

Guerrillas Short Guide

Guerrillas by V. S. Naipaul

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Characters

Except for Peter Roche, who represses his own self-knowledge, the major characters in *Guerrillas* are selfdeceived and ignorant of their own natures. Jane is not even in harmony with her body, mistaking, as she does, rape for love; she is careless of the feelings of others and ignorant of her own. Her awkwardness is a sign of her splintered self, which has lost contact with its extremities. For her, pain and rape are welcome because at least they allow feeling to exist.

Jimmy Ahmed, the supposed revolutionary, is actually a creation of his own lies and the propaganda of others.

His radical commune raises nothing and houses a group with no relation to him or to each other. Politics, posters, and slogans are part of Jimmy's fantasies of power. While these fantasies are sometimes political, more often they are thinly disguised sexual fantasies of raping grateful white women. Women are basically threatening to Jimmy; he is much more comfortable with his homosexual lover, Bryant, whose jealousy he appeases by offering him Jane's life. Like the stories and novels Jimmy is forever trying to write, he can only begin actions, not complete them.

Peter Roche, supposedly tortured for his political views in South Africa, cannot make sense or create value from his past suffering. The only thing he has learned is to flee pain. For him there is no tragic recognition, no solace for suffering. Just as he flies from England when threatened with death, he flees back to England from the island.

Rather than attempt to understand and shape experience, Peter only desires to escape Jimmy and erase his memory of Jane.



Social Concerns/Themes

The status of *Guerrillas* as a major novel rests on its classification as a political novel. Unlike *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), *Guerrillas* has a small cast of characters. Only three are of major importance: Peter Roche, a dispossessed white victim of South African oppression, who has emigrated to the nameless Caribbean island that is the novel's setting; Jimmy Ahmed, a half-Chinese, half-black "revolutionary" leader; and Jane, a Canadian who seems to be hoping for a personal definition through these two men.

For such a situation to express political concerns, the individual relations of the characters must be symbolic of a larger social relationship. In short, the personal relations should give an outline of a culture, as each character represents a part of the social world.

Such an action tends toward allegory, and an initial interpretation of *Guerrillas* might be that of a story in which a white radical befriends a black revolutionary, and their friendship becomes the emblem of a new, just society. This view, however, does not account for the character of Jane, who, except for the excitement involved, is basically indifferent to the political dimension.

But this view of *Guerrillas* as a simple political allegory is inadequate. No one in the novel truly represents any social group. Consequently, the novel presents a web of tortured personal relations, much self-ignorance on the part of Jane and Jimmy, and the rape and murder of Jane as well as of the land itself.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The most important literary influence on *Guerrillas* is Joseph Conrad, whose *Nostromo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), and *Under Western Eyes* (1911) are portraits of revolutionary lands and cultures. Conrad, like Naipaul, was moved by social injustice, and yet he never described political actions, particularly radical ones, with any favor. To him all such actions were undermined by selfishness and weakness. Like Conrad, Naipaul condemns exploitation, such as the rape of the island by an American corporation, but he portrays Jimmy as even more despicable than the corporation. Although he is unsparing in his criticism of social injustices, Naipaul does not seem to believe that revolutionary movements are the answer.



Related Titles

Like all of Naipaul's fiction, *Guerrillas* deals with unsettled individuals in an unsettled society. His literary advances in *Guerrillas* are in two broad areas: the portrayal of lives shaped by external political and economic forces and the use of a narrative strategy of symbolic compression. Naipaul's social grasp is tighter in *Guerrillas* than in earlier novels, and the compression results from a conscious change in narrative form. Gone is the model of the nineteenth-century social novel, filled with a multitude of characters and mimetic detail; here it is replaced by a storyline as compressed as that of a Nathaniel Hawthorne romance. It is as if Naipaul had discovered deeper reasons for the unsettled lives and societies of his earlier works.



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