

Dog Soldiers Short Guide

Dog Soldiers by Robert Stone

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Characters

Although the protagonist, John Converse, surfaces in the novel as the primary focus of attention, the spotlight is shared by Marge, Converse's wife, and Ray Hicks, his partner in crime. All are deracinated, complex characters: troubled, detached, and morally bankrupt. Similar to the character of Rheinhardt, the protagonist in *A Hall of Mirrors* (1967), Converse is self-indulgent and manipulative, hoping to survive in the modern world by the willful exploitation of others. His scheme to smuggle heroin is motivated by profit but also a perverse attraction to the exploit itself.

Seemingly destined for self-destruction, Marge represents a pathetic victim rather than an active participant in the scheme. As a drug-user, Marge is drawn to the heroin by association, but interestingly she develops a romantic attachment to the irrational and violent Hicks. A mixture of raw physical prowess and superimposed pathology, Hicks is a terrifying enigma, enticed into the crime by excitement and danger. Referred to by one critic as "a kind of latter-day samurai," Hicks ironically possesses the necessary qualities for survival in Stone's frigid landscape except for his loyalty to Marge which ultimately proves to be a fatal weakness.

Aimlessly drifting toward apocalypse, Stone's characters are distinctly "unlikable," and consequently questionable in relation to public acceptance. Pitted against a world offering neither hope nor redemption, it is little wonder his fictional characters tend to confront the reality of their existence by allowing themselves "to speed up the trip towards death."

Social Concerns

Dog Soldiers is a vastly disturbing if not horrific vision of contemporary America. Scanning the emotional wellbeing of the nation, Stone envisions a decidedly bleak landscape inhabited by a sordid collection of life's "soldiers" unceremoniously waging a losing battle against their own undoing. Passing judgment as if pronouncing death, Stone presses the reader to look at the world around him while simultaneously pressing him to look closely at himself. Unfortunately, the result is a sad commentary on history and the lack of promise in the generation of the 1970s.

The novel tells the story of an American journalist in Vietnam who schemes to smuggle heroin into the United States aided by his wife in California and an ex-Marine accomplice. As the plan goes askew, Stone creates a harrowing struggle for possession of the drug while investigating the psychological motivation and interrelationships of the major characters.

Having experienced the American involvement in Vietnam firsthand, Stone is seemingly more concerned with analyzing the aftermath of the conflict rather than raising a moral objection to war itself. However, Stone is certainly communicating that there exists an inherent attraction or propensity in the American psyche toward violence and that the horrors of the war unfold as a logical extension of illogical fascination.

Ironically, the heroin takes possession of the novel in much the same way as it does the lives of those who either possess or desire it. Heroin is used by Stone as a vehicle to explore the depth of man's indifference or baseness toward the destruction of self or others. However, the novel is also concerned with the prevailing environment capable of producing such disregard for human dignity and continuance.

Techniques

Utilizing plot as a primary means to articulate his thematic concerns, Stone is unquestionably a masterful storyteller. *Dog Soldiers* is methodically developed by sustained and riveting suspense. The reader becomes engrossed in the intricacies of the narrative and personalities of the major and minor characters. Noted for his descriptive and compulsive sense of detail, Stone creates a vivid picture of a place in time realized by few. Employing convincing and powerful dialogue, Stone produces a tightly written, cynical, and relentless novel worthy of admiration and respect.

Themes

"Part melodrama, part morality play," *Dog Soldiers* brings the Vietnam conflict home to America. Demoralized and victimized by the reality of war, the protagonist of the novel, John Converse, escapes into delusion and sophistry to negate the consequences of smuggling heroin. By illustrating the impact of the drug on the lives of his characters, Stone is acknowledging the terrifying connection between: the war and the American counterculture. As the scheme is discovered by a corrupt federal agent seeking the heroin for his own personal gain, the action of the novel flows from Saigon to Los Angeles to the California desert near the Mexican border as Converse's wife and his accomplice take flight to avoid pursuit and self-actualization.

Stone depicts a world void of decency and morality, a world marked by violence where fear has become a permanent condition of daily living. Accordingly, the only means of survival is either absolute despondency or total escape into a netherworld of drugs, mania, or perversion.

Adaptations

Following his initial, unsuccessful venture into film, Stone was considerably more cautious with the film version of *Dog Soldiers*, grievously retitled as *Who'll Stop the Rain* (produced by United Artists, directed by Karel Reisz, adapted by Stone and Judith Rascoe, and released in 1978). The film, starring Michael Moriarty, Nick Nolte, and Tuesday Weld, received critical acclaim but was only mildly successful at the box office. Most critics commented that despite an action-packed sequence of events and moving performances, especially by Weld, the film was flawed in relation to continuity and character development. Creating unsympathetic and overtly unappealing characters seemed to present insurmountable consequences for the film.



Key Questions

With the Vietnam war as the backdrop for the novel, any discussion of *Dog Soldiers* should provoke the controversy surrounding the American involvement in Vietnam. For Stone, the amorality associated with the war is horrifically reflected in the American psyche, and it would be interesting to compare *Dog Soldiers* with other fictional treatments of the war, notably John Briley's *The Traitors* (1969), Charles Durden's *No Bugles, No Drums* (1976), Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters* (1977), James Webb's *Fields of Fire* (1978), and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978).

1. As the war in Vietnam comes home to America, the "Dog Soldiers" of the title takes on several implications. Discuss the meaning of the title in relation to the major and minor characters of the novel.
2. How does *Dog Soldiers* aspire to what one critic has called "the condition of allegory"?
3. Much of Stone's novel revolves around the element of suspense. What other similarities does *Dog Soldiers* have to the adventure novel genre?
4. The character of John Converse is one of the most complex created by Stone. Discuss the various layers of Converse's personality. How does he compare to the other characters in the novel?
5. How does the range of Stone's narrative voice produce what one critic called "a constant tone of irony" within the novel?
6. As a symbol, the heroin serves to unify the action of the novel. Discuss the relationship of each of the central characters to the heroin. What is the motivation for each of the characters to participate in the smuggling scheme? Is the decision based solely on profit?
7. As a student of Zen, Hicks aspires to a self-determined form of correctness. What does Hicks mean when he thinks of himself "as a kind of samurai"?
8. At several points in the novel Stone introduces children into the action of the novel. How do the children support the development of the novel? What interaction do the children have with the central characters?
9. Discuss the concept of enlightenment in the novel. Does Hicks by the end of the novel achieve enlightenment? Having abandoned the heroin, the Converses flee from the impending arrival of Antheil. Have they achieved a form of enlightenment from their experiences?
10. Early in the novel, Stone writes, "Fear was extremely important to Converse; morally speaking it was the basis of his life. It was the medium through which he perceived his own soul, the formula through which he could confirm his own existence. I am afraid,



Converse reasoned, therefore I am." Is this true of Converse at the conclusion of the novel?

Literary Precedents

Stone admits to being a voracious reader and acknowledges the influence of diversified and numerous authors.

Most implicitly, Stone derives from the narrative tradition of writers such as Joseph Conrad, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Extremely engaging and intensely paced, *Dog Soldiers* is considered the literary descendent of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Of interest, however, is that Stone incorporates cinematic techniques into his fiction prevalent among screenwriters such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and especially B. Traven, as illustrated in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*.

In addition, Stone has publicly commented on his indebtedness to the French novelist Louis Ferdinand Celine. Stone's ability to populate his fiction with dark, disturbing personalities drawn from the counterculture of contemporary society is clearly reminiscent of Celine, most notably in his perverse artistic triumph entitled *Journey to the End of Night*. Likewise, the religious quality of Stone's fiction, first introduced in *A Hall of Mirrors*, present in *Dog Soldiers*, and later realized to a far greater extent in *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981), is comparable to the novels of Graham Greene and the short stories of Flannery O'Connor. Of most importance is that Stone is mentioned in connection to writers of serious literature which is indicative of his growing recognition as an author.



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