

The Friends of Eddie Coyle Short Guide

The Friends of Eddie Coyle by George V. Higgins

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 Friends of Eddie Coyle Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Adaptations.....	6
Key Questions.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	8
Related Titles.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10

Characters

The title itself suggests something of Eddie Coyle's function in the novel: He is the character around which the plot is constructed, the associative link by which other characters are introduced into its action. But his centrality in the novel is very much a matter of focus rather than significance. Coyle does not dominate the action of the novel; indeed, the book's conclusion indicates that he is an expendable victim of the world which it depicts. There is little which intrinsically distinguishes Coyle from his "friends" — those people on both sides of the law with whom he does business. The epithet "the stocky man" (the phrase which introduces Coyle in the novel) and the broken fingers which Eddie had acquired as a result of an earlier "business" deal are the limit of his physical description. He has a wife and children but little is made of Coyle's domestic life (aside from some stereotypical complaints) or indeed of his social contacts outside the circle of his friends. The fact that he is a forty-five-year-old ex-convict who is facing sentencing on another conviction is all readers learn of his motivations other than those which are criminal. In short, his characterization is shaped by its function within a specific fictional environment.

At first, Dillon, the bartender who makes his appearance early in the novel as a police informant, seems to exist even further on the margin of this criminal world than Coyle, and his gregariousness also seems merely appropriate to his dual role. Only slowly is it revealed that he was the man behind the liquor smuggling operation for which Coyle stands convicted and, as a consequence, the prime mover in the events which lead to his murder. Dillon's almost awful mendacity, at the same time that it allows readers to feel for Coyle the sort of sympathy appropriate to a scapegoat, enforces the notion that it is cold efficiency which ensures survival in the world depicted by the novel.



Social Concerns/Themes

When *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* was published in 1972, its originality was registered both through Higgins's control of literary technique and by its seeming to stand apart from various popular notions of the reality of crime in America. In addition to the broadcasting of the revelations of Joe Valachi, recent works of fiction and nonfiction had made common the concept of "organized crime" — the Mafia. Sociological theories were being offered as explanations of criminal behavior among racial minorities. The radical left was responsible for crimes which exceeded the definition of the political as it was understood by the nation's majority. Obviously aware of this criminal topography, George V. Higgins reminded his readers of the persistence of another sort of criminal activity — the mundane reality of criminal life and society which has always shadowed "normal" capitalistic society.

In part, this reality was established through literary style. Against the seismic, orchestrated violence of such a book as *The Godfather* (an almost contemporaneous best seller), the actual violence of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* is made to appear even more a matter of everyday business than Mario Puzo's most perfunctory executions. But this reality is also established through the particular focus of the novel. In opposition to the hierarchical criminal strategies depicted by Puzo, Higgins concentrates upon the smaller businessmen in the economy of crime. Higgins gives a view of the bottom in which patterns of behavior are, at first, hard to discern. Instead of sociological explanation, he offers glimpses of a part of society which allows for few motivations other than the economic and which adheres to its own rules of order and punishment. Since its own objective of economic success is held in common with normal society, it is made clear that political radicals have no solid a place in this criminal world, except as potential customers who cannot be trusted to follow the rules. On the other hand, these rules are shown to operate with little regard for either the law or its agents. Punishment seems to exert no inhibition upon the actual commission of crime and whatever success the police have in preventing crime is shown to be either fortuitous or the result of information obtained from other criminals. It is a testament to the authority with which Higgins writes that readers do not consider the possibility of his indulging in fictive hyperbole.



Techniques

The Friends of Eddie Coyle is so tightly written that a critical distinction between characterization and fictional structure or between literary technique and theme is at times difficult to maintain. The novel's unremittingly close concentration upon the transactions among its characters blurs the distinctions between the different sides of the law, especially when so many of the scenes portray the tactical dependence of Dave Foley, the cop on the case, upon a certain complicity with the criminal characters. The "normality" of the book's criminal world is further reinforced by the correspondences in the depiction of Foley and Jackie Brown, who supplies Coyle with the guns his customers require: They share a noticeably similar taste in clothes, hairstyles, and automobiles. Further, although the talent that has gained George V. Higgins a reputation as a consummate writer of dialogue is evident in this, his first novel, it is put to somewhat different use than in his later works. In them, speech patterns not only aid in establishing the individuality of characters, but are sometimes the only means of their characterization. In *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, the brilliant authenticity of the dialogue establishes the credibility of the criminal environment at the same time that it levels the differences among the characters. The equivalence of their language here implies a similarity of motives and assumptions.

Dialogue between two, more rarely three, characters is so dominant a form of fictional representation in the novel, so much a common ground among the characters and of their portrayal, that the actual transactions which have brought them together, whether the exchange of information or the exchange of guns, are often almost obscured by the language which facilitates them. The details which constitute the book's plot, such as it is, are rarely given the sort of prominence they would have in a more traditional novel of detection. On the other hand, the novel's few scenes of violence are made emphatic not so much as violations of normal social order or even through their actual depiction, but by their deviation from the behavioral ground constituted by dialogue.

This same representational mode enforces an ironic rather than a melodramatic view of the plot. Whatever dilemma Coyle faces, readers are never allowed to see his personal conflict except in the way of inferences from what he says and does. He is offered a choice between the retribution of the criminal justice system and that of his fellow criminals, not between right and wrong. With seeming inevitability, his attempts to protect himself lead him to the position where the only choice he has left is the one he has been avoiding all along — to inform on Dillon. Unfortunately, Dillon realizes this before Coyle does.

Adaptations

The movie version of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* which appeared in 1973 won some praise from its reviewers, but it was suggested that the movie gave hints that it could have been something a bit more than a well-done criminal thriller. Perhaps it is unfair to suggest that whatever originality the film possessed was borrowed from the novel and that the more commonplace elements were a product of the film treatment. It is certain, however, that, in the translation to film, characteristic features of the novel which were tied to its literary means of presentation had to be sacrificed. Robert Mitchum as Coyle and Peter Boyle as Dillon were both superb, but their very images on screen offered physical cues of characterization and for emotional response which the novel had succeeded in doing without. Indeed, the very necessity of finding physical actions and images to represent the plot of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* made it impossible to imitate the tightly focused verbal atmosphere of the novel.



Key Questions

The Friends of Eddie Coyle is a first novel by someone who has considerable talent for writing fiction. Its spare prose and stark portrayals of its characters make it a significant book, and these qualities may account for its broad popularity. Even so, it may have some of the faults that bedevil most first novels: a lack of balance between action and characterization, a lack of focus, too much psychologizing, awkward phrasing, or an unclear plot. In looking at the novel, discussion groups could approach it as a work that presages Higgins's later work. The groups could look in it for those elements which Higgins dropped, changed, or improved in later publications. Another potentially fruitful approach would be to examine the novel as a work of social criticism. In it, Higgins seems to deliberately make criminal acts seem part of everyday life, rather than sensationalizing them or making seem part of some remote underworld. A bartender, a police officer, almost anyone might be engaged in criminal activity. This approach to its subject makes Higgins's novel seem like an antidote to other fictional depictions of crime. Hours of discussion could evolve out of an investigation of how the novel's criminal world works, as well as out of a debate over how accurate the novel's depiction of criminal life really is.

1. Can you identify the rules by which the criminals in *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* conduct themselves? How are the rules enforced? Who enforces them? Are the rules more effective in governing criminal conduct than are society's laws?
2. What is the character Eddie Coyle's function in the novel? Is he the protagonist?
3. How effective is the dialogue? Try reading some of it aloud. Does it sound authentic? Does it provide hints as to the personalities of the speakers? Does it suggest social differences?
4. Some characters are more deeply involved in crime than others, but even police officers deal with criminals to some degree. Try reconstructing the society depicted in *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, diagramming on paper who is most deeply involved in crime and working outward to those who are only slightly involved in crime. What does this suggest to you about the criminal world? How much of it has been shaped by the demands of novel writing rather than the real world?
5. How much physical action is there in *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*? How much of the novel is just characters talking to each other? Is there enough action to interest those readers who look for excitement in novels?



Literary Precedents

Writers sometimes do seem to follow the admonition to write about what they know; no doubt, George V. Higgins drew upon his experience in the criminal justice system in writing *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*. The novel was hailed for its originality: perhaps because it was devoid of the sort of psychopathological characterization which commonly marked the novel of violent crime, without adopting the sort of playfulness which was so often evident in novels of crime which are without a powerfully violent element. Or perhaps it was hailed because the oppositional force of the police was so consistently underplayed (the police, in fact, virtually disappear in Higgins's next two novels).

Surely, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* has an important place within the tradition of the American crime novel from Dashiell Hammett to Elmore Leonard (who is in many ways a useful contemporary figure for comparison). As in the case of Hammett and Raymond Chandler, however, Higgins's position may perhaps be better understood in terms of what he imported from the margin of this tradition than by any direct generic inheritance. The influence of literary naturalism is often brought to bear upon the question of the genesis of the "hard-boiled" novels of the 1930s and 1940s. To the extent that the retributive structure which finally encompasses Eddie is shown to be a feature of his specific "natural" environment, a case could be made for viewing the novel more directly in terms of the work of Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and James T. Farrell than through any hard-boiled intermediaries. This relationship should not, however, be taken too far. The irony of Coyle's demise is a reflection of his world; on the other hand, there are no indications that this world is meant to be viewed as a microcosm of the metaphysical economy of a larger world. This seeming eschewal of larger implications is also what ultimately distinguishes the irony of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* from the ironies of Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene, novelists for whom Higgins has expressed admiration and who have been pointed to in attempts to legitimize the criminal genre. While Conrad and Greene are quintessentially British writers, the verbal texture of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* follows very much in the American tradition of raising to the level of fictional art the representation of the patterns of demotic speech, the tradition represented by Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Ring Lardner, John O'Hara (another writer admired by Higgins), and indeed Raymond Chandler.



Related Titles

While *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* has frequently been used as a reference point in critical evaluations of his later development as a novelist, George V. Higgins has never again produced a book so economical and bare-boned, although he has revealed other literary virtues. In *The Digger's Game* (1973) and *Cogan's Trade* (1974), the two novels which immediately followed *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, Higgins further explores the fictional environment he established in his first novel. There is an explicit connection between *Cogan's Trade* and *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*.

Dillon, the criminal bartender, is the presiding spirit of the later novel, even though he never actually makes an appearance. The repeated invocation of his name and spirit point to his significance within the economy of crime. The illness of Dillon is the cause for his protege, Jackie Cogan, being called in to assume the role of enforcer. By the end of the novel, when the death of Dillon from a heart ailment is reported, Cogan has proved that he is as grimly efficient as his mentor.



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