A Manual for Manuel Short Guide

A Manual for Manuel by Julio Cortázar

BOOKRAGS

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Characters

A Manual for Manuel resembles Cortazar's earlier novels, not only in its fragmented view of reality, but also in its focus on a particular group of individuals who choose to live outside the mainstream of society. Like The Winners' (1960) beleaguered passengers whose metaphysical voyage takes place on a sea of doubt and confusion, or Hopscotch's (1963) lost generation of intellectuals who spend their days in philosophical discussions that ultimately lead them nowhere, or 62: A Model Kit's (1968) multiple protagonists whose destinies come together to form an ever more complex web of relationships from which escape seems impossible, A Manual for Manuel's group of revolutionaries are also outsiders in their rejection of middle-class, bourgeois values. Unlike the other novels, however, it presents a group committed to social action. They are not satisfied with merely talking about life's ultimate meaning, or involving themselves in personal quests for ontological truth or existential integrity. Rather, they are determined to pursue a course of action, albeit a radical one, to improve the present unjust situation in which the majority of their compatriots find themselves entrapped.

Social Concerns

Considered by Cortazar to be his first socially committed novel, A Manual for Manuel marks a new phase in Cortazar's literary development. In its unique blend of fantasy and fact, this novel attempts to share something of the anguish he felt when he read of the growing violence and tortures happening in Latin America, and particularly, in Argentina. Cortazar had met many young Argentineans living as exiles in Paris. It was from these tragic encounters with his fellow countrymen that A Manual for Manuel was born. As evidence of his personal commitment for social justice, Cortazar donated the profit from this book to organizations aiding the families of political prisoners in Argentina.

Techniques

The novel's structural division between historical reality and imaginative adventure is fragmented further by Cortazar's dual narrative technique.

One narrator, Andres, who comes closest to Cortazar's personal situation, presents the events from the perspective of a semi-outsider. He finds himself torn between two opposing alternatives: either to accept his comfortable bourgeois situation or to commit himself seriously to the socialist revolution. In contrast, the other narrator, known only as El que te dije (You know who), is a firmly committed revolutionary.

The final outcome of the group's attempt to free political prisoners in exchange for the kidnapped diplomat ends tragically. After a violent encounter with the French police, the group is captured. Although it is not certain, it appears that some might have been killed. The majority, however, are sent back to their countries to stand trial as political terrorists. From the above, it is clear that to interpret Cortazar's novel solely in political terms would be a mistake. When "You know who" speaks of revolution he is not concerned merely with political reforms or armed uprisings, for these changes touch man only from the outside. Rather, he is in search of changes that will affect man from within, changes that will affect his entire way of perceiving reality.

Cortazar has stated that for him writing is a contest he wages with words. Language is a mask that keeps man from confronting truth. Only by penetrating traditional linguistic structures can he hope to reveal what lies behind this mask. Among the many examples of Cortazar's linguistic experimentation are the following: the spacing of letters to create multiple meaning in what otherwise would be a simple statement of fact; the insertion of diverse thoughts (in extremely small print) between the lines of the normal narration to linguistically capture the experience of simultaneously thinking one thing and expressing another; direct character criticism of explanatory language; the employment of music, especially jazz, as an efficacious way to escape the restrictive boundaries of intellectual concepts and linguistic structures. Perhaps the most obvious example of Cortazar's attempt to free himself from traditional linguistic restrictions is when he has Lonstein develop a wholly other language, boex, whose structure is founded on an erotically poetic base that defies rational thought. Its economic or abbreviated use of phonemes, called ecofon, creates an illogical vision of reality that reminds one of the nonsense poetry of Dada.

Themes

A Manual for Manuel portrays reality from two distinct perspectives or levels. On the one level it presents the objective reality of Latin America. This is done by repeated inclusion of actual newspaper clippings about political atrocities. On the second level it presents an absurd adventure, referred to as the Joda (which, according to Cortazar, means messing around), in which a group of political idealists attempt to kidnap an important diplomat. The idea of abducting a prominent official in order to hold him as hostage in exchange for the release of political prisoners is founded on historical reality. What is absurd is the manner in which the abduction takes place. It is a game. As in most games, there are rules and procedures to be followed.

As part of the Joda's game plan the group invents an absurd strategy for obtaining counterfeit funds. A turquoise penguin is donated to the French government. The illegal money is hidden inside the container carrying this imaginary bird. Unlike most games, however, its goal transcends mere amusement or escape from the "real" world. Like the novels that precede it, A Manual for Manuel's game is a resounding affirmation of man's dignity and thirst for freedom.

Although A Manual for Manuel is firmly rooted in contemporary history, it is obvious that Cortazar is not interested in writing a traditional book about political tyranny. Rather, his goal is to create an open book that challenges both the reader and himself to search for their own particular answers. By juxtaposing newspaper articles that serve to shock the reader into states of pity, guilt, frustration, and anger with the highly imaginative events of the Joda, the reader is able to perceive the Latin American reality from two distinct points of view. As a result the "objective" events described in the newspaper clippings seem to be more fantastically grotesque than the "absurd" events that take place in the Joda.

At the very heart of A Manual for Manuel is the quest for a freedom that transcends political realities. One episode is particularly enlightening in demonstrating this point. Andres candidly confesses to his girlfriend, Ludmilla, his concern about choosing the best way to achieve a greater sense of wholeness. In his fear of passively accepting destiny's plan for him, he rejects the path that leads straight ahead. He also refuses, however, the option to turn to the left or to the right.

What he seeks instead, is the unattainable experience of simultaneously moving in opposite directions.

Andres' quest for personal satisfaction, uncomplicated by any social concerns or commitments, resembles Oliveira's egocentric search. In Hopscotch, Oliveira would share with La Maga his intellectual and self-centered search to capture more fully the meaning of life, only to be abruptly shaken by La Maga's natural openness to and oneness with all that surrounds her. In the case of Andres it is Ludmilla who awakens him to a most fundamental truth: the need to remove the focus of attention from one's ego and to approach reality from a wholly radical perspective. Ludmilla refers to a super

revolution that transcends current political circumstances and penetrates into the metaphysical realm of taboos.

For Cortazar, one of the most serious impediments to man's freedom is his fear of the forbidden areas or taboos that society arbitrarily places upon its individuals. A major part of A Manual for Manuel veers from the political spectrum and centers on modern man's coming to terms with the unknown forces that lie hidden deep within his subconscious. Specifically, Cortazar confronts two sensitive areas (masturbation and sodomy), that traditionally have been looked upon by society as unnatural, and therefore, forbidden activities.

Cortazar's use of deviant, abnormal, or forbidden sexual behavior is a theme that has been present in each of his novels. His characters experience a sort of enlightenment or profound union with an "other" precisely at those moments that are considered taboo or forbidden. It should be recalled that in Hopscotch Oliveira experienced his one moment of enlightenment while being sexually manipulated by a repulsively haggard derelict. Cortazar seems to be saying that only those who descend into reality's dregs will find the truth that will set them free. As such, Lonstein's practice of masturbation and Andres' sexual violation of Francine, in A Manual for Manuel, may be considered deliberate transgressions of the sexual norms of society in order to experience a subsequent release from the bonds that imprison them.

Although A Manual for Manuel has the exterior facade of a political intrigue, it is clear that its principal theme transcends political freedom.

Much of what transpires has to do with Andres' personal growth into a more socially aware individual. In a key episode, Andres has a dream in which he is told of a mission he is to fulfill.

At the time when his mission is being explained to him there is a momentary blackout similar to a cut in a movie. At the dream's conclusion he is certain that he has a definite goal to achieve but has no idea of what this goal might be.

Just as Andres' dream was a call to awaken, to break through into the unknown, forbidden areas of his subconscious, so too, Cortazar's treatment of language in A Manual for Manuel is a call to go beyond the linguistic barriers that impede man's understanding of life.

Adaptations

One of Cortazar's best known short stories, "Las babas del diablo," was adapted by Michelangelo Antonioni in 1966 into an internationally recognized film entitled Blow-up. Starring Vanessa Redgrave, David Hemmings and Sarah Miles, the film explores the theme of illusion and reality. A photographer (Hemmings) has taken a photo of what he believes was a murder; Redgrave suspiciously tries to seduce him out of the negative.

Literary Precedents

A Manual for Manuel is at once an example of socially committed writing and avant-garde experimentation, and as such is much more than its title indicates. Two members of the terrorist group, Susanna and Patricio have an infant named Manuel. As a way of preserving the "true" history surrounding his heritage, the group makes him a scrapbook made up of the very same news articles that appear throughout the novel. It is hoped that by being exposed to such a book, Manuel might develop into a socially aware and committed adult. What the scrapbook is to Manuel, Cortazar's novel is to the reader. A Manual for Manuel was written for the adult literary population, many of whom are searching like Andres (and Cortazar) for the truth, so that they might respond honestly and honorably to the historical circumstances surrounding them. Written in the tradition of avant-garde writers such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, Cortazar's manual leaves the reader pondering its ambiguous ending. It is hoped that the reader's state of confusion might lead him to continue the search begun earlier by Andres.

In the final scene, Lonstein is at his job in the city's morgue. As he prepares a recently arrived corpse, he wonders whether anyone will believe the events that have just taken place.

For the reader, two important questions remain unanswered: To what extent is A Manual for Manuel's reality true, and who is this unidentified corpse? Cortazar hopes that the novel's many news articles will convince the reader of its fundamental truth about Latin American reality. The fact that the corpse is never identified allows the reader to supply his own intuition to solve this mystery. To some, the corpse might be one of the terrorists, possibly "You know who." Others might see in his anonymity a statement that each man, in his own way, is called to follow his mission, no matter where it may lead him.

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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