."

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The five chapters of the text, which are "found" by the anonymous narrator on Simon LeCoeur's desk, are narrated in the present indicative tense, as if what is being described were indeed happening at the moment of the reading. A similar narrative technique was employed in Jealousy (1959; La Jalousie, 1957), which begins with the word "now." Chapter six of Djinn is partially narrated in the past tense by a third person who seems to have limited omniscience, but shifts back to the first person, present tense towards the end, a mode which continues into chapter seven. About a third of the way through that chapter, the narration shifts inexplicably back to third person, past tense. Chapter eight is first person, past tense, but the narrator is no longer Simon; it is now a girl, presumably Djinn, telling her version of the events. After her "vertiginous fall" the narration shifts again to a first person narrator, past tense. He begins to tell the story of going to the hangar at sixthirty, as if the previous pages of the novel did not exist, but he gets no further than the point at which he steps forward to recite the coded message. Then the anonymous narrator steps forth, in the epilogue, to tell the reader that Simon LeCoeur's story has ended. These shifts in person and tense keep the novel as fluid as time seems to be in Simon's story; past and present become meaningless terms. The young boy "dreams the future," but the events he dreams have already been described, which suggests that they are past, the same events that take place with Simon and the young Jean and Marie are repeated later with an older Jean and Djinn/Marie, as if past, present, and future are, in some sense, synchronous. This kind of disordering of time is common among writers of "the New Novel," such as Claude Simon, Michel Butor, Nathalie Sarraute, and, of course, Robbe-Grillet himself.

Related Titles

The names Laura, Boris, and Jean appear in an earlier novel. According to Ilona Leki in Alain Robbe-Grillet (1983), Un Regicide "contains so many seeds of the themes and novelistic concerns which were to develop later throughout Robbe-Grillet's work." It would seem then that, in addition to the literary influences of novelists like James Cain, Franz Kafka, William Faulkner, and Samuel Beckett, RobbeGrillet is his own literary precedent. It is particularly intriguing to note the variations on the theme of the Oedipus myth throughout his work; it is suggested by the very title Un Regicide, built into the structure of The Erasers, where a man seeking a murderer finds it to be himself, alluded to in Djinn, in the image of the blind Simon being led by a child, and made explicit in Simon's musing that he "must have an Oedipus complex."

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