

Godbody Short Guide

Godbody by Theodore Sturgeon

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Characters

Although *Godbody* is an overtly didactic work of fiction, it succeeds to a great extent as a novel because Sturgeon is able to create a number of individualized characters who gain the readers' interest and sympathy. Each is given enough of a history and enough of a unique voice to seem a person rather than merely an authorial mouthpiece. As reviewers have noted, the novel is a sequence of character sketches detailing the impact of *Godbody* on the lives of those he touches: A good man and woman lose their sexual inhibitions and shame and gain a new sense of freedom; a lonely woman finds true community; a girl who has always thought herself unworthy and unlovable discovers her own beauty and learns that she is loved; two sexually twisted and manipulative men are able to transcend their warped perspectives and learn to love.

Briefly described, the characters may seem types or caricatures, but to a considerable extent Sturgeon's deft touch makes them more. Andrew Merriwether, for instance, might easily have become a stock figure, a stuffy banker who rigidly controls himself and uses other people, but his narrative is so ironically and comically self revealing that he becomes a much more substantial character than first seemed possible. While Willa Mayhew never becomes more than a caricature of a repressed and vicious woman, she is a vivid and effective caricature, the only person in the story untouched by *Godbody*. She in fact recalls Mr. Kew of *More Than Human* — for whom she would have made the ideal spouse.

Sturgeon is less successful with *Godbody* himself, which is not really surprising. At times, when he is seen through the eyes of one of the characters, he seems as compelling a figure as Sturgeon must have intended. But at other times he seems little more than a pleasant (if ungrammatical) eccentric who likes to go about unclothed. Then again even John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667) had trouble making the Deity a character.



Social Concerns/Themes

Godbody is an intensely religious novel and at the same time an uncompromising attack on organized religion.

For Sturgeon true religion has nothing to do with churches, priests, or hierarchies; nothing to do with commentaries, creeds, or theologies. True religion is not a question of celibacy, guilt or fear; true religion is love. It is love of a God who is not remote but present in everyone and everything; it is love of people and love of the body and love of nature. It is love of food and sex and beauty. True religion is a love rooted in sexuality, expressed through sexuality. In his last speech, the title character tells his friends, "If ever you want to touch the hand and heart of God Almighty, you can do it through the body of someone you love. Anytime.

Anywhere. Without no middleman."

The novel then is both Sturgeon's retelling of the Christ-story and his explanation of how Christianity went astray. The plot is simple: Somewhere in the Catskill Mountains, late in springtime, a man called Godbody appears. He calls a few people to him, touches them, heals them, teaches them, loves them. He is killed (late on a Friday) by a scandalized pillar of society, and he returns to life (early the next Sunday).

The parallels with the life of Christ are too obvious to require comment, but Sturgeon's real concern is with what happens next. The novel condemns, at first implicitly, then finally quite explicitly, what has happened to Christianity since the death of Christ.

Godbody is staunchly anti-institutional and anticlerical; it is also, at least in the sphere of religion, anti-intellectual.

If the essence of religion is love, or the intimate contact between human and God (and between human and human), then anything that intervenes, any institutional or intellectual construct, is an enemy of religion. Thus in Sturgeon's eyes the development of a separate class of priests and bishops, the growth of rigid codes of behavior (especially sexual behavior) enforced by violence or the inculcation of guilt, and the evolution of elaborate and increasingly abstract interpretations of what Christ really meant — all these have served to undermine the original message of Christianity.

In a sense, Sturgeon is merely reprising a number of heresies (including the Montanism of the second and third centuries) that were ultimately suppressed by what became the orthodox church — in part because they criticized the increasing institutionalization of the church and the development of a whole class that mediated between the believer and God. Perhaps what most provokes Sturgeon, however, is the church's strict regulation of, and frequent hostility to, human sexuality, and here he ventures where very few variations of Christianity have dared.



His Christ-figure, Godbody, is emphatically a sexual being, and the novel celebrates sexuality as the highest expression of human love and as the gateway to the mystical experience of God. The church's attempts to repress sexuality are, according to the argument of Godbody, insanely destructive and a principal source of human evil and suffering. Repression leads to rape and violence and exploitation. The novel then is nothing less than an audacious attempt to correct nearly two thousand years of theological and philosophical bungling — to restore a primitive, natural, and liberating religion.



Techniques

Godbody consists of eight brief firstperson narratives, followed by a thirdperson account of the "resurrection."

The narratives are interlocking — often the same event is described by several different characters or one character's account adds a missing piece or an insight to another's story. It is a difficult technique, and Sturgeon exploits it with considerable skill and effectiveness. Especially noteworthy is his ability to create eight distinct voices for his narrators. Dan Currier's narrative, for instance, catches the tone of a naive, honest, and troubled seeker of God; and Hobo Wellen's crude obscenities and self-serving rationalizations express the self-destructive mind of a man who uses women because of his own desperate sense of inadequacy.

And it is perhaps a final testament to Sturgeon's skill as a writer that a story which would, baldly summarized, strike many readers as profoundly blasphemous, is, in his hands, so often graceful and even reverential.



Literary Precedents

Given the essentially materialistic premises of science fiction, it is surprising how many writers in the field have played around with the notion of a Christ-like Messiah — at times for comic or satiric purposes, at times with quite serious intent. Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), for which Sturgeon wrote a glowing blurb, explores many of the same themes as *Godbody*, including the attacks on organized religion and the close identification of sex and religious worship. *Stranger in a Strange Land* is perhaps in a very general sense a source of *Godbody*. But the differences are probably more instructive. Heinlein maintains at least a nominal science fiction framework and his tone and intent are almost purely satiric, while Sturgeon writes a straight fantasy that is, in its own way, genuinely and seriously religious. It is curious to see close friends make remarkably different books out of essentially the same materials. A more remote precedent might be the Grand Inquisitor sequence of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), in which Christ returns to earth only to be rejected by a leader of the church founded in his name.

Godbody can also be seen in the context of historical and theological efforts to determine the relationship between the actual life and teachings of Christ and the doctrines of the early church.

And there are interesting parallels between Sturgeon's discussion of sexuality and the attempt by some contemporary theologians working from a more or less orthodox Christian perspective, especially James Nelson in *Embodiment* (1978) and *Between Two Gardens* (1983), to postulate a link between sexuality and spirituality and even to explore the sexuality of God.



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