The Invincible Short Guide

The Invincible by Stanisław Lem

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.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Who are Lem's envoys of humankind and why do they fail so dramatically to break out of their routine patterns of thinking? The answer may lie in a number of striking imbalances which TheInvincible displays in the presentation of its characters.

Only Horpach, the Commander, and Rohan, Navigator and second-in-command, are given enough prominence to emerge as individuals. Even at that, the differences between them are carefully balanced so that their individuality is only as separate as two sides of the same coin.

Rohan's character, as he grudging identifies with Horpach, merges with his image of his superior to the point that he dreams of himself becoming "commander of the Invincible some day."

Aloof and reserved towards the crew, both leaders regard each other in no less rigid and hierarchical terms. In their relationship they have never risen above a strictly professional level; in fact, although "they had flown together many parsecs, they had never become friends."

Their reluctance to deviate from a military code of behavior, on top of the strict procedures of extraterrestrial exploration, invites a similar inflexibility in the men under their command. The striking reduction of personalities to professions in the leaders is even more pronounced in the case of the forty odd crew members identified in the novel. Their last names, accompanied by a designation of scientific expertise, are the chief differentiating features within their circle. Even their cabins on the spaceship are nameless, bearing only function initials: Ch. I., Ch. Ph., Ch. T., Ch. B. Dressed in uniformly white suits, which cannot but evoke the impression of white lab smocks, the ship's many specialists emerge as a faceless group agent, subservient to their military commanders and reflecting their limitations. Such a depiction of the crew raises questions about the complicity of the twin apparatuses of the industrial society: science and military.

The uneasy alliance of science with the industrial-military complex is, of course, of great concern to all of us. This is especially so when the latter dominates the former's research agenda to the point of becoming the chief dictator of priorities and strategies which science is later made to pursue (without doubt one of Lem's enduring themes).

For many European critics such a reductionist presentation of the crew is consistent with Lem's interest in the common, rather than the unique, problems of human existence—a position echoed by the writer on more than one occasion. Ewa Balcerzak suggests that in the context of Lem's fictions it is almost inevitable that "man becomes a figure portraying humanity's scientific thought, its moral dilemmas, metaphysical and cultural problems, etc." Under the pressure of the philosophical demands which Lem makes of his works, it is difficult to avoid simplifying the characters beyond the necessary narrative minimum.

These comments are equally valid in many other of Lem's "alien contact" novels. Even the early Eden (1959) foreshadows the epistemological and narrative problems which reappear in The Invincible. In Eden, a crew of instrumental specialists also seek to understand an alien world and are similarly forced to acknowledge the shortcomings of their earthly preconceptions. This time they do not even bear proper names, only professional labels: Captain, Doctor, Chemist, Physicist, Engineer, and Cyberneticist.

Such a harsh reduction of people to their professions is compounded by a symbolic slant in their personalities. The Doctor and the Chemist, representing the biochemical sciences, are somewhat more humane and less aggressive in their dealing with the civilization of Eden. The physicalists, on the other hand, favor instrumental and actively penetrating tactics. This portrayal is obviously intended to be symbolic, as both sides make mistakes which flow from the given stereotype of their profession.

The equally formulaic picture of an allmale scientific community of the Invincible is an ironic reflection of their research program which fails so miserably on Regis III. The same irony returns in the reductionist array of specialists on board the spaceship. With the notable exception of biological and medical sciences, all of them represent the physical sciences.

What is the presumption behind such a striking imbalance? These "hard" disciplines, devoted exclusively to the physical aspects of the Universe, are supposed to be objective and untainted by anthropomorphism. Yet, in the end, Regis III proves them to be encumbered with the baggage of Earthly preconceptions.

Social Concerns/Themes

With its riveting plot, enduring symbolism, and powerful, Hemingwaysparse style, The Invincible may not strike the reader as being in any way atypical.

Yet it would be difficult to isolate ordinary social concerns in this science-thriller, unless it is the broadly understood interest in the future of humankind, determined by the scientific and technological present. Not that there have ever been any doubt about the centrality of cognition in Stanislaw Lem's writings. In a 1979 interview, appropriately entitled "Knowing Is the Hero of My Books," the writer mentions a Swiss critic who suggested that in Lem's books problems of knowledge play the part that love and erotic adventures do for other writers.

Agrees Lem: "To me science, not sex, is the problem."

If his works are multiple variants on the problems of knowledge, The Invincible, from the middle of Lem's golden phase of 1959-1968, is one of its finest dramatizations. In this bestselling, tight-plotted thriller the writer takes up the problem of investigating the Unknown, and reflects on the patterns and limitations of science.

The power of Lem's book stems as much from the action-and-crisis driven narrative, documenting Earthmen's disastrous efforts to control the planet Regis III, as from Lem's reflections on the process of scientific inquiry.

If science is the vanguard of the cultural buffer zone which Man projects into the Universe, then the "fit" between scientific theories and the Cosmos must be a scene of constant conceptual friction. In The Invincible, the source of friction lies between the preconceptions of the ship's military and scientific crew and the baffling phenomena they encounter on Regis III. From the start, the scientists rely too much on instrumental might, and are unwilling to change their attitude even when their step-by-step routines prove too rigid to cope with the contingencies.

The inadequacy of their old patterns of thinking is laid bare when, despite strict emergency procedures, the Black Cloud cripples half of the cruiser's men and machinery. This failure is in itself a warning sign that the entire strategy on which it is based may need revision.

Instead of relying on rule-book responses, effective explorers must be ready to adapt to circumstances since any routines designed to ward off unknown perils must by definition be only of generic nature. From the beginning many crew members resent the rigors of emergency procedures, even though the commanding officer's orders are dictated by a concern for their safety. This instinctive recklessness stands in contrast to the inflexibility of the leaders who miscategorize the type and magnitude of their difficulties. Unsettled by the death and mayhem discovered on board of their sister spaceship, the Condor, the military and scientific leaders nevertheless continue to insist

that they are dealing with a familiar type of situation—one which will reward their investigation with success.

One of the clearest indicators that the crew's routines fail in the face of an infinite richness of the Universe is the language that the scientists use to describe Regis III. The names like "cloud," "flies," "bushes," and "city" conceal the alien nature of phenomena which have no parallel in the part of the universe known to Man. The city, which in truth bears no resemblance to terrestrial dwellings, is a junkyard of gigantic machines, victims in the planet's evolutionary struggle. The "bushes" are tangles of metallic symbionts with the miniaturized Y-shaped crystals, and the "flies" look and act totally unlike any that the crew has ever seen. The greatest misnomer, however, is that of the Black Cloud, whose highly concerted actions give the impression of being synchronized by a single "mind."

The Cloud's show of power when it defeats the Cyclops, the ship's most powerful combat machine, is interpreted by the Invincible as a sign of hostility.

Falling prey to their anthropomorphic view of the Cloud as the enemy, the crew ascribe to it the complex intentionality of beliefs, desires, and goals. This in turn leads them to react to it as if it were a rational being.

Such behavior is psychologically understandable to the degree that it may be inevitable. Applying familiar concepts to the Unknown is the first stage in grasping what exceeds our conceptual horizons, since, as Lem remarks in Science Fiction and Futurology (1970), "one cannot assimilate the Unnamable." On the other hand, the act of naming and labeling presumes that it is possible to describe the alien planet by means of concepts and values imported from elsewhere, a presumption which ends up being an act of being selfdeceiving. The observation that we should always look beneath the surface in search of deeper principles is, of course, quite banal. At the same time, it highlights the fact that conceptual inertia is a problem widespread enough to be an almost inseparable part of human experience. The superficial likeness of Regis III to Earth initially invites a host of hypotheses which try to force the mystery of the Black Cloud into a preformed and inflexible box of familiar concepts. And yet, one by one, these early theories have to discarded in the face of the only one that fits the facts.

After weeks of investigation, an extravagant hypothesis is put forward by Lauda, one of the ship's biologists. According to him, millions of years before a nova exploded in the Lyre constellation, forcing the inhabitants of the region to colonize nearby planetary systems. One of their scouting craft crash-landed on Regis III. The sole survivors were highly specialized robots, capable of adapting to the most difficult conditions. Left to their own devices, under the pressures of the environment and attacks from the local fauna, the robots began to evolve in directions never foreseen by their creators. Some sought adaptive advantage in superior intelligence and stationary growth, whereas others evolved in the direction of miniaturization and symbiosis. The dead city explored by the Invincible was the agglomerated ruins of the losers in the evolutionary struggle, the smart but energetically inefficient machine giants. The winners were the simple,

crystalline micro-flies which learned to survive on next to nothing, while being capable of aggregating into the Black Cloud in times of danger.

Although the Cloud is capable of organized and destructive acts, Lauda is at pains to point out that it is not a thinking entity. In fact, he urges his colleagues to see it as a phenomenon not unlike a storm or an earthquake—a natural "force" which must be investigated as such. Yet despite the persuasiveness of Lauda's hypothesis, the commanders and other crew members seem unable or plain unwilling to accept its implications.

For, if the Cloud is to be treated as an inanimate "part of the landscape," the human explorers must completely change their strategy. Their options are either to study the Cloud as any other natural phenomenon—albeit a perilous one, like a volcano—or simply to pack their equipment and go home. In either case, they must swallow their pride as conquistadors and forget about exacting revenge for the death and injury of their fellow crewmen.

Just as we do not flog the sea after the sinking of a ship, the scientists are called on to renounce their prejudices and face the facts. Yet instead they continue to personify the Cloud into an opponent, even though—as the protagonist, Rohan, realizes early in the novel—"here there was nothing to be invaded." Just like generations of human cultures before them, the men of the Invincible find it easier to see the Cosmos as hostile rather than indifferent. Yet scientific failures must be explained in terms of insufficient knowledge or poor methodology, and not as a result of Nature's antagonism. The scientists' belief that their values hold for all worlds and refusal to accept that Regis III may not conform to them becomes evident when the Black Cloud's instinctive manifestations are greeted as actions of a calculating opponent. Imprisoned by their military and scientific training, the crew interpret their lack of success as a defeat, which in turn leads them to see it as a victory for the other side. Such myopia prevents the ship's scientists from acknowledging the insufficiency of Earthborn and Earth-bound patterns of thinking vis-a-vis Regis III and its evolutionary creations.

Only one person is granted a moment of epiphany into the nature of the Cloud and through it into the nature of the planet and Cosmos at large. The Cloud, like a cybernetic eco-system, has evolved into an autonomous organism outside the values created by human culture. The scientists' attempts to penetrate its mystery, while justifying repeated efforts to destroy it, cannot hide that their technocentric approach to Regis III proves a dismal failure. Only Rohan, braving the Cloud in his solitary search for the missing crew members, is able to see it as something that is simply irreducible to human patterns. Symbolically he succeeds in evading the Cloud when, guided by Lauda's theory, he completely forsakes old modes of thought and behavior. Stripped of protective shielding, he accomplishes his single heroic action by adjusting to the Cloud, rather than trying to dominate it.

It is significant that a man is chosen to perform this dangerous mission, even though the camouflage mechanism could have been used to shield a robot. An imperfect and almost powerless human being, guided by a mixture of intuition, unpredictability, and

even outright quirkiness, is paradoxically better suited to the task at hand. The lost crew members, victims of total amnesia, are so unpredictable in their behavior that only another human being may be able to intuit their whereabouts. There are, of course, no routines for finding missing crew members, only contingent circumstances that demand new and innovative solutions.

The same human traits that were responsible for the disaster and loss of contact in the first place are now called forth to play a crucial role in the rescue attempt.

This symbolic reversal is echoed once again in the novel's structural closure.

Lem's work ends just as it began, with the word invincible. This classical circularity is appropriate, since the Earthmen do fulfil the mission they were sent for—after a fashion. Although they penetrate the mystery of Regis III, they do so only when they learn that "Invincible" does not translate into "Infallible," especially when human frames of reference fail as universal constants. In this sense, The Invincible is a key link in the chain of Lem's novels in which the extent, the meaning, and the limit of human knowledge are defined in encounters with the alien.

Techniques

On one level The Invincible falls within the often mined category of "contact with the alien." But Lem's novel is unique among science fiction which develops this theme along the lines of a "war of the worlds." Instead of presenting a conquer-or-be-conquered scenario, the writer reaches further afield to one of the forgotten sources of science fiction—the contephilosophique. Lem dramatizes problems of science by directing the same questions at his own narrative, thus using the novel not only as a model for inquiry, but also as a model of inquiry. Very early in The Invincible it becomes clear that the methodology employed by the scientists on board the ship is mirrored by the narrative structure. The novel passes from the description of basic research and gradual accumulation of data, through the hypothesis stage, to the point where a dominant theory emerges as a coherent picture of reality. Lem adopts the principles of scientific modeling for his narrative purposes insofar as the investigations conducted by the crew and the author follow the same pattern.

On another level, the structure of The Invincible is defined by a gradual escalation of conflict and violence. It is in this sense that Ursula Le Guin is right to suggest that anybody "who likes a tight, increasingly tense plot-line rising to scenes of dramatic violence will be satisfied." At the outset Regis III is simply a baffling enigma but the subsequent encounters with the Black Cloud quickly escalate into a state of total war. The first few skirmishes give way to a major attack which, in turn, is followed by the crew's decision to confront the "enemy" with their antimatter arsenal. The result is the first climax of the novel in which the spaceship's gigantic combat machine, Cyclops, is defeated in a battle of cataclysmic proportions. The second climax in the novel is an almost symmetrical, and clearly symbolic, reversal of the first armored engagement. In this second phase people again confront the Black Cloud but by using adaptive nonviolent means, they achieve a partial success.

In the second phase of the confrontation with the Black Cloud, Rohan— whose point of view dominates the novel—comes to comprehend the futility of the scientists' previous combative measures. In a clear echo of the military mindset of the crew, a similar anomaly is evident in the depiction of the mobile piece of Earth they inhabit—the Invincible.

The cruiser, an instrumental extension of human science, is a mechanical arm built to reach out into the Universe and explore its mysteries. But under trial by fire the Invincible sheds the guise of a neutral scientific probe for the titanium-molybdenum armor plates of a perfect fighting machine.

Lem's implied criticism gains additional power from the contrast between the technological splendor of The Invincible and the short-sightedness of its specialists. The novel's futuristic setting is only obliquely hinted by reference to the technologies at the crew's disposal—travel to distant stars, faster than light communication, hibernation, and antimatter weaponry—which well surpass present day means. It is in the thesis that mere instrumental progress does not guarantee conceptual maturity that the novel's

symbolism is most explicit. Lem's irony also reflects on the bias of mostly gadgetdriven science fiction, the conceptual sophistication of which quite often boils down to the "them or us" alternative.

The Invincible emerges the novel's pivotal symbol. It manifests not only the frailty of scientific preconceptions in the face of alien reality, but, more generally, the nonsense of anthropomorphic notions in confrontation with the forces of Nature. In Rohan's words, mankind should indeed "Conquer the void, of course, why not? But don't attack what already is, that which in the course of millions of years has achieved a balanced existence of its own, independent, not subject to anyone or anything, except the forces of radiation and matter—an active existence, neither better nor worse than the existence of the amino-acid compounds we call animals or human beings."

Key Questions

1. Do you find that the cognitive problem of cybernetic evolution and scientific response to it enhances or detracts from the action-driven plot of the novel?

2. Do you think that in The Invincible Lem succeeds in presenting a mystery that is genuinely alien? One that obliges you to re-examine and re-evaluate your previous ideas about space exploration?

3. At one point during his solitary search, Rohan sees his image mirrored and magnified by the Black Cloud above him. Can you explain this symbolic reflection of the human form in the inanimate Cloud?

4. Does the conceptual sophistication of the crew of the spaceship match their formidable technological means?

5. Horpach's decision to send another crew member after the missing scientists puts that man in direct danger and potentially jeopardizes the lives of the rest of the crew. Facing the same situation and the same ethical dilemma, would you make the same decision? Why?

6. The novel identifies over forty crew members by name and profession, yet, with the exception of Rohan and Horpach, they remain almost faceless. How do you explain Lem's decision not to characterize them further?

7. The book's long climactic scene involves two machine giants trying to annihilate each other. Even though there are no humans involved, did you find yourself involved in the battle?

8. How do you explain the symbolism conveyed by the name of the spaceship, especially when compared to the attitudes of its crew and what befalls them on Regis III?

9. Lem has often complained about the lack of "science" in science fiction. Is The Invincible open to this charge?

Literary Precedents

The symbolism of The Invincible is held together by multiple allusions to the gothic story. If anything, the science fiction setting of the novel makes the traditionally haunting elements of the genre—mystery, madness, death—even more ghastly. The derelict tower of the Condor, with its sickening spectacle of insanity and decay; the ghostly "corpsespy," which the doctors use to probe the memories of deceased crewmen; the echoes of Frankensteinian insubordination in the gigantic Cyclops; together with the almost Faustian retribution for the lack of humility in search for knowledge—all these elements contribute in original and often shocking ways to the gothic tradition which the novel subtly evokes.

Another clear allusion is evident in the name of the spaceship since, in the end, the mighty cruiser is proven far from invincible. Much like in Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias," the desert of Regis III makes a mockery of the ship's name and of its crew's military vanity and arrogance. Ozymandias's monument, half-buried under desert sand, boasts of its past glory with a proud "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair." The hubristically called Invincible similarly succumbs to the sand, wind, and inanimate life of the Regis desert.

Related Titles

Another work in which Lem mirrors his theme of contact with the alien in the structure of the narrative is The Futurological Congress (1971). In this short novel the author pictures a host of futuro-logical scenarios concerning the fate of the Earth in the event of an unchecked population explosion. At the same time he puts his own speculative efforts in perspective by reflecting on the nature of futuro-logical forecasting. At one point in the novel, Professor Trottelreiner, one of its maniacal characters, describes one of such forecasting methods in a way which suggests parallels with Lem's own efforts in this direction.

Linguistic modeling, which on a basic level will be represented by a creative use of language in fiction, can intimate the future by examining the possible evolution of language. In other words, by studying the possible development of linguistic expressions we may learn what categories, changes, and social revolutions the language will be capable of reflecting in the future. The verbal extravagance of futuro-linguistics, in which he indulges with hilarious results in The Futurological Congress, is Lem's way of illustrating why in some of his novels a "language crammed full with neologisms is necessary, and not just a perverse game with fantastic sounds." For Lem language can be a prognostic tool in literature which acts as an instrument for inquiry into the problems of our civilization.

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 94-18048ISBN 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