

# The Hermit of 69th Street Short Guide

## The Hermit of 69th Street by Jerzy Kosiński

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Hermit of 69th Street Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns/Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques/Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>

# Characters

Except for Chance in *Being There*, Kosinski's central characters reflect the author to the extent that critics have always felt compelled to point out the resemblances. Kosinski, however, always warned against viewing his central character as autobiographical.

Following Stokes and Fremont-Smith's accusations, Kosinski decided to address the issue of the relationship between himself and his characters. He called *The Hermit of 69th Street* "autofiction," which by itself renders problematic any parallels or distinctions critics would want to draw between author and character. His variations on his and his character's name furthers the confusion. Kosky is Kosinski without "sin" as several critics have noted.

J. K., Jay Kay, and Jerzy Kosinski, used for editorial asides, invite speculation as to subtle distinctions Kosinski might be making, and several critics have tried unconvincingly to sort them out.

Kosinski draws out his tease further in a scene where Kosky finds out from his publisher that "another writer is soon coming out with a novel called *The Hermit of 69th Street*." Kosky is told that the writer is Jerzy Kosinski and so decides to change his "Hermit" to "Healer." But as we know, Kosky's novel, edited by Kosinski, comes out as "Hermit."

Kosinski made it difficult to even know how to refer to his central character. Perhaps Kosky/Kosinski, as awkward as it is, will have to suffice.

He is preoccupied, as Kosky/Kosinski puts it, "with words, letters and numbers." The numbers six and nine in combination obsess him because of their obvious sexual reference, and the letters "SS" beginning sequential words brings back his memory of the Nazis and the war. However, Kosky/Kosinski delights in mixing the profane with the sacred. Six and nine are also the trinity doubled and tripled, he says, and SS combinations are made from everything from spiritually sacred to safe sex. The point is that a character's mind is created that, quoting from Whitman, "contains multitudes" and "contradicts itself." In all likelihood he is meant to be seen as clever, complex, even all-encompassing. However, for most critics the spiritual side of the character isn't convincing. He comes off as clever, sexually obsessed, and haunted by the violence in his past.



## Social Concerns/Themes

1982, in what has come to be known as "The Village Voice Controversy," two reporters, Geoffrey Stokes and Eliot Fremont-Smith, wrote an article that accused Jerzy Kosinski of, among other things, dishonestly portraying his past in his fiction and hiring editors who went beyond editing to "collaborate" on his manuscripts.

Friends and publishers jumped to his defense. But despite urging, Kosinski never responded publicly to these charges. When *The Hermit of 69th Street* appeared in 1988, it was obvious to all who were aware of the controversy that this was "the hermit's" response.

Any reader of the novel, therefore, needs to be aware of the controversy to fully understand this book.

In all his novels, Kosinski's central concern has always been with the alienated victim who has to learn the language of the oppressor to escape his victimization. Paul R. Lilly, Jr., in his book, *Words In Search of Victims: The Achievement of Jerzy Kosinski*, (1988) convincingly argues that this pattern manifests itself in Kosinski's novels beginning with *The Painted Bird* (1965) in which "the boy learns that survival depends on observing the behavior of the oppressors, decoding the oppressor's language, and eventually learning to speak that language." Lilly traces that same pattern through each novel up to *Pinball* (1982).

The pattern holds true in *The Hermit of 69th Street* as well. Norbert Kosky, the central character, has been the victim of "docu-slander" by two reporters and has disappeared before being able to clear his name. By assuming the role of literary executor of Kosky's papers, Kosinski creates a house-of-mirrors effect between himself and his fictional alter ego. In so doing, Kosinski is able to defuse the charges of plagiarism and falsification of his past. First, Stokes and Fremont-Smith's extensive documentation of their case against Kosinski is mocked by Kosky/Kosinski's extreme documentation. Almost every thought that Kosky/ Kosinski expresses in the text is credited to a source, inferring that there are, of course, few if any original thoughts, while showing off at the same time Kosky/ Kosinski's impressive scholarship. Second, by including interchanges with his printer and line editors within the text Kosky/Kosinski demonstrates that getting a book to press is inevitably a process with input from numerous people. Third, Kosky/ Kosinski renders the charge that he distorted his personal life in his fiction equally ridiculous by a scene where a representative from a lie detector company offers his services to Kosky. The man tells Kosky that he cannot lose. If he has told the truth, he is clear. And if the machine shows that he has lied about his past, it proves he has just done his job, which is to create fiction.

The logic is inescapable, as is the absurdity of the situation. Kosinski has managed, once again, as a victim, to master the language of his oppressors (in this case pseudo-scholarship) and use it effectively against them.

## Techniques/Literary Precedents

Another of the accusations made against Kosinski was that he used editors because he was not skillful in his use of the English language. Perhaps it is not fair to see Kosinski's novel entirely in the light of that controversy. Nevertheless, it is striking that in his first novel since the controversy Kosinski, who was not known for his spare prose, lack of humor, and aversion to self-conscious experimentation, wrote as if he was straining to outdo James Joyce.

There are numerous precursors to *The Hermit of 69th Street* in the experimental tradition. The technique of the absurd digression was born in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759).

Sterne digressed mercilessly to poke fun at the galloping plots of his day and to slow down time to savor the moment. In his fiction, Kosinski focused on incident rather than plot, which he held in low regard: "Plot is an artificially imposed notion of preordained 'destiny' that usually dismisses the importance of life's each moment."

With the use of interlarded documentation and footnotes, Kosinski was able to further hobble his plot and concentrate on the moment.

A more direct influence on Kosinski's novel comes from two twentieth-century novelists who were profoundly influenced by Sterne — Joyce and Nabokov. Like Sterne, Joyce favors language over plot, the moment over destiny. His stream of consciousness technique concentrates attention on the moment. Kosinski was able to simulate that technique by having Kosinski edit Kosky's novel, adding information to information.

Another experimental novel that influenced Kosinski is Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962). In that novel plot is superseded by language, word play being more important than the events themselves. Moreover, the novel presents an intimate portrait of Nabokov while at the same time displaying his broad learning and attacking academic pretention — exactly the effect Kosinski tries to achieve, although his target is more specific. He may not have been as successful as his predecessors, but he showed no shortage of ambition in attempting a novel which is twice the length and took him twice as long to write as any of his other novels.

## Related Titles

The Hermit of 69th Street should end the controversy over Kosinski's skill with language and whether or not editors collaborated on his novels.

There is a distinctive stamp to all Kosinski's work. In each novel his central character follows a path from victim to oppressor. Kosinski never provides moral guidelines for his readers. His characters keep their judgments and feelings to themselves. For the most part, the novels are episodic in structure, usually containing a revenge motif and plenty of kinky sex. And as almost every critic has observed, Kosinski's original metaphor of the painted bird is central to all his fiction.

The Hermit of 69th Street displays the features of Kosinski's other novels.

However, whereas his previous five novels were somewhat derivative, this novel breaks new ground. Kosinski has created a wholly original stream-of-consciousness-like effect by having his central character and himself as editor collaborate to weave diverse verbal materials together in response to the verbal world around them. Kosinski also reveals an exuberance for verbal pyrotechnics never evident before, which serves as a fitting answer to the charges of verbal inadequacy. When a novelist minimizes narrative in favor of the texture of his novel he always risks rejection from a plot-orientated reading public. The textures have to be worth the price of admission, to adapt a Kosinski line. Whether or not they are in this case, is still up for debate.



# 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

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

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