

Myra Breckinridge Short Guide

Myra Breckinridge by Gore Vidal

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

Myra Breckinridge Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Adaptations.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Related Titles.....	8
Copyright Information.....	9



Characters

Myra is the bitch goddess she proclaims herself to be, a symbolic embodiment of the new woman, larger than life and twice as deadly. The fact that she is a transsexual only makes her symbolic power the stronger because she can be seen to have chosen womanhood. Other characters include Letitia Van Allen, yesterday's nymphomaniac, a self-directed woman but one living in the past and only fooling herself that she is using men, and Buck Loner, the ineffectual remnant of male supremacy. Rusty and Mary-Ann rep resent the misguided values of the past thoughtlessly perpetuated by the younger generation. Myra puts a stop to this. She abuses Rusty with a dildo, turning him first into a sadist (Letitia Van Allen winds up in a full body cast) and then into a homosexual, and she seduces Mary-Ann into a lesbian affair.

Of course, when Myra turns back into Myron this relationship metamorphoses into precisely the conventional sort of thing Myra has been at war against.

Inside every Myron, Vidal seems to say, there is a Myra fighting to get out, but it is a difficult struggle, and few will make it. None of these characters have any depth, but that very fact makes them perfectly effective for the book's satiric purpose.



Social Concerns/Themes

Myra Breckinridge marked Vidal's return to the public eye at the center of a major controversy. This novel, delineating some fantastic consequences of a sex change operation, scandalized some readers, but it allowed Vidal to paint a strongly satirical portrait of American society. Myra Breckinridge shows, on the one hand, that the ideals of the American way of life are identical to those of the B movies of the 1940s and 1950s and, on the other, that all power is in some ultimate sense sexual power. The novel seeks to make readers rethink all sexual stereotypes. Just when the crazed feminist has shown the ultimate absurdity of the new theory of woman, the reader discovers that Myra is, after all, a transsexual (fiction's first transsexual heroine) and thus in her very nature a parody of womanhood, yet the satire does not stop here, for a terrible accident destroys the effects of the surgery, and Myra is turned willy-nilly back into a man. Myra/Myron illustrates twice over in a very concrete fashion the difficulty of the contemporary struggle to acknowledge the essential androgyny of humankind. For Vidal, every man seems to envy the freedom and creative power of woman. Myra is the consequence, and she is a neat satirical twist on the folk wisdom that today's is a patriarchal society. Traditional male power represented by Buck Loner is easily outwitted by Myra's legal machinations; traditional couples like Rusty and Mary-Ann are torn apart and transformed; and yet the plot so cleverly integrates these changes that they seem inevitable. The theme clearly emerges that American society is already on the brink of androgyny.

Techniques

Myra Breckinridge uses alternating first-person narrators (one as if transcribed from unedited tape recordings) to provide its expose of the superficiality of contemporary sexual mores. This method works very well in withholding the book's secrets for disclosure at the right moments. Myra's diary gives full insight into her overripe vision of reality, and Buck Loner's tape recordings provide an appropriate leavening of the mundane and help keep the reader from taking Myra too seriously.

Adaptations

Michael Same directed a movie version of Myra Breckinridge that was released in 1970. Negatively reviewed by the critics, it was not particularly popular despite extensive prerelease publicity. The casting and acting are excellent (although unusual and much criticized at the time), and many of the individual scenes are effectively recreated. The problem is a screenplay that makes no sense, and the reason for this seems to have been the decision to lure Mae West out of retirement to play Letitia Van Allen. While she has exactly the right style for the role, she rewrote parts of the script and refused to do other parts while insisting on top billing. The movie that was released is an abbreviated version of what could be shot around these demands. Myra is played by Raquel Welch, bringing an effective larger-than-life intensity to the part her own plastic surgery had destined her to play. The film critic Rex Reed was the unlikely choice to play Myron, but his cool detachment is right for the part. Other members of the cast include John Huston as Buck Loner, John Carradine as the doctor, Roger Herren as Rusty, and Farrah Fawcett as Mary-Ann. Old film clips are effectively intercut to underscore the satire.

Although Vidal is a successful and effective screenwriter himself, his work has seldom been transferred to film effectively. The one exception is his own adaptation of his play *The Best Man*, directed by Franklin Schaffner and released in 1964. It featured Henry Fonda, Cliff Robertson, Edie Adams, and Mahalia Jackson. It was hailed as an engrossing drama. The worst travesty is the 1960 movie directed by Norman Taurog with Jerry Lewis made from *Visit to a Small Planet*.



Literary Precedents

Henry James's experiments with multiple narrators in works like *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) are behind Vidal's use of alternating narrators. James's experiments, in turn, have behind them a long tradition including works like Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and earlier epistolary novels, for example the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tannes*, *La Princesse de Cleves* (*The Princess of Cleves*, 1678) by Madame de La Fayette, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (*Dangerous Love Affairs*) by P.-A.-F. Choderlos de Laclos, and *Clarissa* (1932) by Samuel Richardson. In his use of transcripts of unedited tape recordings for one of the narrative voices, Vidal also owes something to the documentary novel illustrated by the John Dos Passos work *U.S.A.* (1930-1936) and Bel Kaufman's *Up The Down Staircase* (1964). This technique substitutes for a straightforward narrative a gathering together without authorial comment of materials from which the reader pieces together a story. Discussing Vidal's picture of the decadence of the world, more than one reviewer compared Myra Breckinridge to *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, and there are other precedents in the *Justine* of the Marquis de Sade and the *Satyricon* of Petronius. Both the deft plotting of the novel and the satiric voice owe a great deal to the Evelyn Waugh of *Black Mischief* (1932) and *Scoop* (1938).



Related Titles

In *Myron* (1974), the theme that all power is sexual power is carried even further than it is in *Myra Breckinridge* as Myra shows that saving the MGM movie studio and ending the world population crisis are in some sense the same problem: All she need do is emasculate all the movie extras (just as she was once emasculated) and substitute her own drag queen hyperreality for Maria Montez in the 1948 movie *Siren of Babylon*, for which express purpose she has been transported back to the past through the magical time lapse of television commercials. The levels of reality in this book are complicated to describe, but not difficult to follow in context. Additional complications are provided by the narrator's schizophrenia, with sometimes the cautious Myron in control and sometimes the wild Myra. Myron uses film-making effectively as a metaphor for time travel to contrast the present unfavorably to the past; the book is also highly successful in manipulating euphemisms to mock Nixon-decade Supreme Court justices and others who want to use community standards to determine what is obscene. But even with all these stylistic pyrotechnics and a raunchy sexuality, the book was neither a critical nor a popular success. Perhaps in part because of changing standards of taste, although appearing only six years after *Myra Breckinridge*, *Myron* was not even a *succes de scandale*.



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