The Exorcist Short Guide

The Exorcist by William Peter Blatty

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Characters

Although sprawling in prose, The Exorcist is a surprisingly tight novel, with relatively few characters. It begins with, and stays centered on, the MacNeil household. The mother, Chris, is an actress, based by Blatty on his friend and onetime neighbor Shirley MacLaine. (After the phenomenal social reaction to the novel, Blatty regretted this, since some people assumed Shirley MacLaine actually had a daughter who had been possessed.)

Despite Chris's career, Blatty eschewed the genre conventions of show-business novels; Chris is down to earth, not sexually active, and—other than an actress — primarily a concerned mother. One subplot, cut in the movie, shows Chris forgoing a much-desired opportunity to direct, due to the need to care for her daughter. That daughter, Regan, is not as fully developed, because her personality is too soon eclipsed by the possession. Still, she is, like her mother, sunny but capable of concern (especially over her parents' divorce), intelligent and active.

The other three members of the house-hold are employees: Willie and Karl Engstrom, an older couple who run the house; and Sharon Spencer, a young woman who is Regan's tutor and Chris's social secretary. While still realistic characters, these are more important to the plot than to the novel's thematics. All three provide objective witnesses of the signs of possession; also, Karl is a prime suspect for the murder of Burke Dennings, drawing attention away from one more proof of Regan's state.

Dennings, the flamboyant British director of the film Chris is starring in, provides color and humor to the book, varying from genially obscene to wittily abusive, depending on his level of inebriation. In People magazine, Blatty states that Dennings is based "on a real-life director who used to be a bit of a drunk."

Dennings' death, of course, is vital to the detective-plot of the novel. After Burke's death, the color and humor are provided by Detective William Kinderman, a Columbo-like mixture of sloppy dress, "schmaltz," and hidden brilliance. While much of Blatty is in Karras, much of the author is in Kinderman as well, including ruminations about God and a style much more like the dialogue in Blatty's other books.

The other two main characters are, of course, the exorcists. While it is not overly obvious in either novel or movie, Father Karras and Father Merrin are almost perfect complementary opposites. Merrin, the experienced exorcist, is secure in his faith, but knows he falls short in his ability to actively love his fellow man.

Karras almost bleeds with concern: for his mother, for the priests who come to him for psychiatric advice, and finally for the MacNeil family, which involves him in the process of exorcism despite his deep doubts about anything supernatural.

Karras is physically strong—he looks like a boxer and jogs and engages in sports— but vulnerable to demonic use of his hidden emotions (especially guilt), while Merrin is

emotionally and spiritually strong but hides his weak spot, a heart condition. An archeologist, Father Merrin is partly based on theologian and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whom Blatty quotes in several of his books and interviews.

Among the minor characters are the physicians, a psychic who lends Chris a book on witchcraft and possession (but is otherwise surprisingly absent from the book), and guests at a party Chris holds, including an astronaut. Among the many Jesuit priests that are secondary characters, perhaps most noteworthy is Father Dyer, who is convinced that Father Karras regained his faith in the end and who becomes Kinderman's friend.

Social Concerns

Doubtless, the extreme popularity of The Exorcist, both book and movie, is due to its connection to many social issues of its time, but one should not discount other virtues of the book. While occasionally overwritten, it does excel at conveying mood; and the careful development of the events in the book made it easy for people who did not usually read supernatural fiction to imaginatively enter into it as "real." The movie broke special-effects ground and provided an emotional "rollercoaster ride," as Blatty has said. Still, these qualities alone would not have made The Exorcist the cultural phenomenon it was.

It is easy to define The Exorcist as a "horror novel," because of the genre of best sellers by Stephen King and many others that followed it. Critics have sometimes forgotten that contemporary reviewers as often categorized it as a novel about religion. Religious best sellers, fiction as well as nonfiction, have a long and stable history; by the time of The Exorcist, they were on the decline, although a religious historical novel such as Taylor Caldwell's Great Lion of God (1970) could still make the best-seller lists.

Indeed, by 1971, many were saying that religion itself was on the decline. In Ira Levin's Rosemary's Baby (1967), Rosemary, waiting in an obstetrician's office— unknowingly pregnant with the devil's child—picks up Time magazine, with its real-life cover story, "Is God Dead?"

Traditional religion seemed seriously challenged, while interest in the occult, and in more charismatic and informal Christianity (the "Jesus freaks"), was rising. Thus, the culture was looking for either a replacement for standard religion or a way to revitalize it —or both.

Blatty's novel, like Levin's, fit this culture perfectly. Although some, like Robert Short, call it poor theology, Blatty himself and his readers (including a reallife exorcist quoted by Kenneth Woodward) have stated one theological premise of The Exorcist: It is easier to prove the existence of supernatural than supernatural good. Even Short writes that The Exorcist "is a pregnant and popular symptom of the search for something to believe in, especially something religious."

In the novel, especially, the priests are unqualified winners. They are also concerned primarily with transcendent matters. As Peter Prescott indicates, the time was also marked by "politicization of the churches"—a trend attractive to some, but deeply disturbing to many, especially older Catholics. The Jesuit priests of The Exorcist are definitely of this world, but they are not concerned with national politics and have not placed the world above faith.

Moreover, since the possessed young girl, Regan MacNeil, has already been given the best that medicine and psychology can offer, the church provides that which science cannot. This also fit with the mood of the times, losing religion but wary of the cold and inhuman side of technology. Kenneth Woodward quotes a Jungian psychologist and

minister, saying that the success of the film The Exorcist shows that modern consciousness has become overly rational, and the public perceived a need to balance that with the mythic, a-rational material in the motion picture.

Critics point out that The Exorcist, book and motion picture, also dovetailed with more political concerns of the time.

Stephen King, John Sutherland, and others argue persuasively that the terror of Regan's possession—inexplicably changing, becoming unruly and obscene, finally completely "not herself—is a monstrous metaphor for the usual worries of a parent as a child enters adolescence, especially in the wake of the counterculture and its "generation gap." Significantly, Regan's mother, Chris MacNeil, has come to Georgetown University to act in a motion picture about a student uprising on campus, which she, a psychology professor, helps to quell. In her own life, however, nothing will quell her daughter's uprising (literally, including levitation), and psychology is no help.

Through most of the book, Chris MacNeil searches for rational explanations of Regan's behavior, only giving in to supernaturalism when other approaches seem exhausted. Sutherland speculates that the "demon child" theme, in The Exorcist and elsewhere, appealed to a culture of parents whose bible of child-raising had been Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care, which by 1980 had outsold any novel published, two to one. Spock's approach, as logical as that of his Star Trek namesake, was that even difficult and unruly child behavior made sense, and must be treated as reasonable. The "demon child" theme, Sutherland argues, allowed a vicarious release of hostility that Spock's approach did not address; it also provided catharsis for fears that Spock was wrong, and that following that approach created a generation of monsters.

Family issues crop up in The Exorcist in other ways, as well. Regan's parents are divorced; her distant father fails to call on her birthday, and her working mother fears she cannot give Regan enough attention. Again, Blatty plays out major cultural fears of the time: What was the rising divorce rate doing to children?

Were feminism and working women causing problems due to lack of maternal love at home? Besides functioning as a symbolic subtext, these issues come up literally, especially through Chris's selfdoubts. Significantly, it is during unsupervised free time—or supervised only by Chris MacNeil's young secretary, with interests that would later be called New Age—that Regan contacts Captain Howdy through a Ouija board, the open door of her possession. Stephen King points out that the horrible events are more striking within the "graciously rich . . .

and nice" environment of Georgetown; yet such places also most felt the tumult of changes in the family and society.

The offensive and sexual nature of many symptoms of possession—which Blatty had researched thoroughly and to which he was predominantly accurate— also appealed to a society both dismayed and excited by the sexual revolution.

Looser publishing standards allowed Blatty to go further in explicitly violating taboos than had previous novels. While some readers complained about the sexual content, objections were fewer than if the novel had seemed to endorse the behavior. Because Regan could not help herself, and because it was an expression of evil, the sexual content provided maximum titillation and minimum moral qualms for the reader or viewer.

Even drugs are briefly mentioned, when a doctor asks Chris if she left hallucinogenics around that Regan might have taken. This is quickly dismissed, although a subplot (cut from the movie) concerns the heroin-addicted daughter of the MacNeil housekeeper and handyman, Willie and Karl Engstrom. Thus, The Exorcist is a potpourri of cultural anxieties of the late 1960s and early 1970s, concerning metaphysical meaning, the changing family structure, and youth revolutionary behavior—including drugs, sociopolitical revolt, and changing sexual mores—while on the other hand it offers, at least within its fictitious world, a kind of religious hope that many were missing.

It is, as Stephen King writes in Danse Macabre, "a film about explosive social change"; but its peculiar appeal came about because it was also a novel and film that for many implied the reliability of age-old religious tradition.

Techniques

As Douglas Winter writes, "In retrospect, the novel is noteworthy for what it is not: . . . its literary precedents are those of detective fiction rather than those of horror." Certainly, there are Gothic conventions in The Exorcist, including the monstrous body of Regan once she is possessed, the ancient and hidden nature of the menace, and the battle within an isolated place (refreshingly, a child's bedroom in Washington, DC, instead of a crumbling castle). However, for most of the novel, there are two mysteries: the question of what is happening to Regan, and the criminal investigation of the death of Burke Dennings.

With a detective story to take much of the readers' attention, supernatural elements are introduced slowly and carefully.

Noel Carroll offers The Exorcist as an example of the "complex discovery plot," in which, with the characters, the reader undergoes a process of "onset" (of inexplicable happenings), "discovery" and "confirmation" (of a supernatural cause), and "confrontation," As Carroll states, in The Exorcist, that first stage is "quite protracted"—that is, inexplicable happenings build up before any explanation is offered. Moreover, the "confirmation" stage is complex and rigorous. This fits both the Catholic church's requirements for exorcism and Father Karras's own doubts, but it also enhances verisimilitude. Moreover, some critics felt that the novel did not completely rule out a natural explanation: Newgate Callendar wrote in The New York Times Book Review (June 6, 1971), "Blatty leaves the question open, though it is clear what his own attitude is." While definitely a minority opinion, this approach would make the story accessible to even more skeptical readers.

Blatty's novel is also noteworthy for his strong development of character, including through interior monologues. The prose can be overwrought, and the metaphors often seem overdone ("He climbed the steps and opened the door as if it were a tender wound"), but the book's effectiveness in conveying a dark, contemplative mood is undeniable. At times, Blatty's description is crisp and technical, befitting the medical examination of Regan.

While The Exorcist is as much a "theological whodunit" (as reviewer Kenneth Woodward regards it) as a horror novel, there is no doubt that its techniques influenced the field of horror writing significantly. While Blatty—or even Ira Levin—was far from the first writer to place stories in recognizable modern settings (a hallmark, for instance, of their predecessor H. P. Lovecraft), that approach would come to dominate horror novels, in part because of Blatty's best seller. Moreover, Blatty's prose opened the way for horror writing in a common and explicit, rather than Poeesque and suggestive, voice; both that and the use of interior monologues, for instance, became basic to Stephen King's style.

Themes

The central and overt themes in The Exorcist are metaphysical: What is the nature of man? How does one explain the existence of evil, and can that be reconciled with the existence of a benign God? Even the epigraphs of the three sections of the novel show a movement from the problem of evil, both supernatural and human, to an affirmation of faith and love by St. Paul. These issues are dramatized in the plot, but also discussed openly (too much so for some critics, who found fault with such expository lumps) by the characters, especially Father Karras and Lieutenant Kinderman.

Perhaps the deepest fear exploited by The Exorcist, running under and alongside more specific social issues, is that of death and nothingness after death. In the novel, the night that the first signs of Regan's possession manifest themselves (rapping noises that her mother hears), Chris MacNeil dreams of "death in the staggering particular . . . thinking over and over, / am notgoing to be, I will die, I won't be, andforever and ever . . ." In I'll Tell Them I Remember You (1973), Blatty, discussing his mother's death, mentions his own "half-waking dream of death that had left me convinced it meant final extinction," on which Chris's dream is certainly based.

The positive message of possession is that noncorporeal realms do exist; in Legion (1983; see separate entry), this expands to include definite human survival after death.

Paradoxically, if it undercuts fear of extinction by death, possession raises another fear: extinction of individuality, the monster destroying one's identity, as Noel Carroll states in The Philosophy of Horror (1990). While many readers or viewers identify with Chris as a helpless parent, there is also an ominous identification with Regan, whose unwilling changes ("help me" manifesting on her skin as her only way to communicate) evoke fears of insanity, disease (her wasted and infected-looking body), and other ills the flesh and mind are heirs to.

There are also similarities between Regan's bondage to the demon and the Engstroms' daughter's bondage to heroin.

Parent-child relationships are central to the novel on an individual as well as social level. The outlook is not good, though each relationship reaches a kind of peace.

In an example of good coming out of evil (missed by many critics), Kinderman's involvement with Engstrom's daughter —due to the detective investigating Karl Engstrom as a suspect in the murder of director Burke Dennings—results in her finally checking into a rehabilitation clinic, something her father's love could not accomplish. While Regan's return to status quo ante may be enough, there are also signs that mother and child are closer: in the epilogue, leaving for their home in Los Angeles, Chris and Regan walk hand in hand. While the marriage shows no sign of resuming, Chris does begin correcting those who call her Miss MacNeil, accepting her role as "Mrs." if not her ex-Mister.

The most powerful relationship in The Exorcist is that of Father Karras and his mother. Blatty has said that he based Karras's mother strongly on his own; in fact, incidents show up both in The Exorcist, novel and film, and in Blatty's memoir of his mother. For instance, in I'll Tell Them I Remember You, he reports a dream after his mother's death, of her emerging from a subway kiosk, his dream-self unable to reach her. This is portrayed very poignantly in the movie. Blatty also reports an anecdote of his mother trying to comfort him with money after his dog died of distemper; this appears, down to the name of the dog, when Karras's mother's voice comes from the possessed Regan. One may assume that Blatty began working out his feelings over his mother's death in the novel, which enabled him to face unhappy matters more directly in his memoir.

Adaptations

While The Exorcist was already a best-selling book, the motion picture version made it a cultural phenomenon.

The motion picture, scripted and produced by Blatty and directed by William Friedkin, debuted the day after Christmas, 1973. Controversially released with an R rather than an X rating, it was picketed by churches, while people lined up for hours to get in. Reports spread—no doubt exaggerated, but based on reality—of people fainting and vomiting in the theaters; soon, there was also a rash of people fearing that they themselves were possessed. Commentators such as Father Richard Woods and others toured campuses, lecturing on exorcism and the supernatural, while theology was revived as a popular topic.

The acting drew general praise, even from critics who disliked the movie as a whole. The most controversial casting, of course, was allowing a young girl to act in a motion picture that she was too young to view on her own. However, Linda Blair was perfect for the role, and the only damage seems to have been to her career as an actress, limiting her to typecast or other exploitation roles. Max von Sydow and Jason Miller, respectively, physically embodied the remote, authoritative Father Merrin and brooding, concerned Father Karras. Ellen Burstyn showed range and depth as Chris MacNeil.

In many ways, as one might expect when the novelist writes the screenplay—especially a novelist as experienced in screenwriting as Blatty—the film is quite faithful to the book. It even begins with the same prologue, Father Merrin being called from an archeological dig in Iraq, which is confusing enough in the book but almost baffling when presented imagistically in the movie. However, soon the film is in understandable Georgetown, made more realistic by the almost documentary feel of much of the camera work. Much of the dialogue is retained and well selected to suggest much more, including interior monologue, that could not fit in a feature film.

There are two major differences between the book and the movie of The Exorcist. The first is an understandable, even beneficial, streamlining. The subplot with the Engstroms's heroin-addicted daughter is cut out, as is that of Chic MacNeil being offered a chance to direct and having to turn it down. Moreover, some possibly natural causes of Regan's behavior in the book are left out of or glossed over in the movie, especially the question of whether or not she had read a book on witchcraft and possession (and so could be copying the effects listed there). However, there is still enough reasoning and investigation to convey the rigorous consideration of natural causes of the book. In fact, some of the scenes of medical tests may be more horrible than the scenes of possession-induced violence or vomiting.

More controversial is the effect of the ending of the motion picture, not so much changed from the novel as underexplained and hence too open to misinterpretation. When Karras challenges the demon to enter him instead of Regan, and then leaps out the window to his death, many saw this as a triumph for evil; Blatty's intention, much

clearer in the book, is that good triumphs, as Karras sacrifices himself to defeat the demon and then dies with his faith in God and the church restored. Because of its less obvious theology and ambiguous ending, Blatty criticizes the motion picture in general for lacking the "moral center" of the novel.

Despite huge popularity, the film met mixed critical reactions, with outright pans from Pauline Kael and Vincent Canby. Kael called the film a "recruiting poster for the Catholic Church," but found it "in the worst imaginable taste," "too ugly a phenomenon to be taken lightly." While some writers found the characters moving, others, like Kael, dismissed them as "juiceless stock roles."

Still, the movie changed motion pictures by breaking taboos regarding what could be depicted in a feature film and using special effects to enact detailed violent or disgusting events. While Blatty may have been disappointed that the motion picture played down the "message" of the book, instead primarily providing a "roller coaster ride" for the viewer, it is clear that many people came for the roller coaster ride and went away with at least some of the message.

Key Questions

The Exorcist, both book and movie, provides a wide range of discussion topics, related to character development, social and religious themes, and the new ground broken by each in establishing genre conventions. The controversial reception of the novel at the time is also grounds for discussion, as are the universal religious and philosophical issues with which Blatty grapples in the book.

1. To what extent are charges of sensationalism valid against the book or motion picture of The Exorcist? Is the theological context in which Blatty places it enough to justify the explicit horrors?

2. Father Karras is depicted as having various problems, including a crisis of faith and guilt over his treatment of his dead mother. Are these successfully integrated, in terms of character and theme?

Further, are the problems that Karras brings to the exorcism successfully used in his ordeal during the exorcism?

3. Part of the message of The Exorcist, expressed in a conversation between Father Dyer and Chris MacNeil at the end of the book, is that if such evil exists in the world, then good must also. Do you find this convincing? Does Blatty make a good case for it within the world of the novel?

4. Why did Blatty choose an elevenyear-old girl as the object of demonic possession? How would the novel have been more or less successful—or simply different—if Chris MacNeil had been possessed instead of Regan?

5. Do you think The Exorcist, either book or movie, would cause such a substantial stir if it were first presented in our recent culture, instead of when it was?

How might it be different if it were written today?

6. How did the setting in Georgetown contribute to the book? How was it used visually in the movie?

7. Father Merrin is introduced relatively briefly (in both the novel and the movie) for someone who plays such an important role. Do you feel Blatty manages to establish his character sufficiently? If so, what main techniques does he use to do so economically? If not, what more could Blatty have done to add to the character?

8. In what ways does Detective Kinderman advance the book's religious themes, as well as its plot? What is the effect, if any, of Kinderman's being Jewish?

9. Anthony Burgess has noted that some of The Exorcist's effect comes from the ironic tension of an agnostic (Chris) pushing for her daughter to be exorcised, while the priest (Father Karras) resists and demands more and more proof.

How does this come about? How is Father Karras's training as a psychiatrist relevant? Does Chris give up on medicine too easily, and if so, why?

10. When Karras begins to enumerate the possessing entities to Merrin, the older exorcist replies, "There is only one." Do you agree? If so, why does the entity use the various masks?

Literary Precedents

tike many vastly popular books, The Exorcist drew on different genres and added some new twists, for a result that was exciting but also met familiar needs or desires in the reader. Blatty's prece dents were as diverse as the religious novel, the detective novel, the horror or Gothic, and the celebrity best seller. The central interest in possession and exorcism allowed Blatty to blend various genre-tropes without seriously violating the expectations of the individual genres.

As Carroll points out, Blatty's use of the "complex discovery plot" also characterizes Gothic landmarks such as Bram Stoker's Dracula (1897; see separate entry); it is, moreover, quite similar to the plot of the genre detective story (it may be no coincidence that Edgar Allen Poe is a forefather in both fields). More immediately, Ira Levin had used the same approach in Rosemary's Baby—published just as Blatty began The Exorcist—slowly delivering clues to the reader, building up evidence long before offering any supernatural explanation. Moreover, psychological explanations are entertained for most of both books, although in Rosemary's Baby it is the mother's (or motherto - be's) mental illness, while in The Exorcist it is the child's.

In interviews, Blatty has not tended to be forthcoming about fictional influences.

Instead, he has stressed The Exorcist's origin in documentation of possession as a nonfiction phenomenon, beginning with the 1949 account of the possession and exorcism of a fourteen-year-old boy, which Blatty read while an undergraduate at Georgetown University. The factual research behind the book, in every related field from occultism to neurology, is obvious and impressive.

Although neither Blatty nor many critics discuss them (one exception is Anthony Burgess in The New York Times Book Review, February 11, 1973), the books that most resemble The Exorcist in genre and goals are the "supernatural thrillers" of Charles Williams, such as War in Heaven (1930), The Greater Trumps (1932), and All Hallows Eve (1942). In each of these, as in The Exorcist, spiritual forces of good and evil invade our world, changing the lives of the common people who encounter them. Moreover, Williams matches Blatty's serious religious intent—although as a lay theologian, he surpasses the accomplishment. Still, like The Exorcist, Williams's novels have also been criticized as too lurid. Another book in this tradition, influenced by Williams, is C. S. Lewis's That Hideous Strength (1945).

One possible precedent in terms of topic is Ray Russell's The Case Against Satan (1962). The story concerns a possessed young girl, with many similar symptoms, including vomiting and obscenity (although milder language, due to stricter publishing standards then). The link between possession and family dysfunction is explicit, not implicit as in Blatty's book: the girl lives with her single father, who murdered his wife and probably sexually molested his daughter, definitely responsible for opening his child

to possession and possibly possessed himself. Like Blatty's interviews, Russell's afterword stresses the real-life origins of the book.

Related Titles

Some associations with The Exorcist run through Blatty's work. One of the characters satirically discusses exorcising another in Twinkle, Twinkle, "Killer" Kane (1967) and its revision as The Ninth Configuration (1978; see separate entry), and those books also concern themselves with metaphysical questions such as the nature of man and the problem of good and evil, especially self-sacrifice and redemption. Blatty also addresses both questions of the supernatural and issues concerning his mother (the basis of Father Karras's mother in The Exorcist) in his memoir, I'll Tell Them I Remember You; a lighter portrait of his mother also appears in his first book, Which Way to Mecca, Jack? (1960). However, his only novel explicitly connected to The Exorcist is Legion, a sequel written approximately a dozen years later. The similarities and differences between the two novels are fascinating (see separate entry).

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