

The Erasers Short Guide

The Erasers 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.

(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 Erasers Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Copyright Information.....	8



Characters

It is no accident that the objects in *The Erasers* have more density than the characters. Whereas more traditional novelists might devote much space to the task of exploring the psychology of their characters, analyzing their thoughts and motives, thereby giving them dimension and depth, RobbeGrillet assiduously avoids giving his readers such insights, directing attention instead to objects: a slice of ham, a quarter of tomato, a gray eraser, a paperweight. If his characters have thoughts, memories, perceptions to which the reader is made privy, these are presented without narrative comment, and nothing of the character's emotional life is revealed. The only referent of consciousness is the object perceived, but perceptions alter with fluctuations in mood and experience; thus, the paperweight which Wallas sees at one point as "polished . . . with rounded edges," later, just before the actual murder of Dupont, manifests "sharp edges and murderous corners."



Social Concerns

The Erasers, which launched Robbe-Grillet's literary career and thrust him into the vortex of critical debate, exemplifies many of the characteristics of what would come to be known as the New Novel: a deviation from traditional (linear) plot structure, disordered chronology, unconvincing characterization, and a tendency toward exhaustive description of apparently insignificant objects. Although some critics viewed these characteristics as flaws in his day-in-the-life detective story, others, most notably Roland Barthes, praised the work for a kind of narrative objectivity that was more realistic than the traditional novel.

Barthes gave the term "litterature objet ale" to this objective focus which, rather than providing the all-inclusive vision of an omniscient narrator, directs narrative vision away from hidden meanings and psychological depths of character, toward the surface of specific objects, without attaching to them any symbolic significance. Unlike the novels of such predecessors as Balzac, Robbe-Grillet's novel did not employ objects to symbolize character traits, dramatize psychological states, or provide metaphors to simplify the complexities of the human world. Sharing the phenomenologist view that the world, men, and objects simply coexist in space and time, that meaning is not a property of things, but a function and projection of human consciousness, Robbe-Grillet argued that modern fiction must, if it is to remain viable, reflect this understanding. The role of the modern writer, he declared, is "to construct a world both more solid and more immediate. Let it be first of all by their presence that objects and gestures establish themselves, and let this presence continue to prevail over whatever explanatory theory may try to enclose them in a system of references, whether emotional, sociological, Freudian or metaphysical."



Techniques

Like so many of Robbe-Grillet's novels, *The Erasers* is circular in structure; the murder, which allegedly took place at the beginning, setting the events of the novel in motion, in fact takes place at the end. The novel is more "ordered," chronologically, than later works; but, despite the classical twenty-four-hour span of the novel, the reader's sense of time is disordered, subverted by the number of flashbacks, memories, repetitions of scenes, imagined occurrences.

Consistent with his theories on "etrela des chases" (the "being-there" of things) and his refusal to appropriate them as symbols in the Balzacian sense, Robbe-Grillet presents object and idea as co-existent, without postulating a necessary, symbolic connection between the two; indeed, the novel takes pains to "erase" any symbolic link by mocking or negating it as it occurs.

Themes

The thematic structure of *The Erasers* is curious and complex. It would appear, at first glance, to be the most comprehensible of Robbe-Grillet's works, because it has a discernible plot, following the outline of the Oedipus myth: a murder has been committed (actually, a series of them), and the man who is sent to find the murderer is ultimately led to the discovery that it is himself. There are frequent allusions to the myth and to the investigator Wallas's role as Oedipus' counterpart.

What prevents the reader from satisfying himself that this is simply a modern version of an ancient tragedy, however, is the profusion of painstaking descriptions of objects whose significance is ostensibly nonexistent. In the case of the eraser, the object itself may be nonexistent; it "appears" largely in the mind and memory of Wallas. He tries repeatedly to obtain one of the sort he remembers having seen at a friend's house, but to no avail. The missing object which gives the book its title is no less troubling to the reader, since the story is not really about erasers. But the themes it suggests — negation, erasure, obliteration — permeate the novel. Clues pursued prove unclear, contradictory, or false. Statements made by some witnesses are later negated by others. As if to deny the possibility of certain knowledge, or the validity of reason as a means to obtain it, Robbe-Grillet shows the logical Wallas's pursuit leading him, quite literally, in circles.

Literary Precedents

Robbe-Grillet considered himself fortunate not to have been formally schooled in literary conventions, as his ignorance of them freed him to experiment with new forms for the novel. At the time he was beginning to write, the French literary scene was dominated by such writers as Sartre, Malraux, and Camus, and the concept of "littérature engagée," literature which is committed to some political, social or ideological task. Although writers like Joyce, Kafka, Faulkner, and Beckett were challenging the traditional form of the novel, the prevailing view was still that it was primarily a representational art, the vehicle for some message or truth about the world.

Robbe-Grillet was not alone in his experimentation. A number of his contemporaries — among them, Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, Michel Butor — were creating texts which exhibited a similarity of form, and, in the judgment of some critics, an increasingly unreadable style. Les Editions de Minuit became the main publisher for these works, and critics and the press lumped them together as the "nouveau roman" (New Novel) school, but they never were a homogenous group.

Robbe-Grillet criticized Sarraute, for example, for her concern with psychological depths, in which, he had declared, "we no longer believe."

Despite his lack of formal training in literature, Robbe-Grillet's work did not emerge out of nowhere, as he himself realized. He enjoyed novels with circular plot structures, such as James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934). He also cited as influential such works as Kafka's *The Castle* (1926), Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931), and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), as well as the object descriptions and dreamlike imagery of surrealist writers like Andre Breton, and the "magic realism" of painters like Rene Magritte.



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