

The Double Bass Short Guide

The Double Bass by Patrick Süskind

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.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Double Bass Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	5
Techniques.....	6
Themes.....	7
Adaptations.....	8
Key Questions.....	9
Literary Precedents.....	10
Related Titles.....	11
Copyright Information.....	13



Characters

The only characters in this drama are the speaker and the double bass, and the sum of the work is the relationship of the two to each other and to the unseen soprano Sarah within the context of the orchestra.

By stressing the importance of the double bass to the orchestra, the speaker implicitly extols his own significance. Technical aspects are demonstrated with reference to strings, tone, and range. In his sound-proofed room the bass has a penetrative force which elicits the knock of Frau Niemeyer upon the ceiling, an indication that the musician has exceeded the limits of the mezzoforte. Fortissimo is demonstrated to enjoy a range right through Frau Niemeyer's flat, and all the way downstairs to the caretaker, and across to the house next door.

Practically speaking, the bass is a disaster, more an obstacle than a musical instrument. However, the speaker describes it in terms which become increasingly human. The double bass stands around in the apartment stupidly and, when guests are there, attracts all the attention. The instrument has to be protected against changes in temperature and is provided with the musician's coat while standing in the cold. Even though the speaker contracts the flu, he concedes that such a relationship confirms his love.

The double bass assumes sexual features. It is described as a female instrument; the musician violates his mother every day in the guise of the double bass while playing in an eternally incestuous sexual union. The instrument represents a feminine symbol of death with its protecting cruelty and inescapable womb. It is a fat, old woman with hips too deep, a disastrous waist too high and too wide, and narrow, sloping, rickety shoulders; he denies he could ever love it.

Stumbling over the double bass on his way to fetch another beer, the musician threatens to kill it and asks why a thirty-year-old man lives with an instrument that consists of a constant handicap — humanly, socially, sexually, and musically. An answer to his own question is suggested just moments later as he fantasizes erotically about Sarah, a woman he hardly knows, while taking the bass in his arms and fondling it.

Comparing the orchestra to society, the musician concludes that the orchestra is worse since there is a hierarchy and no chance of advancing oneself.

With a few beers in him, he begins to feel sorry for himself for having to do the dirty work in the orchestra; at the same time he is overcome by feelings of his own mediocrity and inadequacy.

With ample benefits and total security as a civil servant, he remains at home in his free time suffering from claustrophobia or job security psychosis. However, he realizes that all this is within his power to change. He vows to cry out Sarah's name at tonight's

symphony performance, thereby gaining her attention and his own dismissal from the orchestra — if he dares.

Social Concerns

The absurdity of the human condition is represented humorously in the mock lecture of an anonymous musician on the nature and art of the double bass, its place in the orchestra, and his relationship to the instrument and his profession. The musician expresses the egocentricity of someone with a fixation on the musical instrument with which he shares his life in a love-hate relationship; an ambiguous confrontation between himself and his life is generated and remains unresolved and implicitly unresolvable.

Techniques

With a playing time of one hour and forty minutes, *The Double Bass* comprises a one-act monologue or monodrama with but one speaking voice.

Although the musician bares every aspect of his emotional life, he does not divulge his name, and this anonymity lends him the general quality of everyman.

As an introduction to his lecture the musician asks his audience to listen to a phonograph record of Brahms's second symphony; in the sound of the basses he identifies himself and his colleagues in the National Orchestra.

He continues by presenting technical data and illustrating points with his instrument or by means of musical recordings. In a didactic manner he underscores when he is speaking figuratively or subjectively and notes when making digressions ("That's just by the by"); the effect is that of a speaker intentionally directing his remarks along a particular path to make specific points and clearly convey a certain amount of material. His remarks, however, always return to the subject of the twenty-year-old soprano Sarah, fifteen years his junior.

Drinking beer, ostensibly because of the loss of liquid while performing, he apologizes when he interrupts himself to take a gulp; each one contributes to the contradictory and ambiguous nature of his meandering remarks.

Themes

In describing the double bass, the speaker deals with its significance, its technical features, its human and sexual qualities and how these relate to him and influence the nature of his social status.

Adaptations

The Double Bass had its American premiere at the Syracuse Stage in Syracuse, New York during the theater's eleventh season in 1983-1984. Alan Brasington as the musician was directed by Arthur Storch. The following year the play was produced at The New Theater of Brooklyn. There were twenty performances in November and December of 1985 with Boyd Gaines directed by Kent Paul. These two then moved to off Broadway, and The Double Bass was staged at the 47th Street Theatre twenty-one times in November and December of 1986.



Key Questions

The range of Suskind's writing as well as its richness and diversity causes it to speak to the reader upon several planes coincidentally. Such complexity lends itself readily to interpretation. The author seems, at times, to be speaking about something else by the use of analogy. His fictional figures and events may suggest literary or historical personalities and occurrences. And further comparisons are elicited by Suskind's strong orientation toward literary traditions and his occasional borrowing from the voices of other authors in instances which may be interpreted as irony or parody.

1. It has been said that *The Double Bass* owes its success less to its literary quality than to its theatrical effectiveness. Of course, the experiences of reading and attending a stage performance are essentially different; however, did you, while reading the work, wish you could be seeing it acted instead? Was there anything you missed seeing performed, possibly since it was not provided by your mind's eye?
2. A streak of what has been characterized as "musical terrorism" has been perceived in the musician. Where do we see possible examples of this in his words?
3. In what respect is he a victim of his instrument?
4. Do you agree with the statement of one critic that the musician is a slave to authority and eager to subordinate himself?
5. Further, does he try to break out of the order imposed upon himself without placing the order itself in question?
6. Is it an oversimplification of the work to argue that the musician suffers from a feeling of inconspicuousness and insignificance in the orchestra as well as in life and that he dreams, therefore, of a startling, destructive act that places him at the center of attention?
7. Will the musician dare to call out Sarah's name at the symphony performance and thus effectively change his life?
8. Confinement to a small room is a central feature of *The Double Bass*, the subject of Suskind's humorous autobiographical comments about the play, and a reoccurring motif in *The Pigeon*.

Does Suskind turn this feature inside out by representing a claustrophobic need in *Mr. Summer's Story* for the wide, open spaces?

Literary Precedents

The monodrama is defined by one speaking part, which in classical drama served in addition to that of the chorus. In the eighteenth century the monodrama was accompanied by music and centered often on classical heroines. In the role of an eavesdropper the audience witnessed the expressed thoughts and feelings of the character as in the case of dramatic monologue.

The form degenerated to melodrama in the nineteenth century but was finally reborn again with August Strindberg.

The Stronger (1912; *Den starkare*, 1889) consists of one scene about fifteen minutes in length, including two characters, only one of whom speaks. The missing wall technique of naturalism is used so that the audience witnesses a wife speaking with a female companion in a restaurant. The second woman does not respond, and the wife gradually realizes that her acquaintance is, or was formerly, her husband's mistress.

The Double Bass has an important precedent in *East Pole Expedition* (*Ostpolzug*, 1926) by Arnolt Bronnen. This is an expressionist monodrama representing Alexander the Great on an expedition to reach the East Pole, as he calls the summit of Mount Everest. Nine scenes are linked by the final line of each appearing as the first line of the succeeding scene. Explanatory text is projected on a screen before each scene, and a map illustrates Alexander's route across Asia to the Himalayas.

The Theater of the Absurd conveys the consciousness of leading an incomprehensible existence headed into the unknown. The Double Bass is in this vein; it poses a characteristic relationship of the speaker to the audience.

The character is funny and somewhat pathetic; a spectator sees some of himself in him. Moreover, the musician speaks directly to the audience, which serves not as an eavesdropper or an observer when the fourth wall is absent, but as an object of address during a lecture.



Related Titles

The solitary figure represented by Grenouille in *Perfume* (1986), reappears as the anonymous musician, who in his sound-proofed room has in a sense encapsulated himself like the metaphoric tick associated with the perfumer. That locus from which the musician addresses his audience is the subject of remarks by Suskind in the journal "Theater heute," where the author suggests an autobiographical element which will be seen again in *The Pigeon* (1988): "The Double Bass concerns, among an abundance of other things, the existence of a man in a small room. Here I reached back to my own experience since I spend the greatest part of my life in rooms increasingly small. I hope, however, to find one day a room that is so small and encloses me so narrowly that upon my exit it accompanies me. In this kind of room I will try to write a drama for two persons that takes place in several rooms."

In *Mr. Summer's Story* (1993), the only true characters are the narrator and Mr. Summer, who spends his life walking swiftly, endlessly, and aimlessly and wants to be left in peace.

The speaker describes him as fleeing death and stands silent witness as he walks resolutely out into the water of a lake over his head. Making no cry to deter Mr. Summer and no mention of his fate when he is reported missing, the boy grants his desire to be left in peace.

Both the boy and Mr. Summer are solitary figures, the former seeing the old man at a distance on the horizon and only once having exchanged words with him. That lonely reckoning of Mr. Summer with his life and death is similar to the self-appraisal to which the musician subjects himself in *The Double Bass*.

In that play the musician describes the hierarchy established within the orchestra: first comes the first violin, then the first second violin, then the second first violin and the rest of the first and second violins, the violas, and so on. This is a touch of absurdity achieved when differences no longer remain distinguishable. Suskind creates the same effect in *Mr. Summer's Story*: the boy lives in the village of Lower Lake, not to be confused with the next village of Upper Lake, which were hard to tell apart since they were not separated and were situated in a row with neither beginning nor end.

The theme of music is likewise shared with *The Double Bass* and the narrator's piano teacher Miss Maria Funkel is that identified in Suskind's comments in *Theater heute* as Fraulein Traudl Schulze, who similarly taught sonatas for four hands by Anton Diabelli and emphasized her unmarried status by title.

The story appeals to the idyllic quality associated with childhood recollected, a return through the years which is also an escape. The work treats loneliness, the approach of death, and an individual's desire to meet it on his own terms. A boy understands this, respects it, and leaves such grave, personal issues to an old man.



Tree climbing is revealed not only as a boyhood activity like bike racing but also as an expression of that solitary independence of the narrator. And the spot at the back of his head, received upon a fall from a tree, acts as a weather barometer; consideration of a spiny concept such as "conservation of rotational impulse" causes the spot to tingle and burn.

Mr. Summer's Story has been called a classical novella, which it is not, and a children's story, which is also inaccurate. It is a recollection of youth consisting of six unnumbered and untitled chapters united by the image of Mr. Summer striding through them with walking stick and backpack.

The adult narrator recalls in the first person his boyhood forty years ago; and while the reader hears the voice of the youth describe his schoolboy crush on Caroline Kueckelmann, the adult lets his presence be known in mathematical footnotes which apply Galileo's laws of falling bodies to the descent of the boy from a tree.

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 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

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