Killing Mister Watson Short Guide

Killing Mister Watson by Peter Matthiessen

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Contents

Characters

K illing Mister Watson is narrated by a potpourri of characters — ten in all, plus a fictionalized "historian" — who act in the "story" they relate but also stand outside as commentators and reflectors. They include Henry Thompson, Watson's foreman and devoted surrogate son; Richard Hamilton, a Calusa Indian midwife and patriarch of one of the county's most prolific families; Bill House, one of Watson's executioners; and Carrie Watson, his daughter, who exhibits changing perceptions and loyalties, and is an exemplar of ineffective and welldressed feminine morality.

In these narrators, Matthiessen has assembled a cast who, through a series of narrative "interviews," provide access points into the multiplicities of the Watson legend. Along with those who speak directly, the reader is also introduced to a community of coastal farmers, hunters, and fishermen, and a ragbag of oddball types who give depth to the fictional construct. These range from Jean Chevalier the eccentric French ornithologist, treasure hunter, and cynic, to Hannah Smith, a "wild woman" who hacks her way clear across the Everglades only to be murdered on Watson's plantation.

To an extent, this varied cast provides a typology of character that exemplifies strains of the novel's thematics — Hamilton the Indian sage, Jim Cole the small town politico, Frank B. Tippins the resolute lawman, Mamie Smallwood the storekeeper's durable wife — yet the trajectory of the narrations moves the reader farther away from any sense of certainty as to what events actually took place amid the "thousand islands" of the Everglades.

Instead, these voices reveal only the intricacies of self-interest and selfjustification. Although many of the characters are striking in their evocation, any attempt to privilege one of their voices over another ends in futility; each is subsumed by the ensemble.

They are in a sense less characters than eyes, variously trained on the variability that is E. J. Watson.

Social Concerns/Themes

Matthiessen's persistent concern with a primitive landscape bearing the incursion of white "civilization" is represented in Killing Mister Watson. However, instead of displacing this fundamental conflict to South America or the Caribbean, Matthiessen sets it in America, on the west coast of the Florida Everglades. It is here, among the "dark mangrove walls closing out the world, with the empty Everglades to eastward where the sun rose, and that empty Gulf out to the west where the sun set, the silence and miskeeters and the loneliness," that Matthiessen locates his chronicle of the life and death of Edgar J. Watson — farmer, businessman, and outlaw gunman.

Matthiessen has at times been criticized for his tendency to posit the superiority of the primitive over the civilized, but in Killing Mister Watson there is no "primitive" who receives unalloyed praise. These "frontiersmen" of the Everglades are themselves hanging on tenuously to the American continent, and are thus already infused with the values of American civilization, for better or worse. Indeed, a recurrent subject of meditation for the narrators is the question of how much white blood someone has, and in what mixture with what other strains. Even though Sarah Hamilton, one of the narrators, remarks that "this whole darn foolishness of blood will be the ruin of this country," she too proceeds to catalogue her forebears and their nationality. It is as though Matthiessen acknowledges here America's inability to escape this essential concern with racial purity, regardless of its impertinence. The enemy, finally, is shown to be as much within us as without: The Everglades and its wildlife are threatened both by the plume hunting of the settlers, which destroys vast heron rookeries, and by half-baked ideas to dredge the swamps or build a road across the Florida peninsula.

Matthiessen has remarked in a television interview that Watson, the shifting center of this novel, can be seen as "a metaphor for the violence of the frontier." If so, that "frontier" is simultaneously the geographical edge of the continent, the intersection of civilization and its opposite, and a frontier of morality in both the individual and community. While the reader sees Watson recede from the foreground, attention is drawn to Matthiessen's chief focus, highlighted in the novel's title. The book is an exploration not so much of Watson or his actions, but of the act of killing him — a communal act defying any clear ascription of agency, an act even the description of which is multiple and various.

Certainly, the novel draws attention to that particularly American tendency to celebrate its desperadoes even as it despises and fears them, but it also compels one to consider an even more desperate position, where individual responsibility for a collective act of violence is evaded by recourse to recapitulation and myth. As Matthiessen himself notes, his story is drawn from "a mix of rumor, gossip, tale, and legend that has evolved over eight decades into myth." It is this human propensity for myth-making, for the remaking of "history" as fiction, that takes center stage in the novel and reveals a murkiness of motive and morality at the center of things that rivals Watson's persona in desperation and menace. When one man's final verdict on the reasons for killing Mr.

Watson comes down to "folks just got tired of him, I guess," something has gone very wrong.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

By canceling as much as possible the authorial presence and giving over the act of narrating entirely to objectified others, Matthiessen's novel gives the lie to conventional notions of univocal historical truth, substituting a choir of competing voices in its stead. The collection of interview transcripts, diaries, news clippings and historical records that constitutes the novel gives Matthiessen an opportunity to display his formidable powers as a stylist and his unerring ear for the nuances of voice — talents always in evidence in his work, but never more superbly executed. But Matthiessen does not employ stylistic brilliance for its own sake; indeed, coming to grips with the formal innovations of Killing Mister Watson is crucial for an understanding of the novel's themes.

Comparisons of this novel to the work of earlier writers — the social criticism of Sinclair Lewis, for example, or the evocation of the humid moral wasteland of Joseph Conrad — were made in the earliest reviews of the book, and will no doubt continue. In addition to these, Killing Mister Watson shows striking similarities to William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! (1936).

Like Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen, E. J. Watson comes from nowhere to raise a plantation from the swamps; both are of dubious character but express undeniable physical and psychological force. Even the absenting of Henry Sutpen and the debacle of Judith's wedding in Absalom, Absalom! find parallels in Matthiessen's novel. But, while Absalom, Absalom! also explores the multiple points of view that make up history and the power of that history's hold upon its survivors and interpreters, Faulkner retains through his novel's diffusion of voices the characteristic and immediately recognizable Faulknerian style. Matthiessen, conversely, goes one step further, thoroughly fragmenting his voice into a multiplicity of styles that dissolve a fixed center of reference altogether.

Key Questions

The implicit menace and violence surrounding the character of Watson must surely evoke interested response, and exploring that initial response will provide a good point of entry into Matthiessen's ideas. Some attention to the narrative form will also be in order, particularly if it emphasizes not merely that form's innovative quality, but also its appropriateness for the media-inflected era this book and its readers jointly inhabit.

1. Given Matthiessen's blurring of the line between history and fiction, what can be made of the intervening passages of objective "history" that cement the separate recollections?

2. This is Matthiessen's only major fiction set in an American locale. What is specifically American about its places, people, ideas?

3. What are the precise delineations of Mr. Watson, as synthesized from the various accounts? What is the real source of his menace? How good or bad is he? What purpose is served by the technique of using multiple narrators to present him?

4. Does the trail of violence attributed to Watson offer a comment upon the society he inhabits? How ironic is it, and how necessary is it, that he, too, falls victim to that violence?

5. Is Matthiessen proposing that real individualism, pursued to its furthest logical extension, must always be destroyed by weaker men acting anonymously and in concert? Or is "civilization" predicated upon just such an elimination of threatening outsiders?

6. How significant is it that Watson is both a desperado and a political force? Is this of largely satiric intent, or do the categories blend, and at what point does lawmaking become lawbreaking?

7. In what way does Matthiessen's environmentalism make itself felt in this novel, and what impact does this issue have on its themes?

8. What function does Richard Hamilton, the Indian midwife, play here? Is he an alternative to the violence and murder of a white civilization that would also engulf him?

Related Titles

Besides the connections to the other Matthiessen works that have already been noted, the novel's investigation of "evil" and its focus on the individual and community response to that evil echo themes explored in At Play in the Fields of the Lord (1965). In technique, Matthiessen continues the fragmentation of voices and points of view found in Far Tortuga (1975). Yet in spite of these similarities, Killing Mister Watson is a major advance for Matthiessen; in complexity and maturity, both thematic and formal, the novel goes far beyond his previous work and is an achievement of great originality. Perhaps the most pertinent connection to his previous work lies simply in the recurrence of Matthiessen's boldness of vision.

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