The Lynchers Short Guide

The Lynchers by John Edgar Wideman

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.

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".

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".

Contents

Characters

The four conspirators in the plan constitute the main cluster of characters in The Lynchers, although they are ringed by lovers, family, and community members. Littleman, Wilkerson, Saunders, and Rice form an uneasy alliance based not on friendship but on need, brought together by Littleman and unable to maintain coherence after he cannot participate.

Littleman is the orchestrator of the plan, A cripple, he uses his cane and his tongue with equal fervor. He seems rational early in the book, an intellectual, a radical, a man obsessed with issues of race and class, but an eloquent spokesman against the evil and injustice he sees in his world. His passion ignites all the other characters — he draws them into the plan and makes it seem possible. He articulates for the other characters the disparity and despair in their lives, and his words offer them a way out. After Littleman is beaten by police and ends up in a hospital, the central force holding the characters together weakens and they spin apart. Littleman, isolated in his hospital bed, becomes increasingly strident and incoherent; he seems destined to end up on the insane ward.

His words could sustain the other men, but they are not enough for himself.

Saunders embodies both madness and viciousness, more concerned with his own power than the societal implications of the plan. He watches his mother go crazy, hustles on the streets, and becomes increasingly vicious, fantasizing about raping before murdering the black victim required to instigate the plan.

Rice, the keeper of guns, also goes insane. A poverty-stricken janitor, Rice sees significance in names (in his own, white rice as a symbol of oppression) and envisions himself a powerful revolutionary. He also is linked with the issue of random murder because he shoots Wilkerson, who comes to disarm him.

Wilkerson is the cautious conspirator, a fifth-grade teacher who understands intellectually the societal aspects of the plan. When the words become real, though, when he sees the daughter of the woman they plan to kill, he realizes he cannot go through with it. He is trapped by his yearning for a better life for his race and his knowledge that he cannot take their lives to attain it.

Wilkerson may be the most accessible character. His thoughts and actions reflect an ambivalent stance on the major themes — a stance many readers may share.

All four men self-destruct by the end of the novel. Littleman seems to be going insane; Saunders becomes unable to act without Wilkerson, whom he despises; Wilkerson dies at the hands of Rice. Of the four, only Rice is actually able to kill, and only then because he completely loses touch with reality.

The other three, despite their anger and their professed belief in murder, do not take advantage of the times when violence presents itself as an option. These characters are unique, creating a sense of sadness and waste as they spiral downward.

Social Concerns

Race relations, the nature of power, and the origins of violence all serve to illuminate the central issue in The Lynchers, an examination of society and revolution. Wideman offers a portrait of American society in the 1960s and 1970s as violent, oppressive, racist, spiraling downward to decay and chaos. The protagonists of The Lynchers see their plan to lynch a white policeman as an act of protest and renewal fomenting a revolution which will reverse the power relations between blacks and whites.

Race relations, therefore, are an important social issue addressed in the novel. The chasm between races seems unbridgeable, from minor to major events. A white woman casually farts behind a black man's head at a movie theater; white policemen brutally subdue and beat Littleman, one of the main characters, at a rally; a well-intentioned white teacher cannot make a difference in the lives of her students.

But it is the power behind race which Wideman is more interested in. The book addresses the nature of power, who wields it, and who suffers from the wielding. Littleman philosophizes about the nature of power: You must be prepared to assert your power brutally and arbitrarily if it is to remain pure . . . If it's a man over his woman, he beats her because she bats an eyelash; if it's a king over a subject people he systematically slaughters their first born. A master exercises droit de seigneur with the women of his slaves. The white citizens of Talladega Mississippi lynch a black boy.

And so it goes.

Each of the characters feels powerless, whether because of race, class, family circumstance, or physical disability.

They see the plan to lynch a white cop as an act which will begin to topple the existing power structure.

Violence is both a demonstration of and a reaction to power. The "Matter Prefatory" at the beginning of the book lists example after example of the violence visited upon black people in America by whites. This factual material evokes anger and frustration and helps the reader understand the motivation underlying the fictional plan. By intertwining fiction and reality, Wideman broadens the scope of the novel: this is not only a story of four men but of a race, and the collective history is as real as the individual manifestation.

The Lynchers touches a number of social nerves: the violent nature of American society, the fear and mistrust between races, and the threat of social unrest and upheaval.

Techniques

Watching Wideman work is like hearing a skilled jazz musician play. Each riff floats in the air, lingering as another is played, and the music intertwines and creates a whole out of seemingly disparate pieces. Multiple points of view, shifts in dialect, and tremendous energy propel this book.

One of Wideman's trademarks is his use of multiple narrators. In The Lynchers the points of view range from a white cop waiting to break up a rally, to Littleman rambling from his hospital bed, to Wilkerson's mundane preparation for school. Some critics find such shifts disconcerting, asserting that they call attention to the writer. It is true that this is not Wideman's smoothest book and that the changes in point of view at times seem to distract from the narrative.

Likewise, the dialect shifts call more attention to themselves than in other of Wideman's books, primarily because they are embodied in particular people.

Littleman's philosophical talk is often conducted in formal English, as he consciously moves away from Black English. In fact, Littleman argues with Saunders over his diction. In one section at the beginning of the novel, trash collectors meet for morning whiskey and nasty talk, a scene which seems more calculated to achieve effect than propel the book forward. In other books Wideman deftly shifts dialect, but in this novel the characters themselves call attention to their speech.

Underlying the text, though, is tremendous energy, which is fortunate because the events of the book are very dispiriting. The material which precedes the book, historically and literally, evokes anger. As the characters envision and then attempt to carry out their desperate plot, they pull the reader along. Wideman puts the reader in the same predicament as the conspirators, simultaneously intrigued and horrified by Littleman's theories.

Themes

The Lynchers is a bleak book, and its themes are unsettling. Wideman explores work, madness, and dying as components of a society in decay.

Work is a particularly meaningful concept in terms of the African-American experience, resonant after hundreds of years of slavery. All of the characters are stuck in meaningless jobs, from garbage collecting to rote work at the post office. Even Wilkerson, the teacher, finds that he has submitted to schedules and obligations which deny the basic humanity of his students. Wideman evokes a depressing picture of urban life in his descriptions of men waiting on the corner for temporary work or of three black boys sharing the same janitorial job without anyone even noticing. The meaninglessness of work contributes to the frustration permeating the characters' lives and is a commentary on the plight of their counterparts in contemporary African-American life.

Another theme of the novel is the development of madness, again a component of a chaotic society. Two of the major characters, Rice and Littleman, descend into madness over the course of the book, caught up, it could be argued, in the inherent insanity of the plan itself — of murder. Some, though, like the crazy residents of a hospital ward, have been affected by other forces, genetic and societal. These portraits offer a disturbing and moving exploration of the origins of madness and the way it is played out in society.

The Lynchers also examines dying, particularly as it is linked with meaning or meaningless in life. Littleman convinces his conspirators that each must be ready to give his or her life for the plan, asking, "What is anything worth if you've given up to others the single significant choice, the choice which proves something has value." By being ready to die for it, the four characters invest the plan with meaning.

That idea notwithstanding, the characters also wrestle with the idea of taking other people's lives, especially of murdering a black woman to instigate the plan and of making choices for the black people who will suffer the inevitable retaliation. Ironically, Sweetman, the character who opens the book with a sense of puzzlement about murder, is the one who himself commits a senseless murder at the end. The Lynchers demonstrates that death, however much it is intellectualized, erupts randomly and always with an individual price.

Key Questions

In its plot and themes The Lynchers is an explosive book, sure to elicit strong reactions from readers. The plan to lynch a white policeman, with its component parts of murdering and mutilating a black woman and the inevitable reprisals from white society, thrusts to the foreground issues of power, violence, and revolution. Such topics demand discussion, particularly in a society rife with unrest.

Kermit Frazier has said that Wideman's fiction "is difficult and places great demands on the reader . . . But he is an exceptional writer of keen insight who is certainly worth reading and following". The Lynchers is one of Wideman's more difficult books, both in terms of content and form. These questions may help readers work through some of the issues in the novel.

1. The four conspirators are radically different men. What draws them together? How are they similar?

2. What motivates the four conspirators?

3. How is power defined in the book?

Who holds it? In what ways is it wielded? How is power defined in society?

4. What is the effect of having Sweetman open the book? What is his role in the narrative?

5. What do you make of Anthony, the black boy at the hospital, especially his action at the end of the book?

6. Look at the women characters (Tanya, Angela, Mrs. Wilkerson, Sissie). Are they portrayed convincingly?

What role do women play in the plan and in the novel?

7. The plan is geared toward revolution. Speculate on what might have happened if the plan had indeed been executed.

8. A number of characters are linked with insanity (Saunders's mother, Littleman, Rice, the inhabitants of the seventh floor). What characteristics do they share? Does society create or simply define insanity?

9. What is to be salvaged from the wrecked lives in the novel?

10. Examine the episodes of violence in the book, both in the prefatory material and in the story itself. Is the violence justified, either in the book or in society?

Literary Precedents

In his ability to capture and present a whole stratum of society, Wideman has been compared to Dostoevsky, a comparison which is particularly apt in terms of oppression, revolution, and the internal workings of the human heart and mind.

Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952) serves as precedent. In both novels the protagonists inhabit a subsurface, living lives and thinking thoughts which are invisible to the rest of the world.

For the characters in The Lynchers, though, their burst through to society is fraught with violence and despair.

When Wideman wrote his first two novels, he had no awareness of African-American writers. He had not read works by black writers, utilizing instead his exposure to the European literary tradition. In The Lynchers Wideman begins to draw upon an AfricanAmerican tradition, dealing with issues of crucial importance and resonance for African-Americans. He acknowledges in particular the influence of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison upon his work.

Related Titles

Early in his writing career, Wideman was cautious about explicitly using names, people, or events from his own experience. After The Lynchers Wideman became more forthright about the origins of his fiction, admitting and then fully exploring autobiographical elements. But in this novel Wideman is still operating with what he calls "a very conservative idea" about what is appropriate to reveal. He may be using places from Pittsburgh or characters from his life as a student or his travels in Europe; in some passages he clearly utilizes his knowledge of basketball.

But the novel is not grounded in a particular place with recurrent characters the way his later books are.

One aspect of the book which runs throughout much of Wideman's work is the link between fact and fiction. In The Lynchers this link occurs early in the book, where the "Matter Prefatory" gives excerpts from books and newspaper articles recounting episodes of violence against blacks from the early 1700s to the 1950s. The fictionalized material which follows arises from historical fact.

Whether dealing in fact or fiction, many of Wideman's themes remain the same. In a broad sense he is concerned with the nature of human beings, particularly in exploring how race, family, community, and society combine to create identity.

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

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