Giles Goat-Boy Short Guide

Giles Goat-Boy by John Barth

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Characters

One of the attractions that Giles Goat-Boy held for its initial readers, which certainly contributed to its early commercial success, was the allegorical dimension of the novel. In this novel, Barth uses the university as a metaphor for the Cold War and divides his world into Eastern and Western campuses, with various quadrangles identified with the major powers of post-World War II politics. For example, America corresponds to New Tammany, Germany to Siegfrieder College, Asia to the monastic world of T'ang, and the Soviet Union to Nikolay College. In Barth's novel, New Tammany is led by Lucius Rexford, also known as "Lucky," a thinly-disguised portrait of President John F. Kennedy.

In addition, the various political ideologies are presented allegorically: For example, communism is described as Student-Unionism. The events of recent history are also represented in Barth's allegory so that, for example, World War II becomes Campus Riot II.

The Eastern and Western Campuses are controlled by a separate computer, which is known by the acronym of WESCAC in the west, and Barth's own novel is presented as a transcription of tapes from WESCAC's files.

Barth injects George, a young man raised by Max Spielman in the New Tammany goat barns, into this world.

Max was essential to the New Tammany effort in Campus Riot II, but he has since been blacklisted and kept from any position of power. George spends his early life as a goat, and his narrative gains much of its humor from its caprin perspective. After realizing his true calling, George sets off to pursue a career as a human in New Tammany. He becomes convinced that his mission in life is to become Grand Tutor of the Western Campus and to complete his own education with the ultimate aim of discovering his true identity and setting New Tammany straight. Despite the efforts of the False Tutor, Harold Bray, to thwart his education and although often misled by his own misunderstandings, George achieves a moment of mystical transcendence in the belly of WESCAC.

Yet, like all mystical moments, this one is short-lived, and although George enjoys some brief notoriety, he changes little in New Tammany. By the end of the novel's epilogue or "Posttape," George is saddened by his experiences, despairs for the future, and withdraws from active life in New Tammany.

Social Concerns

Giles Goat-Boy, Barth's greatest commercial success, is a novel concerned with the question of innocence and its loss. This narrative retains vestiges of the existential influence in Barth's earlier works. His major concern, however, is with the ultimately despairing implications of the "Tragic View," particularly the notion that all advances or achievements on the individual level are in time eroded and forgotten in the broader societal realm. In addition, Barth is concerned with the limits of education and the possibilities of knowledge, again for both individuals and social organizations.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Like the manipulation of eighteenthcentury novelistic conventions in The Sot-Weed Factor (1960), the use of allegory in Giles Goat-Boy is designed to assert the fictional nature of Barth's narrative and to suggest at the same time a parallel between this elaborate fiction and the United States in the early 1960s. But the allegory is only one dimension of Barth's novel; more significant to the structure of Giles Goat-Boy is the typical pattern of heroic adventure outlined by the comparative mythographer, Joseph Campbell. In his 1949 study The Hero With a Thousand Faces, Campbell outlines a monomyth, in which the typical hero traces a course that leads him from initiation to illumination and eventually to disillusionment. Barth's George conforms to this course, but it is also important to note that he often does so ironically.

This elaborate structural pattern is thus mocked in order to demonstrate the very limits of all imposed order.

Among the more interesting narrative devices in Barth's novel is the selfconscious commentary provided by the text's various framing devices. Giles Goat-Boy begins not with the story of George, but with letters from various readers in a publishing house commenting upon the quality of the novel and upon the character of its author.

This "Publisher's Disclaimer" is followed by a "Cover-Letter to the Editors and Publisher" written by a "J. B.," who then describes how he received this manuscript, entitled The Revised New Syllabus, from one Stoker Giles.

This series of frames questions the authorship of these transcriptions, and thereby echoes the preoccupation with truth and the impossibility of arriving at absolute certainty that haunts George's quest. These frames also provide a self-conscious commentary on the narrative that they introduce, and much the same effect is achieved when at the height of George's quest, he asks a librarian for directions to Tower Clock. The librarian complies, but her response is read out of a book, and the book that she is reading appears to be Giles Goat-Boy. This episode ironically dramatizes the thematic preoccupation with patterns and the limits of their usefulness.

Key Questions

1. What seem to be the dominant attitudes expressed toward technology and science in this novel?

2. How do the various frames Barth places around the main narrative affect the reader's interpretation of the story?

3. Is Giles finally a satire directed at religion or a confirmation of the truths of religion?

4. Would the novel be improved or harmed by removing much of its repetition? Is its length entirely necessary?

Mostly necessary?

5. What do the main characters learn about themselves by the end of the book? Can the self-knowledge gained by characters in this book be used by the average reader to increase his or her self-knowledge?

Related Titles

While Giles Goat-Boy has not maintained the reputation it enjoyed when it was published, it is an important book in Barth's career. It signals his growing interest in the ironic possibilities of myth and demonstrates a further step in his manipulation of structure and narrative techniques as correlatives for his thematic concerns. Giles GoatBoy also encourages the exploration of innocence seen in The Sot-Weed Factor, and the text's political allegory recalls the examination of the origins of American political life in that novel. In addition, the preoccupation with the limits of knowledge is consistent with the thematic concerns of Barth's first two novels.

Barth's later novel LETTERS (1979) returns to a university setting, although it handles that setting in a much less allegorical way than does Giles Goat-Boy. LETTERS, an encyclopedic epistolary novel populated by correspondents from Barth's other works, places Jerome Bray, a descendant of Harold Bray, the false Grand Tutor, in another university setting, where his preoccupation with nonprint media and other new technologies causes trouble for several characters, including the character called "the Author John Barth."

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