Harvest of Stars Short Guide

Harvest of Stars by Poul Anderson

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Contents

Characters

Allegorical figures are common in Anderson's fiction: Usually the allegorical figure will be a dominating, virile male who represents the strengths of free enterprise. On the other hand, it is unusual for Anderson to create a novel in which nearly every figure is symbolic of an idea. Not only does Harvest of Stars feature many allegorical characters, but it develops them in a very unusual way. The novel begins as an adventure, and its characters seem to be what one may reasonably expect in an adventure written by a talented and mature author. For example, Kyra Davis begins as a courageous, good-hearted person, and she evolves into a heroic figure as she learns that she has abilities that she was initially unaware of and then uses her hidden talents to defy a deadly enemy and to save her friends from doom. As such, she is a heroine typical of Anderson's mature period—resourceful, courageous, given to deep emotions, and without self-pity.

Anderson develops her carefully, offering a well-rounded figure that a reader can come to know well enough to anticipate her reactions to the difficulties that she faces; for example, her responses to Rinndalir seem natural for her—she admires him and is attracted to him, but she has the maturity to control herself and observe him well, noting that his love of intrigue poses a danger to herself and to her allies. One may reasonably expect her controlled yet feeling response because of her relationships with other attractive men in which she displays her suspicion of them and of her own emotional responses to them, as well as because of her focused determination to see a plan of action through to its conclusion.

Throughout the first movement of the novel, characters are by and large developed in the same way; like Kyra Davis they are placed under pressure and their characters are developed according to how they respond to the pressure. Anson Guthrie repeatedly thinks first of those who depend on him whenever he is in danger; this shows him to be compassionate, as well as courageous. On the other hand, Enrique Sayre first resorts to coercion when he wants something, and he resorts to torture if other forms of coercion do not work. He excuses his plainly despicable behavior by referring to the principles of Avantism—anything that advances Avantism is justified, no matter how horrifying it may be. Sayre comes to personify the view that people should be controlled and forced to do what a given philosophy says is right for them. This is a common strain of twentieth-century thought, and Sayre serves to exemplify the evils of such thought. Yet, this allegory is presented in an unusual way.

The first movement of Harvest of Stars can easily seduce one into accepting the novel as a light diversion—an interesting and thoughtful, as well as exciting, escape far from one's daily life. The characters are familiar types, with the protagonist starkly contrasted against the evil she battles. The structure of the chase is a common one in popular fiction, and it usually promises stirring moments of derring-do and an ending in which the fleeing protagonist turns the tables on her pursuers and defeats them—and all this happens in Harvest of Stars, but it happens with one third of the novel remaining.

The elements of allegory that are prominent in the second movement are dropped as hints, sometimes in passing, during the first movement. Without these hints, the behavior of the characters in the second movement might not be credible. Thus, Kyra Davis is shown to be a caring steward of her imaginary virtual reality world when she takes respite from her dodging from her enemies. She also is shown to be able to communicate well with animals during her stay with the Keiki Moana. Further, she loves best when she loves a nurturing man, and she instinctively withdraws from the attentions of attractive men who tend to be dominating. All these elements are natural parts of her adventure; she hides from her enemies in virtual reality or with the Keiki Moana, and in a world of intrigue where sudden death is common, she should be suspicious of dominating people. On the other hand, these elements are building her credibility as an allegorical figure—an earth mother who becomes Demeter; she is caring, conscientious, loving, and nurturing, and she sets the natural world at defiance of those who would dominate it.

This same sort of development may be seen in the novel's other figures. Anson Guthrie becomes a complex representation of ideas—principally a loving father who wants his children to live freely. He embodies the honesty and dedication to the welfare of his people that a leader, even a Zeus, should have. Rinndalir represents the nobility of the spirit—the ability of a person to rise above immediate personal concerns and do what needs to be done to help others. If Anson Guthrie fills the role of a god, then Rinndalir is the earthly leader—with leadership come obligations; a good leader must be willing to sacrifice himself for the good of those who trust him. Even minor characters take on symbolic meaning in the first movement that is fully realized in the second. For instance, Eiko Tamura is developed not only as a technician on L-5 who steadfastly keeps her troth to Fireball Enterprises, she is developed as an artistic figure whose art enriches the lives of others and adds meaning to their struggles and sacrifices. She becomes an interpreter; the caring artist who devotes herself to her community's need for beauty.

Social Concerns

A hallmark of Poul Anderson's novels is their consistent focus on social concerns. Whether the novel be about time travel or conflict between galactic empires, Anderson always seems to be, at least in part, talking to his readers about their actual lives and the choices they may have in how they live those lives. In this sense, Harvest of Stars is a philosophical work that identifies two major trends in the development of human societies and then contrasts one against the other. One trend is introduced as repressive—the desire to control people's lives in every way and the willingness of many people to have their lives governed by others.

The other trend is toward civil liberties and freedom of action and of choice.

Anderson complicates his comparisons by having each trend make the same demand of people—they need to have faith in something greater than themselves.

In Harvest of Stars, the first trend is represented by a repressive North American government whose bureaucrats have organized themselves into a religious organization that follows the teachings of a political theorist who sounds much like Karl Marx (suggesting that the government would be similar to a Marxist one, something Anderson has made clear through many novels that he detests) and somewhat like Isaac Asimov's character Hari Seldon of the Foundation novels and the creator of psychohistory; like Seldon, Xuan Zhing, the creator of the Avantist movement, believed that history could be predicted by science, that human behavior on a large scale is governed by mathematical principles. The Avantists have taken this idea to mean that human life should be governed by science and like religious despots they devote themselves to forcing everyone else to conform to their views.

The second trend is represented by Anson Guthrie's huge mercantile empire; in it, people are encouraged to think for themselves, even though on its surface it bears some resemblance to the Avantist government, because both require faith in large ideals. This superficial resemblance encourages comparison of the two social trends, and comparison reveals a very important distinction: The Avantists demand obedience and expect people to have faith in them because people are forced to, whereas in Guthrie's organization people voluntarily pledge themselves to each other—one demands fealty, but the other is free choice that encourages people to continue making free choices.

There can be little doubt of which Anderson favors: People freely choosing to help one another is better than people being forced to conform. As the novel develops, to the extent that a government forces people to do what the government wants them to do is the extent to which the government is evil. For instance, a government that forces people to conform to an ideology and a pattern of living for all their lives would be a completely evil government. This is probably why Guthrie throughout the novel (except for the download of Guthrie that is altered by the Avantist police) shies away from

demanding obedience and even regards such demands with horror; his organization is built around free people making free choices, as well as free enterprise.

That the two trends in the development of human society are conspicuously contrasted is not to say that they are the only social elements covered in the novel.

A long essay could be devoted to nothing other than the many social observations Anderson makes throughout the novel, such as the ethics of making and unmaking worlds, what reasonable limits might be placed on a person's freedom to act, how very different cultures (for instance Muslim and Christian) may find common values and peaceably cooperate, how intelligence may be defined, and how intelligent human creations, whether genetically altered animal species or artificial intelligence, should be treated by society. Space, here, does not allow for full coverage of these and other social concerns found in the novel, but one concern stands out in importance because of how Anderson develops it as a unifying theme from beginning to end of Harvest of Stars: How would one create an ideal society?

At the beginning of the novel, consortes (people who have pledged fealty) of Fireball Enterprises seem to have found their ideal society: They are pledged to an organization that encourages their freedom of action while only demanding that they help one another —and their pledges were freely given.

Yet, this seemingly ideal society of devotees of free enterprise has significant flaws. One is that it depends heavily on the electronic incarnation of the founder of Fireball Enterprises, Anson Guthrie; the demise of his "download" could bring about the destruction of Fireball Enterprises—a society based on a single personality has a very great weakness. Another flaw is the inability of the society of Fireball Enterprises to protect its people against evildoers, especially governments.

An ideal society should be better able than Fireball Enterprises to protect its people. On the other hand, Fireball Enterprises has the seeds of an ideal society within it; most importantly, its people are willing to freely risk their lives to help others in the society.

Do not mistake this for one of Anderson's uncomplicated statements of the superior morality of personal liberty and freedom of choice; he does not let himself or his audience off that easily. Note the different social creations in the novel.

At one point, protagonist Kyra Davis joins a friend in a virtual reality entertainment in which she creates a world for which she is god; she turns her attention away from her creation for a while and then is horrified to discover that the people of her world have taken to fighting wars and vigorously killing one another. She makes some godlike visitations to government leaders and puts an end to the fighting. Even though her experience was supposed to be a game, she feels regret when she leaves and is not sure that what she created was not in fact real.

Compare this experience with what Anson Guthrie goes through; he is responsible for an organization that promises a lifetime commitment to the well being of its followers, and he cannot fulfill all of his obligations. Fireball Enterprises seems ready to spin out of

control without Guthrie's devoted attention. Also note how Davis's experience parallels the second movement of the novel, in which people actually do try to build a society on a new world. This helps to unify the novel by developing images such as Davis virtual reality as symbols of the theme of the ideal society. Elsewhere are new societies such as that of self-aware seals in Hawaii; Davis's experiences with them are more than just charming, they help to develop her character and they again suggest how a good society may be created. The seals live fairly peaceful, happy lives together, although like Fireball Enterprises, they are vulnerable to outside evils beyond their control. All this sets up the effort to create a new society on 5648 Demeter; by escaping the Solar System, people free themselves from the intrusions and threats created by corrupt, repressive governments, and this escape is shown to be necessary by the earlier conflicts with the Avantists and other earthly governments.

That the second movement should be Homeric in structure is somewhat surprising because the first movement is more typical of popular fiction, a chase is a way of creating a narrative structure that is comfortable for an audience. The notable contrast between the story of how Anson Guthrie came to create the migration to Demeter and the story of how settlers made Demeter their own may be deliberate on Anderson's part because he is dealing with big, significant issues and he may wish to call his audience's attention to the ideas of the second movement. In the second movement, he shows the creation of two societies, one based on intimate cooperation with nature and the other based on domination of nature, the first created by Earthlike humans and the other created by the Lunarians. Both feature concern for the independence and well being of individual people. On Demeter, certain characters become part of the fabric of the natural world and are able to help out people in danger, even in remote areas; these nature characters are somewhat like Homer's gods and goddesses in the Iliad, and the Kyra Davis nature figure seems notably like the goddess Demeter, for whom the world is named. Among the asteroids that the Lunarians choose for home, a society of mutual pledges and family obligations evolves, and nature is not so much cooperated with as dominated; the Demeter society grows organically, but the asteroid one evolves through the domination of individual will over the environment.

Significantly, the two societies have their disagreements but do not war against each other. The ideal of liberty that lives in each society creates a common bond that mitigates against conflict —neither society wishes to dominate the other. Throughout this second movement is the knowledge that the two societies will perish when Demeter is destroyed in a cataclysmic collision with another planetary body. This creates an air of tragedy that is reminiscent not only of Homer but of Ancient Greek literature in general, and the Ancient Greek concept of hubris suits the second movement well: The people of Demeter strive for greatness even though they know that they are doomed. This makes the second movement a wonderful literary experience; the lives and deaths of characters become like instruments in a symphony that uplifts the spirit—against all odds, people who can choose their actions freely can rise to Homeric heights of courage and character. That some escape while others perish is anticlimactic, but it is Homeric in flavor; depleted of many of their greatest leaders, the Greeks of the Iliad nonetheless returned to home and laid the foundation for a great society.

Their adventures and courage set the standard for Ancient Greek social behavior. In Harvest of Stars, the people of Demeter set a similar standard, even though they cannot return home.

Techniques

One of the keys to understanding Harvest of Stars is recognizing that it is a double narrative with two different plot structures (called movements). The first portion of the novel has a pursuit or chase structure, something very common in popular fiction and other media such as television dramas and motion pictures (the archetype would probably be The Fugitive of both television and motion picture fame). The second portion— much shorter than the first—of the novel is structured like a Homeric epic, replete with gods and goddesses working their wills among people and heroic figures such as Rinndalir, whose choice to die so that his people may live echoes the choice Achilles makes in the Iliad, when he can choose to live to great age with much honor or die and save many who would otherwise perish.

Another literary technique that is handled in an interesting way in Harvest of Stars is the presentation of the language of the characters. In Harvest of Stars, speech is also used to indicate a location in time. The language of the characters is futuristic, representing a logical outgrowth in present-day trends in American speech. Spanish contributes many words to the dialects of Kyra Davis, Anson Guthrie, and other North Americans, with gracias having replaced thank you in everyday speech, and other words such as consorte are commonplace. The differences between present-day speech and that of the characters of Harvest of Stars serve as reminders that the novel is a depiction of a time in the future in which American society, like everyday speech, has changed.

Themes

Typical of much of Anderson's mature work, Harvest of Stars is rich in themes that are beyond social concerns. The very structure of the novel makes it a philosophical work; like Horace and Samuel Johnson and other writers of philosophical literature, Anderson knows that to be read he must first entertain. The tense, rollicking chase of the novel's first movement is exciting from the first word, and is gripping in the tension it creates in the depiction of how individual people play important roles in the great conflict between a despotic society and a free society.

The social concerns of the novel focus on the way people live and how a society might best benefit its members. In Harvest of Stars, the benefit matters most if it is individual; the well being of the individual person is essential to a good society.

The philosophical themes of the novel focus on why people live as they do. In Harvest of Stars, people have needs that must be fulfilled if they are to live happy lives: they need freedom to choose for themselves, they need freedom from oppressive governments, they need the freedom to associate with whom they please, they need trust in one another, they need control over their environment, and they need a society that helps them when they need help—but not intrusively and not when they can help themselves. In various characters one or two of these needs predominates. In Enrique Sayre, the need to control his environment so dominates his thinking that he wishes to dominate other people—to have them live exactly the way he wants them to. Thus, he is a fanatical Avantist who believes that Xuan Zhing's teaching that human behavior can be scientifically predicted means that human behavior should also be scientifically controlled; his philosophical representation is that people should be forced to be good, and Avantism gives him the comfort of having something greater than himself to be responsible for his actions. This makes for one of the key contrasts of the novel: Evil people take little responsibility for their actions, whereas good ones make free choices and are personally responsible for them. Note the significant character trait in Nero Valencia, a gunjin who kills without remorse; he does not force himself on Kyra Davis, and he does not deny responsibility for his actions. As unlikely as it may seem for a hired gun to fit into Demeter's scheme of things, he has an essential quality for goodness that eventually transforms him into a heroic figure: He takes responsibility for his own actions and does not pretend that any greater authority is actually responsible.

Thus ever present in the novel is not only the social concern that individual liberty is essential to a good society but that such liberty cannot exist without individual responsibility for one's behavior.

Anderson also explores what intelligence means and how humanness may be defined. He presents a variety of forms of intelligence. Anson Guthrie is a download (his brain patterns, including his memories and temperament, have been recorded on computer disks) of a man long dead, yet the download retains Guthrie's drive, determination, and dedication to his work, as well as his personality traits such as earthy humor. He even, somewhat to his frustration, retains a sex drive.

During the novel he becomes two Anson Guthries, one devoted to the good of the people of Fireball Enterprises and the other devoted to the forcing of Fireball Enterprises into submission to the dictates of the Avantists; he becomes a godlike figure on Demeter, and even metamorphoses into a living, humanlike being that is able to experience physical life again. Which of these is the real intelligence? Are they all artificial, or is each incarnation of Guthrie the real Anson Guthrie? Anderson seems to answeryes, each is Guthrie, that bound up in our memories and individual inclinations for behavior is each of us; the Guthrie that for hundreds of years watches over his great enterprises is a real intelligence, even if it is an electronic download retained on computer disks. He behaves individualistically with independence of thought, therefore he is an intelligence.

This concept is crucial to the development of the themes of the novel. To be able to think independendy, to be able to take full advantage of personal liberty, is intelligence in Harvest of Stars. The Keiki Moana may be sea animals, but they are creative thinkers with independent imaginations, and they are able to associate with Kyra Davis and even understand her life, all of which are taken as signs of intelligence. On the other hand, the artificial intelligence that helps run spaceships is not taken to be intelligent, perhaps because it can take no independent action, it must do as it is told. Further, it has no sense of self as shown by its lack of a sense of self-preservation. Thus, the novel suggests that the ability to calculate, to reason complexly as Kyra Davis's ship does, does not constitute intelligence— although the ability to reason may be an element of intelligence. This is an important matter in the novel; during the first movement people are known to be trying to create artificial intelligence that is not dependent on downloads like that of Anson Guthrie. Eventually, they succeed and human civilization slowly turns itself over to great, self-aware calculating machines that create interior worlds that encourage human beings to explore their own consciousness.

This becomes a troubling idea: If intelligence requires the ability to choose for oneself, to create for oneself, and to understand others, are the people of Earth intelligences anymore? Does giving their responsibilities over to artificial intelligence take away their humanity, leaving only the machines as the sole intelligences in the Solar System? This is not an idle bit of philosophical speculation; its relevance to industrialized societies is of immediate interest in our own time. What are we giving away to computers, machines that track us from birth to death and tell us what to do, from how much tax to pay to when to serve on juries? Are we losing our ability to choose for ourselves, to make independent decisions about our lives and thereby lose our status as intelligent beings and thereby lose our humanness? Anderson is cautioning us that to give away our ability to think by submitting to artificial intelligence is to give away ourselves and our progeny.

Key Questions

The complexity of narrative structure and themes makes Harvest of Stars a good book for group discussions. One way to open discussion of the novel is to begin with its tone: Is it a hopeful vision of the future or is it a grim vision of humanity losing itself? Both views of the novel's tone are valid: the human spirit continues to strive to be free in Harvest of Stars, but humanity in general becomes utterly selfabsorbed and ceases its striving to expand into and learn about the universe. Thus defenders of both points of view are likely to be found in a discussion group, and by beginning with the novel's tone, a group may quickly perceive how complicated the novel really is, that it offers no clear answers to the questions it raises, which in turn may lead to discussion of the novel's other complexities.

Another approach to opening a discussion could begin with the novel's two very different movements; the first seems almost routine whereas the second seems extraordinary. Would the second movement be able to stand alone, without the first one? Would the emotional scenes in the second movement be as effective without the first movement? Why would Anderson break his novel into two very different narrative patterns? This last question could stimulate very different answers: Perhaps Anderson began the novel as a slick adventure, of which his canon features many, and in the process of writing it saw his ideas taking flight and moving in unexpected—in this case Homeric—directions; perhaps he began with the idea for the second movement and found that he needed a preceding narrative to clarify the flights of imagination in what became the second movement; a supreme craftsman, Anderson may have created a chase pattern for his first movement in order to capture the interest of his audience and thus draw his readers into the complex ideas that he wished to explore. Some discussion group members may be pleased by the novel's asking them to think about tough philosophical issues, while others may be put off by what they hoped would be a mere entertainment turning out to be something much different, all of which means that a stimulating discussion that would last for hours could be generated just by beginning with the narrative structure.

Another opening that could prove successful would be to begin with the novel's themes. For instance, in Harvest of Stars humanity take two divergent paths in its future development: One path is pursued by a tiny minority; they choose to venture out into space, to explore, and to take great chances, even at the risk of colonizing a planet that they know will be destroyed in one thousand years, perhaps dooming their descendants and ending their great venture among the stars. The vast majority of humanity takes another path; they turn over their lives to artificial intelligences and choose to devote themselves to exploring inner space, a universe of their imaginations. Which path would humanity be likelier to take? Is Anderson balanced in his views of each direction, one physically active, the other philosophically complex? If he favors one over the other, why does he? What would be better for humanity? If the group is composed of people who like wrestling with ideas, the thematic opening to discussion could develop into a vigorous discussion that would inevitably involve tone and narrative structure (after all,

with his focus in the second movement Anderson chooses to develop one set of ideas at the expense of others).

1. Who are the human beings in Harvest of Stars? Are the Lunarians human? Is the download of Anson Guthrie human? Are the Keiki Moana human? Are the composite beings at the end of the novel human?

2. Why does the novel begin with an epilogue?

3. What modern-day social trends are used to create the futuristic earth of Harvest of Stars?

4. Why do people have to run away in order to be free? What could the characters of the novel do to preserve freedom on earth? Is liberty doomed?

5. At the end of the novel, some people escape doomed Demeter. What theme of the novel does this ending advance?

6. Is Harvest of Stars hopeful or pessimistic?

7. Is Harvest of Stars good literature or merely a popular entertainment with literary pretensions?

8. According to Anderson, which is the better activity for people, exploration of the world or exploration of the self?

9. Is it more important that people create worlds or that they understand natural worlds?

10. Compare Isaac Asimov's Forward the Foundation (1993) to Harvest of Stars.

Which has the more convincing view of whether human history can be mathematically predicted? Would the ability to predict, and thus shape, future history be liberating for humanity or oppressive?

11. Why does Anderson write a Homeric second movement? Why not stick with the rollicking adventure style of the first movement?

12. Is the first movement like Homer's The Odyssey? Are Kyra Davis's adventures at all like those of Odysseus?

13. In spite of its energetic adventure story, an important element of popular fiction, Harvest of Stars is not easily understood. Does this make reading the novel jarring or annoying? Is the structure of the novel well suited to Anderson's exploration of ideas?

14. What are the elements of Harvest of Stars that make it one of the most popular science fiction novels of recent times?

What are the elements that have enabled it to inspire a series of popular sequels?

Literary Precedents

Harvest of Stars offers several elements that are staples of science fiction—a totalitarian North American government, artificial intelligence, colonization of faraway planets may be found in numerous novels. The predecessor that comes closest to envisioning the society the Avantists try to create is George Orwell's 1984 (1949; see separate entry), which depicts a society in which people's lives are controlled from birth to death by leaders similar to Enrique Sayre—any lie, any cruelty is justified if it serves the party. Colossus (1966) by D. F. Jones offers an account of how the world may be taken over by artificial intelligence; in its case, a sentient computer that controls America's nuclear weapons unites with a Soviet version and takes over control of the world. It is not a happy place for human beings. John Varley frequently features the interaction of artificial intelligence and human beings, particularly in "Press Enter " (1984; see separate entry) in which the computers of the world form a global intelligence and Titan (1979) in which an artificial intelligence runs a huge artificial world.

A subgenre of science fiction known as "cyberpunk," inspired by William Gibson's novel Neuromancer (1984; see separate entry), focuses on how human minds may explore worlds created entirely by the imagination and electronic thinking machines—a concept similar to what may have happened to the Solar System after Anson Guthrie and his followers left for Demeter. In the majority of instances, the ascendance of artificial intelligence is depicted as destructive to humanity and as an evil to be avoided. In the case of Harvest of Stars, Anson Guthrie (a form of artificial intelligence himself—Anderson persistently offers no easy answers to the problems he raises) and his people flee the impending end of independent human enterprise.

Isaac Asimov's robot short stories depict a more sanguine view of artificial intelligence, and instead of focusing on competition between human and humancreated intelligence, the stories tend to focus on the ethical implications of creating artificial intelligence and on speculations on what actually constitutes sentient intelligence. Near the end of his career, Asimov blended his robot fiction into his Foundation fiction, and at the end, in Foundation and Earth (1986; see separate entry) and Forward the Foundation (1993; see separate entry), robots are depicted as guiding humanity's development, perhaps reflecting his increasing pessimism about the future prospects for development out of the present-day state of affairs for human societies. The idea of colonizing other worlds is an old one; in modern literature it has its origin in the nineteenth century, in which humanity's expansion to the stars was depicted as following the pattern of European colonialism. In general, the scientific hindrances to interstellar journeys have been glossed over in favor of the generally optimistic view that humanity will find a way to travel conveniently from one star system to another.

Some writers have taken pains to follow contemporary physical theory; for example, L. Sprague de Camp's Rogue Queen (1951) and its sequels envision interstellar travel in which Einstein's time dilation principle applies: What seem to be a few years on a spacecraft will be decades on the spacecraft's home world. De Camp gets around some of the problems involved with such travel by having future humans living to be hundreds

of years old. In Harvest of Stars, Anderson takes pains to create a vision of interstellar travel that takes into account modern physical theories, including the speed limits imposed by light.

Related Titles

Anderson has written sequels to Harvest of Stars, each a fine novel in its own right.

They are The Stars Are Also Fire (1994) and Harvest theFire (1995). In the former, people in the Solar System, where machine intelligence seems to make human being superfluous, struggle to assert their independence. The latter novel depicts humanity's expansion beyond the Solar System and the conflict between human and machine intelligence. Both novels are good reads and intensely thoughtful.

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