

Godric Study Guide

Godric by Frederick Buechner

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Contents

Godric Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Pages 3 - 22.....	5
Pages 23 - 43.....	7
Pages 44 - 61.....	10
Pages 62 - 79.....	12
Pages 80 - 99.....	14
Pages 100 - 120.....	16
Pages 121 - 138.....	18
Pages 139 - 158.....	20
Pages 158 - 178.....	22
Characters.....	24
Objects/Places.....	28
Social Concerns And Themes.....	30
Techniques.....	32
Themes.....	33
Style.....	35
Quotes.....	38
Topics for Discussion.....	40
Related Titles.....	41
Copyright Information.....	43



Plot Summary

Godric is a man of peasant stock who dishonestly amasses a significant fortune and uses it to lead a life of pleasure and sin. God gradually sends him supernatural signs, usually through the intercession of a saint, to guide him on the right path. Godric eventually decides to become a hermit by the River Wear and lives to be over one hundred years old.

Godric is born to a peasant family in Walpole, England. He has two younger siblings, Burcwen and William. Burcwen and William are very close as they are growing up, but she begins to draw closer to Godric after she saves his life. Godric found a fresh porpoise carcass in the ocean and went to retrieve it—it could easily feed the family for days—but on his way back he succumbed to the strong waves. His sister found him unconscious and resuscitated him. After that point, Burcwen pulled away from William and developed a strong, if excessive, attachment to Godric. When Godric decides to leave Walpole to set out on his own, she tries to stop him—she even threatens to commit suicide—but she is unsuccessful, though he longs to be with her, too.

Godric becomes a merchant. The first ware he sells is women's hair which he buys from convents. He stumbles fortuitously into fortune one day during a riot. He is at a merchant's fair in Bishop's Lynn when local Jews break into a church trying to find one of their own who converted to Christianity. The Christians inside respond with violence. The riot loses its purpose and turns on a slight, effeminate man named Peregrine Small, whom they mistake for a Jew. It so happens that Peregrine dies in Godric's arms, spilling his blood on his clothing. After the riot, the facts become distorted; Peregrine was, they say, a martyr, valiantly defending the church against the Jews' attempts to desecrate it. Godric makes a small fortune selling the "relics" of Peregrine, and even counterfeits more with cat blood. The bishop eventually exiles him, however. He travels to the island Farne to stash away his money when he receives a miraculous vision of St. Cuthbert. He feels genuine sorrow for his sins and confesses to the saint, who absolves him and urges him to live a holy life from then on. Godric is moved, but does not yet change. Instead, he goes into business sailing with Roger Mouse. His life is the opposite of the one recommended him by Cuthbert; he drinks, fornicates, cheats, and even robs.

Godric starts to truly convert on a pilgrimage to Rome with his mother. Rome itself is unimpressive and he feels as if God does not hear his prayers. On the journey back, however, he receives mystical visits from a woman named Gillian, who rebukes his sinfulness and urges him on a path of holiness. Upon returning home, he works briefly for a local baron, but cannot stand the corruption and exploitation. He and Roger finally resume their enterprise, but Godric is no longer a willing party to their dishonest ways. His opposition culminates in a fist fight on the shore of Jerusalem and he winds up being tossed overboard. While in Jerusalem, the site of Christ's execution, he decides to wholly dedicate himself to God. He returns to Farne, collects his treasure, and gives it away. He lives for two years with an eccentric hermit named Elric and decides that he will, one day, be a hermit too.



After working for a church and receiving a basic education, Godric uses his friendship with the bishop to procure a plot of land to live on. He lives solitary for some time but before long his family comes to join him. Aedwen, his mother, is quite old at this point, and does not live much longer. The unspoken desire that exists between Godric and Burcwen finally boils over and the two have sex. While Burcwen is sleeping with Godric, William, their brother, comes by to find his sister; Godric lies and says he does not know where she is. William slips on some rocks and dies looking for her. Ever after, a rift opens between Godric and Burcwen and they only rarely see one another. She finally decides to become a nun. The last years of Godric's life—which were many—were spent quietly in his hermitage. Eventually, a local monastery sent Reginald to record Godric's life. Godric agrees only reluctantly and has a fit when he discovers that Reginald has written that he is a saint. The revelation affects him so strongly that he dies that night.



Pages 3 - 22

Pages 3 - 22 Summary

"Of Godric, his friends, and Reginald": Godric recalls the five friends throughout his life. Two are snakes named Tune and Fairweather. He once enjoyed a fairly close relationship with the snakes—they would even coil up his legs for warmth—but he wound up sending them away. Next is the now-deceased Roger Mouse. Roger was a sailor and adventurer. He was not a particularly virtuous man, but Godric hoped God would excuse Roger's sins, since they did not come from an evil heart, but rather from a carefree, joyful soul.

Next is Ailred. Ailred is the abbot at a nearby monastery. Godric has an extremely high opinion of him; he truly believes him to be a living saint. Ailred once confronted a wicked king, renowned for brutality and sadism, and miraculously converted him to Christianity. For the rest of his life, the king renounced his sins and lived according to the Christian faith. Ailred sent Reginald to gather testimony for Godric's biography. Godric is very resistant to Reginald. He does not think he lives a life worthy of recording; he sincerely believes he is a woeful sinner. He tries to discourage Reginald by recounting some of the worse moments of his life, but Reginald is undeterred.

Finally, Godric recalls a woman named Gillian. Though he does not specify the exact nature of their relationship, it is clear that he was once very fond of her but wound up losing her somehow. He has experienced loss or pain in all of his friendships, but the loss of Gillian is the greatest of all.

"Of the family of Godric, his youth, and a sign from the sea"

Godric does not have much memory of his father, Aedward. He was a kind man but only rarely spent time at home; most of his time was spent, by necessity, acquiring food for his family. He remembers his mother, Aedwen, fondly as a woman who was always joyful, despite their difficult conditions.

Godric is the oldest of three children. Burcwen, his sister, is the youngest. Burcwen was somewhat of a tomboy growing up. She loved the dirty, rough adventures of boys. When boys started showing sexual interest in her, she became confused and spurned their advances. Her closest friend, for a time, was William, the middle child in the family. William was an extremely talkative young boy. This trait annoyed many people, but Burcwen found it soothing. Their relationship changed one day when Burcwen saved Godric's life. Godric nearly drowned pulling a porpoise carcass from the ocean. Burcwen discovered him and revived him. After that point, she drew away from William and drew closer to Godric.

"How Reginald asked and Godric answered and the Blessed Virgin's song"



Reginald is with Godric, interviewing him for his biography. He showers Godric with praise for his holiness and Godric responds by trying to undermine the compliment. Godric truly believes he is a sinful man and tries to prove it by pointing to his unrighteous past. At first, Reginald is troubled by this and begins to weep. Godric has only been presenting the low points of his life and is refusing to show Reginald how God's grace has touched him and the miracles he has experienced. Godric pities him and tells him how the Virgin Mary appeared to him in a dream and taught him a song.

Pages 3 - 22 Analysis

The reader is immediately struck by Buechner's unusual writing style, which is simultaneously simple—even crude—and lyrical. This writing style suits the book because it reflects the two obvious aspects of Godric, the main character and narrator. Godric is a man of humble, peasant origins. In his old age—more so, perhaps, than even his youth—he has become a crude, though not profane, man. He talks openly about the effects of the weather on his genitals and about "fouling" his hay. On the other hand, he is also a holy man who has been sanctified and exalted by God. Thus, just as God's grace shines through Godric's rough exterior, so too does a certain poetry permeate Godric's unpolished narration.

The character of Godric is intended to defy the reader's expectations of a Medieval saint. He is hardly the silent, dignified being, staring with cold, fixed eyes from the murals of a cathedral. Rather, he is a rough, even vulgar man who makes no attempt to be dignified or even respectable in the eyes of the world. Indeed, Godric almost seems like a madman. He lists snakes among his friends and describes his relationship with them in completely human terms. This unstable mental state is corroborated by his disjointed narration. The stories are all told from the first-person but there are occasional, almost schizophrenic breaks in the text where he shifts between the first- and third-person perspective. This is done clearly on page 14: "I see it yet and yet see Godric seeing it as well."

Godric's rough even insane depiction is not meant to detract from his saintliness. Rather, the reader ought to take it as a sign of inner grace. Godric has no concern for what others think about him, and he especially has no desire for people to think that he is a saint. These attitudes are not without precedent. Indeed, in many ways, Godric resembles John the Baptist. Like Godric, John the Baptist lived for years as a hermit in the wilderness, living among beasts and eating insects. It is no coincidence that John the Baptist is one of the saints in Godric's mystical visions.



Pages 23 - 43

Pages 23 - 43 Summary

"How Godric left home"

Godric has decided to leave his family (why, exactly, is unclear). Their goodbye is simple. He bids his parents farewell and without shedding a tear they send him away with what meager provisions they can spare. The image of his father sending him off with a raised hand imprints itself permanently on his memory. He realizes that moment marks the beginning of a journey, a journey which he hopes will end at the gates of Heaven. Burcwen, still very attached to her older brother, tries to convince him to stay, even threatening to commit suicide. Godric is emotionally torn—he loves his sister very much—but realizes that they must, for now, part ways.

"Of Peregrine Small and how Godric came to prosper in trade"

Godric recalls why he sent his two snake friends away. He loved the snakes dearly and they even loved him in return. They were faithful servants—one even would scare off intruders on command—but he realized his attachment to them was detracting from his attachment to God.

Before Godric leaves his hometown, he is blessed by the town priest, Tom Ball. The priest tells him to always be attentive to the cries of the poor. Godric takes this advice to heart, and hears not only the cries of the financially poor, but the cries of all those who suffer, even birds dying in the forest. He hears the same cry from a man named Peregrine Small. Small is a weak, effeminate man who endures constant ridicule and mockery. One day, Small falls victim to a heinous crime. Godric and Small are both merchants at a fair in Bishop's Lynn when a riot breaks out between Jews and Christians. The Jews were angry because one of their own, Haggai, converted to Christianity. They broke down the doors to a church, hoping to find and kill him, and were met by an angry mob of Christians. Godric finds himself among the melee and sees Small cowering in the corner. The angry mob loses sight of its initial purpose and continues to roar even after the Jews have been driven away. They find Small and mistake him for Haggai and kill him.

Out of desperation, Small runs to Godric, hoping that he can somehow help him. Small dies in Godric's arm, his blood staining Godric's clothing. As it turns out, this works to Godric's benefit. The facts of the riot are distorted and the story spreads that Small was a martyr, killed because he was trying to stop a pack of Jews from desecrating the church. Since Small is a martyr, Godric possesses his relics. He sells them for great profit and even fabricates more relic with cat blood. His enterprise comes to an end, however, when the chancellor discovers it and exiles Godric from Bishop's Lynn.

"How Godric fared on the holy isle of Farne"



After being exiled from Bishop's Lynn, Godric travels to the island of Farne. On the island he meets an old man. Though the old man says nothing, something about him impresses Godric. Godric was feeling repentant about his sins and meant to do penance but fell asleep on the shore instead. That night—perhaps in a dream—the same old man approached him and talked to him. The old man, it turned out, was St. Cuthbert, a Christian saint of great renown. Godric confessed all of his sins and the saint forgave him in God's name. He gets back on the boat to leave the island next morning and meets Roger Mouse.

"How Godric met a boar and a leper and how people sought him in his cell"

Godric recounts a few events from his past which bear some relation to the question of his holiness. The first was an encounter he had with a wild boar. In the encounter, Godric was roughed up quite a bit. He realized, however, that the boar was really the devil, and destroyed the animal with the sign of the cross. He also recalls meeting a leper on the road. At first, he was disgusted by the leper, as most people were, but he had mercy on him when he saw the leper fall over on the road. Not wanting to bear the guilt of letting a man die, he helped the leper. Though he saw the leper's repugnant face, he gave him a kiss anyway, why he does is not known. Rumors circulated afterwards that the leper was cured by this kiss—Godric did not stay around to see—and it earned him the reputation as a healer. People came from far and wide just to be touched by him.

Pages 23 - 43 Analysis

Godric and Burcwen have a muddled relationship. While it not surprising that two siblings would have great affection for one another, there are a few hints in the text which suggest a romantic, even sexual, aspect. For one, it is unusual that Burcwen's affection is so exclusive. While one might expect a sister to care for all of her brothers (and sisters) in a more or less equal way, Burcwen focuses only on one at a time. At first, she spends all of her time with William. Then, after she saves Godric from drowning—and the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation is definitely suggestive—all of her focus is on him. It is also interesting that Godric assumes William is secretly happy that Godric is going away. Godric notes that William's external actions exhibit no jealousy, so it is reasonable to think that Godric is projecting his own feelings onto William. Buechner gives more clues when Burcwen tries to dissuade Godric from leaving. Her despair over her brother leaving is extreme. The fact that she would kill herself—or at least threaten to—if he leaves shows clearly her unequal feelings for her two brothers; William, after all, would still be around. The narration becomes outright sexual when Godric recalls noticing his sister's bare breasts under her ripped shirt.

Also worthy of note in this chapter is Buechner's treatment of Jewish-Christian relations. First of all, none of the anti-Semitic statements in the story ought to be attributed to Buechner himself. The book is narrated by Godric who, though a holy man, is also a man of his times. In those times, Jews were second-class citizens, looked down upon by Christendom. Godric's narration, then, reflects those attitudes. For example, he says



of Haggai that "[p]erhaps he turned to Jesu truly in his heart, ruing the bloody mischief of the cross the Jews had wrought" (31). Though neither side is blameless in the Bishop's Lynn riot, it is clear that the Christians act more reprehensibly than the Jews. It might be suggested that the aftermath of the riot is meant to represent the treatment of Jews in Europe in general. Christian crimes are covered up and distorted and the blame is placed instead upon the Jews, who suffer violence as a result.



Pages 44 - 61

Pages 44 - 61 Summary

"How Godric became Deric and sailed the seas with Roger Mouse"

Godric and Roger go into business together transporting goods from place to place by boat. Godric tells Roger his real name is "Gudericus"— "Deric for short"—because he feels that by changing his name, he can somehow escape St. Cuthbert's admonition to stop sinning. The time spent with Roger is wild and debauched. They travel from town to town, drinking and fornicating almost nightly. Because they cannot initially afford to pay all of their workers, they develop tricky schemes to cheat them out of wages. Piracy is a problem then and the two men find a way to use this as an advantage. They stage pirate raids of their own to rob the pilgrims aboard their ships. Roger takes it much further than Godric and, when it is his turn to play the pirate, rapes the pilgrim women. During this time, Godric frequently returns to Farne, where he has stashed away his growing treasure. Once, he thinks he sees St. Cuthbert, but he disappears before his eyes. Moved by sorrow over his sinful lifestyle, he kneels down and cries.

"How Godric journeyed home and Aedwen's dream"

The Saint Esprit, Godric and Roger's ship, is damaged and requires extensive repairs. While the work is being done, Godric travels home. Upon his arrival, he learns that his father died six years ago. His mother is still crushed by it. She received a vision in a dream that Aedward is in Purgatory and that she can free him by making a pilgrimage to Rome. She asks Godric to come with her and he agrees, though his motives are confused. He asks Burcwen to come with them, but she refuses, and he knows that it is to punish him for putting limits on their relationship.

"How the waters rose, and Godric spoke of time, and the road to Rome"

In his later years, Godric recalls a time when the river flooded. He and Ailred are forced to climb up to the shrine Godric made for the Virgin Mary. While there, they reflect on the passage of time. Like the storm clouds obscure the sun, so too do human events and emotions obscure God, who endures changeless. Reginald arrives with a raft to rescue the two men, and for once Godric is happy to see him.

Godric then returns to the pilgrimage to Rome. It is a very trying journey, especially for his aging mother. Their nights are spent either sleeping outside or in seedy taverns. They see many of the great European cities. In one city, they see a man publicly drawn and quartered, a sight which horrifies Aedwen.



Pages 44 - 61 Analysis

These chapters begin to shed some light, perhaps, on the strange manner of Godric's narration. After he talks to St. Cuthbert, he begins to live a kind of double life. Godric is the man who tearfully confessed his sins and begged God's forgiveness. Deric is the man who lives a fast life of vice and gratification and has no time to ponder the consequences of his action. He freely steals, cheats, and fornicates. However, it is obvious that Godric cannot escape himself by simply creating a new identity; he is himself no matter what name he goes by. This is the realization he comes to when he revisits Farne. It is important to note, however, that Godric sees the hand of God in the history of his life. His meeting with St. Cuthbert—whether it was a vision or not—was part of God's Providence, an attempt to save Godric's soul. Likewise, Godric's second repentance is something made possible through the grace of God.



Pages 62 - 79

Pages 62 - 79 Summary

"Of Rome, a maiden, and a bear"

Godric and Aedwen finally reach Rome. They are shocked by what they see. The town has been ravaged by war and the people live in miserable poverty. Disease and hunger pervade the town. They pray for Aedward at St. Peter's church but Godric feels as if his prayers are not being heard. They set out for home. One night, a bear comes near the area where they have made their camp. Godric watches as it eats a few pieces of fruit off of a tree, defecates, and leaves. A woman of extreme beauty named Gillian appears by his mother's side. She tells him that for his entire life, he has been like the bear: Taking God's gifts and then throwing them away. The woman disappears and Aedwen says she never saw her.

"Of a band of pilgrims and a parting in a wood"

Godric and Aedwen join a diverse group of pilgrims on the final leg of their journey home. Godric continues to have visions of Gillian during this time. She continues to admonish him to follow Christ and give up his sinful life. She always appears to him when he is by himself, or when others are sleeping, and no one else ever realizes her presence. She appears to him for a last time—at the same spot he would later kiss a leper—and tells him that his father has been freed from Purgatory.

"Of Falkes de Granvill"

Godric arrives home to discover that Roger has left a message for him. Their boat is still being repaired and will not be done until spring. The letter was addressed to "Deric" and Burcwen asks who that is. Godric tells a half truth and says it is someone else on the crew, a vile man who he hopes dies soon. Godric had hoped that the rift between him and his sister would have been healed by the time apart, but Burcwen is as resolute as ever to stay away from him. She uses her relationship with William to make Godric jealous. Godric realizes, however, that it is probably good that there is some distance between them, lest they become too close.

Godric's lord introduces him to a baron named Falkes de Granvill. The lord had recommended Godric to him, citing his years of adventure and enterprise as a sailor. Falkes offers Godric a position in his court, as a steward. Godric accepts and swears his loyalty.

Pages 62 - 79 Analysis

This chapter continues to develop the theme of Godric's supernatural guidance through life. It is unclear what exactly Gillian is. She has access to knowledge an ordinary



human would not have, like the state of Aedward's soul. However, she does seem to hint that she is a human like Godric when she says ". . . Gillian has her own long way to wend. We all are pilgrims on this earth" (72). The most probable explanation is that she is a living saint who has been allowed to miraculously communicate with him.

It is probably incorrect to interpret Buechner's depiction of Rome as a rotting city as a Protestant needle at Catholicism. After all, Aedwen did receive a vision telling her to travel there and Gillian seems to have confirmed that the pilgrimage was effective. Rather, Rome is probably meant to present the same kind of contrast that Godric himself presents. That is, holiness and Divinity are not always obvious to the eye. Rome was not a beautiful city that one might expect, but it is still, nonetheless, the earthly center of the Christian religion. However, it takes faith to see the city for what it really is, and it was because he lacked faith that Godric felt so disappointed.

This faith is increased to an extent by his visits from Gillian, and she is certainly the catalyst for a more total conversion later on, but it does not appear that Godric is totally there yet. For, as soon as he returns to his home town, he says whatever it takes to please the Baron, even if the content of his speech is vile and reprehensible. Godric is still too sensitive to worldly pleasures and pains to live a full Christian life, as the narration explicitly points out.



Pages 80 - 99

Pages 80 - 99 Summary

"How Godric served a noble lord"

Soon after Godric begins working for Falkes, he realizes that he is betraying God by so doing. One of his duties as steward is to punish Falkes' peasants. In some cases, this even amounted to executing men for crimes as trivial as stealing eggs. The one bright spot of his time there was that he was a kind of comfort for Falkes' troubled wife, Hedwic. Falkes took Hedwic as his wife when she was still very young and she was disgusted by him. He treated her horribly and she went through life miserably. It only made matters worse when she discovered the depth of corruption that went on. The Baron was an avid hunter but the deer meat he earned fetched such a high price that they sold it instead of eating. In its place, hunters stole sheep from peasants who were already on the brink of starvation, if not past it. Thus, the food Godric and Hedwic were eating was stolen from the mouths of men like Aedward. Godric tried to subtly tell Falkes what was happening—it was not clear whether he knew—but it was at least obvious that Falkes did not care. Godric left the next day, never to return, sorrowful only that Hedwic would be left on her own.

"Of the rescue of a king and a cruel farewell"

After leaving Falkes, Godric returns to the sailing with Roger Mouse. He is glad to see his old friend again, but he realizes that their friendship is already fading. They reminisce about old memories but do not generate any new ones. A sign, Godric thinks, that the friendship is already dead. They take on a job to transport some pilgrims to the city of Jerusalem. Roger wants to rob them—as they had always done in the past—but Godric insists that they do not: Robbing already poor pilgrims is too much. They arrive amidst the battles of the Crusades. While docked in a Turkish city, they are approached by a man wearing ornate armor asking for passage: He is King Baldwin, Christian king of Jerusalem. The men happily take him and deliver him to this troubled people, relieved to have their king back. Before rowing the rest of their passengers to shore, however, Roger devises a plan to get more money out of them. He demands that they pay half of what they paid for the entire journey for the ride to land. Once again, Godric's conscience speaks up and he opposes this scam. The two get into a fight and Godric winds up being tossed overboard. Thus ended his friendship with Mouse, a friendship the likes of which he would never again enjoy.

"Of Wear and Perkin and Godric's Tomb"

In his old age, Godric develops the habit of sitting everyday in the River Wear, no matter how cold it is. Winter, then, is a kind of death as the freezing waters numb his entire body. He loves the river and carries the water up to a container in his shrine to Mary. He recalls using the same water to baptize a boy named Perkin. Perkin is a kind of adopted



son for Godric, the son he never had. Perkin helps Godric out however he can each day by bringing him food or assisting in some errand. He is not, however, a particularly pious boy and has little time for blessings and such. One project he helps Godric with is building Godric's tomb.

Pages 80 - 99 Analysis

As these chapters progress, Godric finally begins to put the urgings of his conscience into action. The trials of these chapters are particularly harsh because they entail giving up the comforts and friendships he valued so much. First, he finds himself in a morally difficult situation with the Baron. Once he discovers that Falkes is stealing from peasants to feed his court, he feels wretched for eating the food. At the same time, he does not want to leave the court, because he is Hedwic's sole comfort in an otherwise miserable life. After failing to convince Falkes to change his ways, Godric decides that he can no longer stay. This episode reflects the ambiguity of life. Godric was not faced with any clearly heroic decision. By leaving Falkes, he was abandoning Hedwic; by staying with Falkes, he was effectively consenting to stealing from peasants. Once again, Buechner is trying to bring the saint out of the aether and bring him into a situation familiar to the reader. Godric, though holy, was a man like any other man, and placed in the same uncertain situations.

Godric's second trial is harsher. When he left Falkes, he was leaving behind material comforts and prestige. It would not mean he would live poorly, however. After all, he still had his stash of treasure on Farne and the lucrative sailing operation with Mouse. Moreover, he only lost material goods. When his conscience forces him to oppose Mouse's scheming, he is sacrificing his closest friend. The enormity of this sacrifice is confirmed when Godric later refers to it as a kind of spiritual rebirth, the moment he turned his back forever on Deric.



Pages 100 - 120

Pages 100 - 120 Summary

"Of Jerusalem and what befell Godric there"

Godric swims to shore at Jerusalem after being tossed from the boat by Roger Mouse. While there, he visits the sights of Christ's life and death and experiences a profound religious conversion. He weeps for all of the sins he committed and dedicates his life from then on to God.

"Of Deric's treasure and Godric's feet"

Moved by the fact that Christ wore no shoes during his execution, Godric resolves to never wear shoes again. His feet become scabbed and calloused but he never wavers in his resolution. He returns to the isle of Farne to recover the treasure he stashed away. The treasure is a tangible reminder of the life of sin Godric had once lived. His fortunes were all won by scamming or robbing the poor, all the while living a life of debauchery and gratification. As penance for those years, he decides to give the money away. He hauls the money to a church and gives the money to a priest, trusting that it will make it back, in some capacity, to the poor. While there, he meets a man named Elric. Elric comes into the church yelling and swatting at the air, as if some invisible bug were pestering him. As it turns out, Elric is a hermit, whose holiness is well-known in the town. He is constantly assaulted by visions of demons and he is constantly engaged in swatting and crushing them. Elric is very old and Godric agrees to take him back to his lodgings. After arriving at Elric's abode, Godric decides to stay with him for the next two years.

"Of Elric, demons, how Godric first saw Wear"

Elric is a learned man who used to live with monks at a nearby monastery. Though certainly a holy man, his view of the world is dark and gloomy. Just like he sees tiny demons floating around everywhere, so too does he constantly see temptations to sin. The lessons he teaches Godric are valuable, but Godric knows that the goodness of God is greater than the evil of any demon. While with Elric, Godric receives a vision of the River Wear, though he does not know at it the time. In the same vision, St. Cuthbert speaks to him and tells him that he will become a hermit. When Godric tells his vision to Elric, for once, he encourages Godric and tells him that the life of a hermit is a great thing. Not long after, Elric comes down with a fever and dies.

Pages 100 - 120 Analysis

Godric undergoes a rapid transformation in these chapters. Though he was already on his way to living a life of virtue—as indicated by his disagreements with Roger—his conversion is intensified by his accidental pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It is safe to assume



that the fact that he wound up ashore in Jerusalem is Providential, or is at least perceived that way by Godric. Nor is it a coincidence that Godric's moment of conversion occurs in the Jordan River, the same river in which Christ was baptized by John the Baptist. Though "Godric" is for the most part a departure from traditional hagiography, by drawing parallels between the life of Christ and Godric, Buechner is firmly entrenched in convention.

The depth and speed of Godric's transformation is seen especially clearly in his encounter with Elric. Elric is an old man, several decades older than Godric, and is revered by the town as a living saint. He has been living the life of a hermit for untold years. It is surprising, then, that Godric, a relative neophyte, seems to understand the Christian way of life better than Elric. Elric is an utter pessimist. He sees only devils and never angels (and if he sees angels he mistakes them for devils). Godric, however, sees that Christianity is a religion of joy and, while he does learn from Elric, in many ways he seems to already have surpassed him.



Pages 121 - 138

Pages 121 - 138 Summary

"How Godric went to Durham, saw two graves and nearly died"

Later in his life, Godric is summoned to the city of Durham by the bishop to attend Christmas Mass. Since he lives the rough, and generally unclean, life of a hermit, Perkins and Reginald clean him up for the occasion. They make the journey to Durham and Godric is met by crowds seeking his blessing; his reputation as a holy man precedes him. They attend Mass and Godric receives Holy Communion with tears streaming down his face. On the way back to Wear, the group stops at Burcwen's grave. Burcwen, evidently, had become a nun somewhere nearby and died a chaste woman. Godric says a brief prayer at her grave and they continue on their way.

"How Godric kept Saint Giles's door and went to school"

Though he knows he is destined to become a hermit, Godric does not go at once. Instead he becomes, by chance, a worker for the church of Saint Giles where he performs a variety of tasks, like ringing the bell or looking after the trouble-making youth. One of the children at the church, aware Godric has never had any education, invites him to come with him to class. He attends a school run by monks. There, Godric learns to read and write on a very limited basis and memorizes a few prayers. Bishop Flambard—the same Bishop who had once exiled Godric—visits the school one day and bestows a special blessing on Godric, in hopes that he will one day amass as much wealth as the bishop.

"Of Ranulf Flambard and a dream come true"

Godric becomes a friend of the bishop. Flambard is a very worldly man. He idly dreams of wealth and the technological advances the years will bring with them. He hopes that Godric will follow his path and become a wealthy, powerful man, too. Godric does not explicitly protest, but he is still determined to become a hermit. One day, the bishop takes Godric and some others out to feast in the woods. There, Godric sees the River Wear for the first time and realizes that it is the same river he saw in his vision. He asks the bishop for a small plot of land there and it is granted to him.

Pages 121 - 138 Analysis

These chapters highlight a theme displayed at several points in the text already. Godric, as an old man, has a contempt for authority, secular and religious. His life story seems to give a reasonable impetus for this. Falkes was a brutal, merciless baron who mistreated his wife and stole from penniless peasants. Bishop Flambard, though charged to imitate Christ and be a shepherd of souls, looks down on the poor and seems to have purely worldly concerns. If he were a spiritual man, he would applaud



Godric's decision to become a hermit; instead, he regrets aloud that he has not chosen to serve the king. Of course, these types of people were those Godric admired and wanted to be like when he was a young man. It should not be surprising that part of his conversion entails turning his back on them forever.

One might especially wonder at Godric's contempt for religious authorities. It may, at first, seem like Buechner is again trying to make a subtle case for Protestantism by showing the corruption of bishops. He may be doing that, but it is important to note that Godric is not against religious authority, as such. He still recognizes his bishop's authority. When the bishop summons him for Christmas Mass, he obeys; he even kneels down before him and kisses his ring. It is probably more accurate to say that Godric despises the worldliness of the bishops and not the idea of a bishop as such.



Pages 139 - 158

Pages 139 - 158 Summary

"How Godric filled his time and certain holy sights he saw"

As a hermit, Godric fills most of his time absorbed in thought. He thinks often about the past and how his life might have been different if he had made different decisions. He is able to keep temptation out of his waking thoughts, for the most part, but in his dreams he is often assaulted by lustful visions which greatly trouble him. Godric is also visited by several miraculous signs. Once, while in misery over his sins, he receives a vision from the Virgin Mary, in which she gives him a song to console him. Another time, he lays awake at night and ponders, with despair, over how difficult it is to live virtuously. He asks God to send him a saint for guidance. John the Baptist appears to him and encourages him in his fight against sin and urges him to cling dearly to God. Yet another time, Godric has just committed a sin and sat in the wilderness. He is not yet repentant, but is experiencing a kind of spiritual numbness and indifference. While in this state, he sees a man's face, radiant with holiness and beauty. He believes that the face is Christ's.

"Of those who joined Godric at Finchale and a grievous loss"

Godric's family finds out where he has moved through a chain of gossip. Godric awakes one day to find that they have come with all of their belongings to live with him. He is happy to see them and helps them build a modest hut to live in. He talks briefly with his mother about faith and the afterlife. After years of hardship, she is cynical. She does not know whether the dead will rise again or if there is a heaven; she has never had the luxury to think on those things in her life. Burcwen, too, is jaded. Now in her thirties and still unmarried, she begins to despair of loneliness. She has dedicated her life to William but, in truth, she does not like him very much. One night, Godric is roused from his sleep by William. Aedwen had fallen ill and Godric races to see her. In her last moments, she recalls aloud the pilgrimage to Rome and begs Godric to help her on her final pilgrimage to the afterlife.

"Of what befell one summer's day"

Life rolls on after Aedwen's death. Godric lives happily with his snakes and Burcwen and William seem to get along together happily, too. One day, Godric is looking out on the wilderness when he sees Burcwen walking by herself. For some reason, he says nothing—perhaps he is afraid of what might happen if the two start talking alone in the wilderness. He continues to watch, however, as she undresses herself to bathe. Afterwards, he is filled with such shame that he avoids seeing Burcwen whenever possible. His absence takes a great toll on her and she loses a tremendous amount of weight. Finally, he decides that they ought to talk. She comes to his lodgings one night and he pours out his heart to her. He confesses to watching her bathe and she



confesses that she knew he was watching. They talk for hours and eventually succumb to their urges and have sex. They are awoken the next day by William, anxious because he cannot find Burcwen. Though she is lying there with him, Godric pretends ignorance. While looking for her, William falls on some rocks and dies. As far as Godric is concerned, by staying silent about Burcwen, he is guilty of William's murder.

Pages 139 - 158 Analysis

Throughout the book, the reader ought to be constantly comparing Buechner's biography with the biography that is being compiled by Reginald. From each work, a different image emerges; Buechner, of course, believes that his is more accurate. Godric has already complained several times (and will complain more later on) that Reginald omits or whitewashes his sins. Godric does not want to be held up as some kind of immaculate saint; he wants to be seen, instead, as the sinner he is. He does not deny that he has received great and even extraordinary gifts from God, but he does not see them as coming from his merit, but from God's benevolent, if somewhat arbitrary, will.

Buechner, then, wants to create a biography in the spirit Godric would have desired. He does this by including several sins which should truly shock the reader. The most shocking of all of these sins is his incestuous relationship with his sister. The romantic nature of their relationship has already been hinted at so far, but it is, so to speak, consummated in these chapters when they actually have sex with each other. Though one might argue that a consensual sexual affair, however perverse, is naturally less grave than the crimes of violence he was party to in the past, this event stands out in another way. When he was in the business of robbery with Roger Mouse, he had not yet been fully converted to living a Christian life. He had received the vision of St. Cuthbert and, so to speak, put on the path, but he had not begun to take it seriously. However, when he sleeps with Burcwen, not only has he fully devoted himself to Christ, he is even living the life of a hermit.



Pages 158 - 178

Pages 158 - 178 Summary

"Of what became of Burcwen, of Godric's second sight, and the departure of two old friends"

After William's death, a rift of shame opens up between Burcwen and Godric. Both feel—perhaps justifiably—that their sin was the cause of William's death. From then on, the two hardly see one another, though Burcwen continues to live in the same house. One day, Burcwen comes by Godric's lodging with a nun. She has decided to join their convent and dedicate her life to Christ. Godric sees her only once more for the rest of his life. Years later, he is attending Easter Mass in Durham and they see each other across the church. Though they exchange no words, each knows it is a final, loving goodbye.

"How Reginald sought Godric's blessing on his book, and Godric's death"

After he completes his biography of Godric—save for the final pages, which will record his death—Reginald tries to convince Godric to have it read to him. Godric all along has been uncooperative in the effort, and resists Reginald here, too. Finally, he gives in. To Godric's mind, Reginald's writing has missed the essence of his life. Godric is presented as a man dedicated to Christ throughout his life; Reginald has glossed over all of the wicked episodes. Godric protests, but Reginald dismisses the old man. Godric's dissatisfaction boils over when Reginald reads the final pages, wherein he calls Godric a saint. His reaction is so strong that it causes him to have some kind of stroke or seizure. He is able to vaguely communicate that he wants to be taken down to the Wear and Perkin and Reginald oblige him. After washing briefly in the river, he is taken back to his lodgings and dies.

"Reginald's last word"

This final chapter is written as Reginald. He dates Godric's death and recalls the various signs of his holiness. Godric was, he says, a man always given to mortification. He punished his body and soul for his sins and the sins of the world. His eyes were always fixed on serving God. In many ways, Godric came to resemble Christ himself. He commanded an otherworldly control over serpents, as Paul predicts Christ's followers will be able to do. Like Christ, he cured a leper. When death came to him, he approached it not with fear, but calmly and peacefully. Reginald ends the chapter with a prayer to St. Godric.

Pages 158 - 178 Analysis

The final two chapters (and the postscript which gives the few certain historical facts of Godric's life) consummate one of the book's main themes: Buechner's deviation from



traditional hagiographical conventions. Is it as if three different kinds of biographies are juxtaposed. The first is the book itself, Buechner's interpretation of Godric's life. The second is Reginald's biography of Godric, which is excerpted from in the second-to-last chapter. The final chapter is a kind of fictionalization of what Reginald thought, or wanted others to think of, Godric. Finally, the postscript is an objective presentation of whatever historical facts are known with certainty about Godric; it is conspicuously short.

Compared to Buechner's writing, Reginald's biography seems obviously flawed. Nowhere in his book does he capture the rough, even vulgar character of Godric. He omits the difficult, sinful path that led him to become a hermit. Indeed, the story of Godric is not really the story of a wayward sinner being transformed into a glorious saint; Godric never really becomes the glorious saint Reginald imagines. After all, even after his conversion he continues to sin, and his sins are far from minor—like incest, for example. It is not surprising, then, that Godric reacts so strongly against Reginald's writing.

Perhaps even more interesting than the contrast between Buechner's and Reginald's respective works is the contrast between Buechner's work and the postscript. The postscript is more or less an admission that most of "Godric" is fictional, and especially some of the more shocking bits. There is no evidence, for example, that Godric had any kind of sexual feelings, let alone a sexual relationship, with his sister. Considered by itself, this is a rather startling fictionalization; after all, Buechner is more or less slandering a figure who likely is still held in pious memory by an entire religion. Of course, Buechner does not do so gratuitously; rather, by depicting a man renowned for his sanctity as a great sinner, he is showing the reader that anyone can be touched by God's grace and be saved. Perhaps by disclaiming the historicity of his work, he also does something to preserve Godric's reputation, too.



Characters

Godric

Godric is the main character of this fictionalized biography. He was born in Walpole, England to a peasant family in the 11th century. When he becomes an adult, he sets out on his own to become a merchant. He starts by selling hair but stumbles into great profits when he takes part in a religious riot. Peregrine Small, a Christian mistaken for a Jew, dies in his arms. Afterwards, the facts of the events are distorted and Small is made out to be a martyr. Godric sells his bloodstained clothes as relics and even counterfeits more relics with cat's blood. He is exiled by the bishop and goes at first to an island named Farne to store his fortune. There, he receives a vision from St. Cuthbert admonishing him to give up his sinful ways. He does not listen, however—at least immediately. Instead, he starts up a profitable sailing enterprise with Roger Mouse. They find various ways to cheat their customers and even stage pirate raids to rob their passengers—often religious pilgrims—of whatever money they have. Their business is suspended temporarily for repairs to their ship. During that time, Godric goes on a pilgrimage to Rome with his mother to atone for his father's sins. On the way back, he receives visions from a mysterious woman named Gillian. She rebukes him for his sinful ways and urges him to live more like Christ. In her last appearance to him, she reveals her father has been freed from Purgatory.

Godric returns to his sailing enterprise a changed man. He can no longer participate in cheating and larceny and opposes Robert when he attempts to do so. Eventually, they come to blows over it and Godric winds up stranded in Jerusalem. There, among the sites of Christ's life and death, his religious conversion is consummated. He walks home—barefoot, in imitation of Jesus—and gives away all of his money. He learns the life of a hermit from an eccentric, gloomy man named Elric. He lives with Elric for two years until the latter dies. He resolves to become a hermit but spends time working for a church and receiving a rudimentary education. Finally, he secures a small spot of land in Finchale near the River Wear from the bishop. Before long, his family comes to join him. His mother, well advanced in years, dies not long after. His brother William dies, too, when he falls on rocks looking for his sister Burcwen. Godric is racked with guilt: For he and Burcwen were together, engaged in an immoral, incestuous relationship. After that, Burcwen joins a convent and Godric spends the rest of his life with almost no human contact. One exception is Reginald, a monk sent to be his biographer. When Godric hears that Reginald described him as a "saint" his fit of frustration incapacitates him. He dies later that day.

Burcwen

Burcwen is Godric's younger sister. At first, she spends most of her time with her brother, William, whose company she finds comforting. Everything changes, however, when she saves Godric's life. Godric had found a porpoise's carcass in the sea and



tried to retrieve it for the family to eat. The waves were too powerful and he was knocked unconscious and nearly drowned. Burcwen finds him and revives him. After that point, the two draw very close: too close, perhaps, for siblings. When Godric decides to leave the family, Burcwen begs him to either stay or let her come with him. She even threatens suicide. Her attempts are useless, however, and she resigns herself from then on to being William's companion.

Godric does not see Burcwen for many years. He finds time to return home when his ship is in need of repairs. He agrees to go on a pilgrimage with Aedwen, their mother, and tries to convince Burcwen to come but she refuses. He realizes that her pride has been wounded by his rejection and that by refusing to come along she is trying to punish him. However, he thinks that it perhaps might be for the best, given the ambiguous nature of their feelings for one another. They do not meet again until Godric commits himself to the life of a hermit. When the family hears where he is, they move to Finchale to join him. Burcwen admits to him that life has been miserable for her. Now in her thirties, she thinks that she is probably too old to ever marry; her life, instead, has been "wasted" on William. In time, the latent feelings between the two come to surface and they wind up having sex. Their affair indirectly causes the death of their brother William and, after that point, they hardly see one another. Burcwen decides to join a convent and become a nun. They see each other only once again, across the church during Easter Mass.

Reginald

Reginald is a monk assigned to research and write a biography of Godric. Godric does not like Reginald, mainly because he does not think that he has lived a life worthy of being recorded. Reginald is enamored with authority figures—kings, bishops, princes, and so forth—and does not like it when Godric mocks them, as he often does.

Aedwen

Aedwen is Godric's mother. As a child, he recalls her being joyful and happy. After he husband's death, she becomes morose and even skeptical about religion. She seems to have a deathbed conversion, however, and begs Godric to help her get to Heaven.

William

William is Godric's brother. He is characterized by his excessive talkativeness, a trait which most people find annoying. Godric speculates that William talks so much as a kind of defense mechanism to draw people near him. However, it does not work, and William winds up being a very lonely man. He dies looking for his sister Burcwen who he does not know is laying with Godric.



Roger Mouse

Roger Mouse and Godric partner together in a sailing enterprise. Together, they cheat, drink, fornicate, and even rob. Their friendship—which Godric says was the strongest he ever had—disintegrates when Godric refuses to scam pilgrims they had taken to Jerusalem.

Aedward

Aedward is Godric's father. He did not know him very well because he was forced to constantly work to sustain the family. His death takes an enormous toll on Aedwen. She receives a vision in her dreams that he is suffering in Purgatory, and thus she and Godric travel to Rome to attempt to free him.

Falkes de Grenvill

Falkes de Grenvill is a wealthy baron who employs Godric as his steward. Falkes is a corrupt man who allows his men to steal from his peasants—who are already on the brink of starvation anyway—to increase his already enormous wealth.

Bishop Flambard

Bishop Flambard is Lord Chancellor when Godric sells the "relics" of Peregrine Small. Eager to gain favor with the king, he exiles Godric from Bishop's Lynn. Later, he and Godric become friends and he gives Godric the spot of land in Finchale.

Elric

Elric is an eccentric hermit whom Godric lives with and learns from for two years. He is constantly assailed with visions of demons and is unable to see the joyful aspects of religion.

Ailred

Ailred is abbot of the monastery near Godric's hermitage. Godric believes him to be an extremely holy man and credits him with converting a wicked king to Christianity.

Cuthbert

Cuthbert is a Christian saint who died several centuries before Godric lived. He appears to Godric several times and tries to guide Godric along his path to salvation.



Gillian

Gillian is a mysterious woman who appears to Godric several times on his return trip from Rome. She rebukes his sinful ways and convinces him to follow the ways of Christ.

Tune and Fairweather

Tune and Fairweather are Godric's pet snakes. He first sees them in his supernatural vision of the Wear. When he sees them again in Finchale, he knows that he has found the spot and that he is meant to be a hermit. His attachment to them winds up interfering with his relationship with God, however, and he sends them away.

Perkins

Perkins is a young boy who helps Godric. He is somewhat of a troublemaker and not a terribly pious boy. Nonetheless, Godric has great affection for him and considers him his son.



Objects/Places

Wear

The River Wear is the river which flows near Godric's hermitage. Godric loves the river and sits in it almost every day, even when the weather is extremely cold.

Finchale

Finchale is the name of the woods in which Godric's hermitage is located.

Durham

Durham is the closest city to Finchale. Godric travels there occasionally to attend Mass.

Walpole

Walpole is the town in which Godric was born.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem is, according to Godric, the holiest city in the world. Jerusalem was the site of Christ's execution and thus has a special significance for Christians.

Bishop's Lynn

Bishop's Lynn is the town which is the site of the riot between Jews and Christians which takes Peregrine Small's life. Bishop Flambard exiles Godric from the town for peddling relics.

Farne

Farne is an island where Godric hides his fortune. It also has a mystical significance to him, however, for while there he receives a vision of St. Cuthbert.

Rome

Rome is the center of Christianity and the city where Godric and his mother travel to in hopes of freeing Aedward from Purgatory. When they arrive, they discover it is a city that is rotten with poverty and immorality.



Saint Esprit

The Saint Esprit is the ship Godric and Roger Mouse use in their sailing business. Years after his friendship with Roger Mouse is over, Godric has a vision of the ship sinking and taking the life of Roger.

Saint Giles

Saint Giles is the church Godric worked after leaving Elric. He performed various tasks, such as locking the doors and ringing the bell.

Social Concerns And Themes

Godric was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1981. It is a novel of only 175 pages which, despite its compressed form, manages to elaborate strikingly on the themes of life and faith Buechner has expressed throughout his writing career. The novel is a fictional interpretation of the life of an Anglo-Saxon merchant who later became a hermit. Such was the historical Godric's reputation for holiness that he was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. Although Buechner includes a historical note on the real St. Godric at the end of the novel, the biographical date and spiritual life of the actual Godric have been freely interpreted and embellished by Buechner's creative imagination.

The novel purports to be the autobiography of a hermit of the Middle Ages named Godric. After retiring to a forest hermitage, Godric's reputation as a holy man attracts even the notice of Bishop Flambard, who summons him to an honored seat at mass, and the adulation of the monk Reginald who prepares a glowing account of Godric's life. Reginald's most fervent desire is that the elderly recluse bestow a blessing on his work. The novel, which is the hermit's straightforward, unexpurgated recounting of his life, is Godric's rebuttal to Reginald's manuscript. An important theme in Godric is that no one can be authentically spiritual until he acknowledges the whole truth about himself. Godric, therefore, embarks on his autobiographical task determined to reveal his strengths and weaknesses, his spiritual awakening, and his inability to escape temptation. For Godric, the truth about himself is complex. As he reminds his brother, the name Godric can be interpreted as either "God's reign" or "God's wreck." As a young man, Godric experiences the "wreck of sin" by following the life of a brigand, selling false relics, negligently causing an innocent man's death, and serving a corrupt nobleman who oppresses the peasantry and fills his child-bride with terror. The young Godric, however, also experiences moments of God's presence and guidance. He encounters St. Cuthbert on the Holy Island of Fame, has a vision of the Blessed Virgin who bestows a song upon him, and has a mystical experience with a mysterious young woman named Gillian.

Although Godric acknowledges that even hermits remain human — "hermits sleep like other men ... and in the dark all men go mad" — he is sincerely devout. When Godric receives communion he is emotionally overwhelmed.

The mysterious Gillian expresses another of the novel's central themes: "We are all pilgrims on this earth."

God works through every moment of human life, through sin and virtue, prosperity and poverty, whether a person is aware of God's presence and grace or not. Godric experiences the greatest test of his life, which he fails, long after he has retired from the world. He succumbs to the temptation of an incestuous affair with his sister Burcwen. Yet even then all is not destroyed. Godric's final words assert that through God's grace, "All's lost."



All's found."

Godric includes commentary on the oppression of the Jews and the peasantry. The corruption of the Church as a materialistic institution obsessed with power is noted by Godric. For the hermit, however, the greatest battle he is compelled to undertake "is all within."

Techniques

Godric's structure is that of a hagiography, a literary genre of the Middle Ages used to recount episodes in the life of a saint which may be seen as a testimony to his or her holiness. Buechner's use of this form is ironic. Although Godric's visions of Christ and Mary are recorded, so are Godric's misadventures and temptations. In constructing Godric, Buechner felt free to combine known historical facts and pious legends with his own interpretation of the life and times of the saint.



Themes

Buechner's Conscious Reinvention of Hagiography

Traditionally, writing about the lives of saints was something only done by Catholics. It is interesting, then, that Buechner, a Protestant, would write a book about a Medieval Catholic holy man like Godric. As the book progresses, it becomes clear that part of Buechner's purpose in writing "Godric" is to show a different, "new" kind of saint which other hagiographers, like Reginald, have failed to adequately capture. Of course, Buechner does not really think that he is creating a new kind of saint; Godric, after all, had been dead over eight centuries at the time of this book's publication.

The traditional saint is aetherial and intangible and, for that reason, inaccessible to the average Christian. Buechner's Godric, therefore, is in many ways an ordinary person. He is simple and even, at times, quite vulgar. He talks openly about the effects of the weather on his penis; he throws around "dirty" words like "shit" and "piss." He laughs when people fall. He also seems to have quite ordinary vices. He is not always a tender, kind saint. Reginald seems to genuinely bother him, and he seems to be genuinely disgusted whenever he sees him. (That said, he is not completely cold, and wishes no real harm upon Reginald. At times, he is even sensitive to the effects his harsh words have on him.) Buechner writes in a style that is meant to closely resemble the vernacular speech of the time (of course, he writes in Modern and not Middle English). All in all, the effect that is intended, and skillfully achieved, is that in many ways Godric appears to the reader scarcely different from any other man of his time.

That said, there are certainly some significant ways in which Godric is not the typical Englishman. Above all, Godric has an extraordinary, supernatural devotion to Christ. This quality is something which must transcend all others, or Godric truly is nothing worth writing about. After his moment of true conversion in Jerusalem, Godric's life is thoroughly penitential. He gives up shoes, in imitation of Christ, and endures feet covered in callous, blood, and scabs. He gives up all the wealth, which he once valued so highly. He gives up women and friendship to live with snakes in the middle of the woods. He dons a vest made out of pot lids to chafe his skin and keep the suffering of Christ ever present in his mind. By combining these two natures of Godric, Buechner makes his central point: If rough, crude Godric can be saintly, so can anyone else.

Godric's Supernatural Guidance to Salvation

Throughout the story, Godric is prodded along his long, difficult path to Heaven almost entirely by supernatural help. First, Godric has the vision of St. Cuthbert at Farne. There, for the first time, Godric feels genuine sorrow for his sins and resolves to sin more. It is, however, too much for him to bear immediately. He changes his name and continues to sin, not as Godric, but as Deric. His high-flying life at sea seems like it will remain too exciting, and too profitable, to ever give up. He receives a jolt when he



glimpses Cuthbert again at Farne, but otherwise Godric shows no signs of giving up his sinful ways. Once again, then, God sends him a sign. This time, it is in the form a beautiful, mysterious woman named Gillian. She visits him several times on his return from Rome and rebukes his lack of faith and sinful lifestyle. It is curious that this time God decided to send a beautiful woman instead of a wizened old man; perhaps a female would produce a greater effect on the carnally minded Godric. In any case, Gillian begins to nurse true faith in the seeds Cuthbert had planted. When he returns to Roger Mouse he can no longer take part in their dishonest schemes and is even willing to sacrifice his friendship over it.

Providentially, he finds himself in Jerusalem, the site of Christ's execution and, thus, the holiest city for Christians. While there, Godric experiences a truly powerful conversion and dedicates his life from then on to Christ. His first act of penance is to give up shoes in imitation of Jesus, who wore no shoes as he carried his cross to Calvary. Though now sincerely devoted, God does not stop giving him supernatural guidance. While staying with Elric, Godric learns, through a vision once again, that he will be a hermit and glimpses the woods which will be his home. He continues to experience visions and miracles as he spends the last several decades of his life by Wear: visits from the Virgin Mary, admonition from John the Baptist, and, once, even a glimpse of Christ's face.

The Fictionalization of Godric to Show the Universality of G

After finishing the narrative, the reader might be surprised to see how little is actually known about Godric. The list of facts takes up hardly more than a page and a half and most of it was probably gleaned from Reginald's biography. In order to create this novel, therefore, Buechner was forced to either extrapolate generously from the few facts he had—the entire enterprise with Mouse seems to be gleaned from a single reference to "Gudericus, pirata de regno Angliae" (177)—or simply make things up from nothing. All considered, it is probably most surprising to learn that Buechner made up many of Godric's grievous sins. There is no historical basis to assert, for example, that Godric was ever engaged in relic peddling let alone relic counterfeiting, nor does there seem to be basis for thinking that he was exiled by the bishop. Indeed, the entire incestuous episode with Burcwen is a creation of Buechner's imagination; all that is known is that Burcwen lived in Finchale for a time before entering religion.

At first, it seems shocking that Buechner would invent such sins and attribute them to Godric. After all, though not a formally canonized saint, Godric is nonetheless held in pious regard by an entire, worldwide religion. It would not appear to be a light business to attribute a sin so grave as incest to such a man. However, Buechner is obviously not engaged in slandering Godric's reputation and the inclusion of the historical postscript makes it clear that Buechner is also not engaged in writing history. Buechner wants to combine heinous sin with the image of exalted sanctity to show that God's salvation is open to any man, no matter how grave his sin might be. It does not matter if the man is a murderer or thief or engages in incest; all can be forgiven, as Godric amply proves.



Style

Point of View

Aside from the final chapter, the entire book is written in the first-person perspective, narrated by Godric himself. However, Godric's use of perspective is complex. The reader will immediately notice that Godric often shifts between referring to himself in the first-person and referring to himself in the third-person. Indeed, early on, the reader could easily become confused about who is supposed to be the narrator. This complex use of perspective is more or less confined to the early chapters of the book and disappears altogether after the pilgrimage to Rome.

Godric himself provides some indirect hints as to why he speaks this way. First of all, in his early years, Godric himself had a kind of split identity. There was the part of him which wished to follow Cuthbert's words and live a life of virtue. Then, there was the other, stronger part which wanted to live a boisterous life of adventure at sea. In order to overcome this psychological division, Godric invents a new identity for himself: Deric. Perhaps, then, Godric, looking back on his life, dissociates himself from the sinful youth who peddled relics and robbed pilgrims. The division also seems to be in part temporal, however. It is unclear when or how Godric is supposed to be narrating this story—he narrates his own death, after all—but he lives to be over one hundred years old. Separated by so many years from his youth, he remarks that it was if he were a different person then.

Setting

In a strictly technical sense, the book is probably set exclusively in Godric's hermitage near the River Wear. There is some ambiguity about the nature of the book's narrations. At times, Godric's recollections are explicitly framed by Reginald's (often frustrated) attempts to interview him. Sometimes, Reginald is not around and Godric is reflecting internally. At other times, Buechner makes no attempt to provide a frame and simply presents some episode of Godric's biography.

Regardless, Finchale is clearly the most important setting in the book. For one, Godric spends around fifty years of his 105-year life there. He is extremely attached to his land, especially to the River Wear. He has an almost personal connection with the river and his narration often talks about it in anthropomorphic terms. Even in his old age, he makes it a point to sit in the river everyday, even if the weather is freezing. Though the analogy perhaps might be taken too far, it is not unreasonable to see some parallels between Finchale and Eden. For, in Finchale, Godric is, like Adam, a man in total harmony with nature; even the snakes are his friends.

Godric's memories are set in places all over Europe and the Middle East, though the majority take place in his home country of England. At this time, England is a thoroughly



feudal country. The majority of people are peasants, bound by oath to serve their lord. In return for taxes—which taxes could be quite onerous, as Falkes shows—the peasants are allowed to work the land owned by the lord and keep its product. Lords themselves are, in turn, bound to higher authorities (Falkes is mentioned as having lords in his services). This chain of authority continues upwards, terminating only when it reaches the king.

Language and Meaning

Buechner put in great effort to make the language of "Godric" seem as authentic to his period as was possible. Of course, to be truly authentic, the book would need to have been written in Middle English, a language which would be all but incomprehensible to the modern reader; it is understandable and excusable that Buechner did not go that far. Buechner appears to have done extensive research to master the vocabulary which would have been common in those times, especially the slang words. It is often difficult for a modern reader to understand exactly what is being said and will often take several readings to deduce the meaning of this or that slang word. For example, the verb "tumble" appears throughout the text, evidently slang for sexual intercourse.

Buechner chose this style not only to create authenticity, however. He purposefully chose to give his narrator a vernacular, common voice in order to, so to speak, bring Godric down to Earth. He wants to present Godric as he truly sees him: a man of peasant stock who was led to holiness by God. A major theme of the novel is that salvation is open to anyone, no matter how poor or crude they might be. Therefore, it is vital that Godric appear as the quintessence of the "common man," if not of modern times, then at least of his own.

Structure

The book is divided into twenty-eight chapters followed by a historical note outlining the few certain facts known about Godric. The book is meant to appear to the reader to come directly out of the 12th century, at least so far as is possible. This effort can even be seen in such subtle features as the way chapters are titled. According to modern conventions, chapters are either numbered or given brief titles. In "Godric," however, Buechner titles his chapters with brief summaries of their contents, reminiscent of literature produced in those times.

That said, "Godric" does (perhaps inevitably) bear several marks of its modern origin. For one, the book does not exhibit the linearity and consistency one commonly finds in older texts. Godric's narrative style is actually quite complex. He shifts freely, but purposefully, between the first- and third-person perspectives. The frame of the story—a convention which was common enough in Medieval literature—is employed inconsistently throughout the book. At times, Godric seems to be telling Reginald about his life; at other times, Godric seems to be reflecting to himself; at other times still, the frame seems to be dispensed with altogether. None of this should be attributed to

Buechner as sloppiness, since these things are done intentionally, nor do these deviations greatly distract from the authentic tone of the book.



Quotes

"What's friendship, when all's done, but the giving and taking of wounds?" (7)

"Or she'd cover her mirth with her hands and shake till you'd think that the fit was upon her. She did the same too when she wept so you'd never be sure which she hid with her hands, her tears or her cackling. I think there were times she herself didn't know, nor does anyone know at times. Laugh till you weep. Weep till there's nothing left but to laugh at your weeping. In the end it's all one." (11)

"Perhaps he turned to Jesu truly in his heart, ruing the bloody mischief of the cross the Jews had wrought. Perhaps it was because he was so fair of hair and face he hoped in time to pass for Saxon. Perhaps, since nothing human's not a broth of false and true, it was the two at once." (31)

"She [Burcwen] stayed at home because once more I would not take her thence. It was her woman's pride that I had hurt and not her love that made her cleave to William." (53)

"Why did we weep? I asked myself. We wept for all that grandeur gone. We wept for martyrs cruelly slain. We wept for Christ, who suffered death upon a tree and suffers still to see our suffering. But more than anything, I think, we wept for us, and so it ever is with tears. Whatever be their outward cause, within the chancel of the heart it's we ourselves for whom they finally fall." (64)

"Shape on a wheel, like earth, poor folk Christ shed his precious blood to save? Tread down, like earth, poor souls like Aedward who grubbed and grubbed until they grubbed for him a grubbers earthy grave at last?" (77)

"'The noble motto of that noble lord was this,' I say, 'and often have I heard it on his lips. 'Base-born folks, like willows, sprout better for being cropped.' Such was the noble law he ruled the manor by. My task, as steward, was to see it carried out.'" (82)

"Not Wear but far away another river saw the birth of me that mattered most, and the year was the year that Deric died and Godric swam away from Mouse and first set foot upon the holy shore." (99)

"Two years I stayed, and if I never truly loved that small, fierce man [Elric] whose only love was Christ, I came to love the life I learned from him. And though I often chafe at it and roar with rage, there's part of me, deep down, that loves it yet." (113)

"Shadows he [Elric] saw everywhere, but never light. Devils were his everlasting prey." (117)



"So Christmas comes and Christmas goes, and the world the holy child is born to rests, as ever, full of dark so deep that all the Norman bishops in the land with all their candles aren't enough to drive it back an inch." (127)

"Well, Godric, I had grander dreams for you,' he said. 'I thought you'd heap up riches such that folk would gather in the streets and bare their heads to see you pass. I thought you'd come at last to serve the King.'

'And so I shall, my lord,' I said. 'The King.'

He took my meaning then, I think. 'If ever he should cast you out, you come see me,' he said, whereat he seized me in his arms and hugged me like a bear.'" (138)

"So, Reginald, when you come to write out Godric's sins, be sure, although he struck no blow himself, to set down murder with the rest." (157)



Topics for Discussion

Why does Godric not include Elric among his friends?

Describe the language and style used by Godric and how this suits, or does not suit, the book's subject matter.

In Buechner's view, is Godric a saint?

Explain how Buechner's Protestant views affect his depiction of Godric.

Explain the significance of the difference between Rome and Jerusalem.

If Buechner has a high opinion of Godric, as he seems to, why does he make up heinous sins and attribute them to him?

Explain the structure of the book. What is the significance of interspersing Buechner's version of Godric's life with Reginald's attempts to make his version?



Related Titles

In some of his nonfiction works, such as *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (1973) and *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (1979), Buechner fulfills the role of the teacher of religion as a lexicographer of the truth revealed in the Bible. The first book concentrates on the great words of the Bible, addressing itself to the three categories of doctrine, worship, and discipline. Such traditional words as Trinity (doctrine), sacrament (worship), and pride (discipline) are described in an attempt to make the orthodox beliefs and practices of Christianity intelligible not only to the laymen but to those outside the church. *Peculiar Treasures* is an effort to link the proclaimer of Christian truth with the truth he has uttered. Of 147 figures, eight come from the pages of scripture. For example, the entry for Abraham may be found under the heading of faith. Frederick Buechner, it is interesting to note, includes his own name.

Autobiographical data may be found in Buechner's two volumes of memoirs, *The Sacred Journey* (1982) and *Now and Then* (1983). The author uses one day in his own life in *The Alphabet of Grace* (1970) as a text for meditation on the theme of God's active grace working through the daily occurrences of human life. In Buechner's estimation, men and women are limited by their finite nature from glimpsing the love of God in every moment of the daily round of their activities. Yet he asserts that the divine presence can occasionally be glimpsed by those who are committed to accepting the life they have been given, whatever its seemingly mundane form, and living it to the fullest.

For Buechner, spirituality does not mean running away from life's responsibilities or the knowledge human beings gain of their weaknesses. Although excessive introspection may become mere vanity if it leads to an excessive preoccupation with the self at the expense of others, Buechner invites men and women to face the shadows of their lives and lift all into God's presence where it may be redeemed. Buechner finds divine grace, love and redemption in such transient moments as sharing breakfast with one's family or waiting for the arrival of a friend. At such times, men and women find God in their lives and are transformed. In *The Alphabet of Grace*, Buechner finds many such moments in his own life when he experiences the revelation of God's abiding love and transformation through faith.

As a preacher and a writer of fiction as well, Buechner has demonstrated in his nonfiction and in his novels how these two interests can be profitably combined. The basis for this collaboration of literature and theology is explored in his nonfiction work, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* (1977). Although the book is addressed to the preacher who is told to "tell the truth" without reservation, Buechner, as a writer of fiction, has clearly paid attention to the book's exhortation.

In Buechner's view, "telling the truth" involves exploring the way in which the elements of tragedy, comedy, and fair y tale combine in the human condition. According to Buechner, the tragedy involves accepting as plain fact the fallen condition of humanity: "man is a sinner, to use the old word, ... he is evil in the imagination of his heart, ...



when he looks into a mirror all in a lather what he sees is at least eight parts chicken, phony, slob." This is the bad news.

For Buechner, however, the truth about life does not end there. The "gospel," the good news, is also part of the truth. The tragedy is that men and women are sinners. The "comedy," is the good news that even in their imperfect state, men and women are loved and redeemed. Sinner though man may be, Buechner asserts that "it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for."

Finally, the sinner who can be redeemed in spite of the worst in himself can experience life not only as a comedy of God's saving love but as a fairy tale where the miraculous becomes real. A person experiences the gospel as a fairy tale when: "extraordinary things happen ... just as in fairy tales extraordinary things happen." The presence of the gospel as fairy tale, impossible but true, manifesting itself in human life is expressed by Buechner in words echoing the prologue to St.

John's gospel: "... above all there is the joy of it, this tale of a light breaking into a world that even the darkness has not overcome." Ultimately, for Buechner, the truth about the human condition is resoundingly hopeful. The frog that turns into a prince is the sinner; indeed, "To preach the power of the gospel in its original power and mystery is to claim ... that the ones who are to live happily ever after are .

.. all who labor and are heavy laden, the poor naked wretches wheresoever they may be."



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

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994