Neighbors Short Guide

Neighbors by Thomas Berger

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Contents

Characters

The cast of Neighbors is stringently limited, as perhaps befits a comedy of bad manners. The cast consists of Earl Keese, his wife Enid, his daughter Elaine, Harry, Ramona, Baby, their wolfhound, and the seemingly interchangeable Greavys, who are in reality father and son. To be sure, a few friends of Keese and Enid are mentioned and Keese does talk to some of them on the telephone, but they are essentially bit-players.

Since the novel describes the stresses and heightened intensity of the last day of Keese's life, all the characters are seen through his highly emotional and paranoid point of view. Keese is in fact a man about to have a heart attack, mainly because his mind and body are stressed to the breaking point. (However, Keese acknowledges to himself that he had felt that his life was essentially over as he had accepted an existence of inertia when he had reached the age of forty-five a few years before.) As a result, Keese's view of Harry and Ramona's actions is charged with suspicion about their actions and skepticism about their explanations. In essence, Keese seems to be projecting on the rude Harry and Ramona the stored up resentments of a lifetime of anger over a society that treats individual sensitivities with contempt. Thus the events of the novel frequently seem hallucinatory to the thoughtful reader, although he or she may conclude that there are rational explanations for the actions of Harry, Ramona, and the Greavys, rather than the ones generated by Keese's sense of persecution.

Restricting the narrative point of view to Keese's consciousness allows Berger to present sharply delineated characters who attain the hard outlines of satirical caricatures. At times, Harry, Ramona, and the Greavys seem less credible as realistically drawn characters than Keese's vision of them: For him, they are malignant demons sent from some mysterious realm to bedevil him.

Keese, an overweight and sedentary middle-aged suburbanite, has a passion for correct form and for controlling his life and his environment. As a result, he is peculiarly suited to be a victim of Harry's and Ramona's aggressive and shameless behavior. Not only has Keese purchased a house at the end of a lonely suburban street (which ends in a cul de sac), but he resents unexpected changes and would like to have control over the choice of which neighbors will live in the only nearby house. Unfortunately, Harry and Ramona bring into Keese's life the crass behavior and annoying lack of consideration that Keese despises in everyday social life. Although readers probably sympathize with Keese's reactions to their vulgarity, they may find his insistence on controlling events somewhat fatiguing, as it is for Keese himself.

However, at the end of the novel, Keese becomes a more human and sympathetic protagonist, for he acknowledges that Harry and Ramona are "free spirits" and "the world would be a worse place without them."

By contrast with Keese, Harry is a presumptuous and gregarious back slapper, who tries to become friendly with Keese even before they have been properly introduced. No action seems too outrageous for Harry, as long as it is performed in the name of good

fellowship. Not only does Harry invite himself into Keese's house without approval, but he also promotes a dinner invitation for himself and Ramona. Moreover, he orders the food he wants after pawing through Keese's private papers in a desk, even commenting on the smallness of Keese's bank balance. One of his crowning insults is to claim forthrightly that Keese made homosexual overtures to him.

Yet part of the irony of the novel is that it is Harry who seems to be a primary victim of Keese's exasperation. It is Keese who pushes Harry's car into the swamp at the rear of the house, and later Keese, who locks both Harry and Ramona in the game room in his basement, in an effort to end their aggressive assault on his sense of decorum. Moreover, Harry must be considered a victim of his wife's sexual aggressiveness and absence of moral concern since it is Ramona who takes an uninvited bath in Keese's house, then naked under a bath towel, drapes herself on Keese's bed to waylay him.

Ramona is to some extent a female version of Harry's brash rudeness; but her behavior seems even more irrationally shameless than his, at least from the point of view of traditional moral standards. Although she has had no opportunity to get acquainted, she has the effrontery to wait in the nude for Keese in his own bedroom. Such an act of "neighborly friendliness" becomes an ironic parody of traditional neighborly civility.

After he rejects her obvious invitation to have a few moments of meaningless sex, Ramona later denounces Keese to his wife, claiming that he tried to rape her.

Yet even fully clothed, Ramona remains a sexual aggressor, later surprising Keese when he steps nakedly out of his basement shower. Keese's response to Ramona is indignation and shock; indeed, he quickly decides that she must be insane. However, his reaction seems to be a blend of anger over Ramona's lapse of decorum and revulsion because of her feminine aggression. Whatever the truth about her sanity, Ramona's actions are essentially shameless, for despite her advances to Keese, she ingratiates herself into the confidence of Keese's wife, Enid, and has some success at turning Enid against him. Moreover, Ramona has an annoying ability to use Baby, her wolfhound, as a prop in her games.

By contrast, Enid, who has long been a passive and uncomplaining wife, is depicted as a source of exasperation for Keese because of her reactions to the offensive neighbors. Whereas Keese wants her to be a psychological ally, she seems more concerned about Keese's irrational actions and the possibility that he will embarrass them. At best, Keese can only view her as an uncomprehending and innocent victim of their crass neighbors. Enid's obsession with observing the proprieties seems to be as great as Keese's own; she also appears to be concerned to protect her new neighbors (whom she admits she does not like) from angry outbursts by Keese.

Enid is portrayed as a somewhat ambiguous character, so that the reader must ask whether she is merely lacking in perception, or whether she clings to social decorum as a protection against the fears and uncertainties of confronting a world without courtesy and good manners, a society where, as Keese says, "chance encounters can be brutal."

In fact, late in the story she confesses that Harry and Ramona frighten her and this is the main reason for her cooperation with them.

Although Enid may seem merely obtuse, Keese finds her unpredictable and frequently fears that she has become fellow conspirator with the objectionable Harry and Ramona.

Similarly, Keese is uncertain of the responses of his daughter Elaine, who makes an unexpected appearance in the middle of the novel. As a student home from college for the weekend, she seems even more than Enid to be a mischievous co-conspirator with Harry and Ramona.

Fueled by youthful energy, Elaine's actions suggest to her father that she shares some demonic secret with his tormentors. In fact, Keese has idolized her and overlooked her faults. To be sure, Elaine finds Keese to be an overly protective father; although he does not want her to drink, he finds that she carries a small bottle of vodka in her purse, which she shares with Harry, and tries to share with her mother.

Nevertheless, Elaine is not exactly playing a game like that of Harry and Ramona (their guiding principle seems to be the attempt to be deliberately outrageous and unpredictable). When Harry oversteps the bounds of hospitality by placing his hand on her back and then touching her hip, Elaine does nothing; but after Keese hits Harry she praises Keese and calls him a "hero." Elaine is also presented ambiguously: Her mother assures Keese that Elaine has been expelled for stealing a ring at the dean's house; but at the novel's end, she has decided to return to school. Was the ring actually stolen by a friend, as she tells Keese, or is she going back to return the ring herself? Moreover, Elaine seems genuinely fascinated by Harry when he is present, and she also seems to be adopting Ramona as a role model. Yet when Harry and Ramona leave for good, after their house burns (although it is revealed that they did not really own the house), both Elaine and her mother claim that their behavior during the weekend was a pretense assumed because of their fear of Harry and Ramona. One must conclude that Elaine has a streak of perversity—including the inability to explain her acts directly—which makes Harry and Ramona attractive to her.

Perhaps the key to understanding Elaine is to realize that she has a secret agenda, since she may be planning to drop out of the university without telling her father. But the sensible reader will see Elaine not as the demonic conspirator Keese imagines her to be, but as a fairly typical adolescent female student, dominated by the egotism of youth and pursuing her private schemes without informing her parents.

Similarly, the Greavys, the father and son who are handymen engaged by Keese, both appear to be the same maddening person, and their erratic service visits seem to be conceived with the object of increasing Keese's frustration.

They become understandably hostile after Harry plays the joke on Keese of having the elder Greavy haul Keese's car in for inspection, although there is nothing wrong with the vehicle. Although they are masters at offering the studied insolence of service people, their actions are understandable to a knowledgeable reader. However, the reader may

sympathize with Keese in his resentment of their habitual contempt toward their customers. The elder Greavy avenges himself on what he considers Keese's arrogance by hitting Keese in the stomach, and he apparently puts "Pimp" in whitewash on Keese's car, after discovering that he has had to haul it in and inspect it for no clear reason.

In short, the behavior of the other characters, although often bizarre, remains somewhat consistent with the demands of fictional realism, except for the final sequence when the dying Keese dreams that Harry and Ramona have returned for him. It is the peculiar perspective of Keese's point of view that allows the reader to perceive Harry and Ramona as demons perfecting the practice of rudeness and the other characters as fellow conspirators in the Kafkaesque world created by Keese's bitterness and incipient paranoia.

Social Concerns

Neighbors is, among other things, a smooth but corrosive satire on bad manners and the lack of neighborliness, or even fundamental respect for others, in contemporary society. Thomas Berger's dark comedy of manners opens when Harry and Ramona, an obnoxious couple, move in next door to Earl Keese's isolated suburban house, and spend a day and a night imposing themselves in offensive ways on the apparently innocuous and middle-aged Keese. Harry and Ramona are not so much three-dimensional characters as caricatured social monsters, like the grasping and avaricious characters in Ben Jonson's seventeenthcentury comedies, who often seem to be personified vices. Both Harry and Ramona cheerfully take advantage of Keese's good will through numerous impositions that often masquerade as good fellowship in America. Harry virtually invites his wife and himself to dinner on the first day of their acquaintance, and Keese is shocked to find Ramona naked in his bed at their first meeting.

If Keese is constantly victimized and offended by the shameless couple, he is also subjected to various humiliations by repairmen and service people, all of whom turn out to be the insulting Greavys, father and son. Just as Harry and Ramona represent the kind of impolite aggression one routinely confronts in a society without good manners, so the Greavys in their insolence satirize a social situation where the consumer is at the mercy of those he hires to serve him.

Keese's sense of outrage is heightened by his isolation, for neither his wife nor his daughter seem aware of the offenses committed by Harry and Ramona. Clearly, the novel is a portrait of Keese as a contemporary American Everyman: a beleaguered loner, harassed by social forces completely beyond his control.

Techniques

Keese is clearly intended to be a twentieth-century American Everyman. It is essential to the theme that the other characters not be fully developed, but rather remain as two-dimensional figures.

Harry and Ramona are embodiments of surface good nature and vulgarity; the Greavys are textbook illustrations of contemptuousness; Keese's wife Enid seems blissfully unaware of any social undercurrents; and his daughter Elaine is self-absorbed and enigmatic, at times even appearing to be a fellow conspirator with Harry and Ramona. Berger's earlier novel, Sneaky People (1975), portrayed a small group of Midwesterners who hid their true interests from each other; in Neighbors, since the reader is restricted to Keese's point of view, the effect is like experiencing Sneaky People without being taken into the mind of more than one character.

Berger uses certain surrealistic techniques to heighten the irony of the novel.

Not only are many events left ambiguous and enigmatic, but a year's indignities are compressed into the span of one day. To add to the irony, time is mysteriously accelerated, a phenomenon that might be explained by Keese's tense state of mind and impending heart attack. Finally, there is the final ironic appearance of Harry and Ramona as Harry's companions in the ambulance; Zulfiker Ghose, commenting on this point, compares Harry and Ramona to the fabled angels of death.

Themes

Beneath the dark comedy of Neighbors, there is an undercurrent of tragic irony, particularly since the novel ends with Keese's fatal heart attack (his neighbors have literally persecuted him to death). As a middle-aged and prosperous suburban householder, Keese has tried to insulate himself against the more unpleasant realities of American life. Yet this mild mannered conformist is an archetypal victim who must confront the same indignities that others face. In this respect, Keese resembles the Everyman figures of some celebrated European literary works, like Ivan Ilych in Leo Tolstoy's novelette, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," or Joseph K. in Franz Kafka's The Tria/ (1925; see separate entry). Like those predecessors, Keese finds himself the target of implacable fates in the persons of Harry, Ramona, and the Greavys, who seem determined to make Keese pay for his lifelong attempt to avoid anguish and suffering.

At times, however, Berger's irony is double-edged, for Keese, the victim, sometimes becomes the aggressor in his response to Harry and Ramona. But Keese's acts of aggression seem to produce more guilt for Keese than harm to his tormentors, who appear impervious, like the specters of nightmare. In the final scene, at any rate, Keese's anguish is handled compassionately, when Harry and Ramona return to be companions in the ambulance after his heart attack. (No doubt their appearance is an hallucination brought on by his illness, but that only heightens the aesthetic effect of their presence.)

It is clear that one major theme of the novel is the need for Keese to recognize the emptiness of his highly conventional middle-class life, which he has constructed as a defense against the moral nihilism of outsiders and the threat of mortality. In presenting this theme, Berger has skillfully adapted the vision of Kafka's novels and the absurdist drama to an American setting. As Harry and Ramona destroy Keese's carefully maintained sense of order, they make him aware of the existential anguish of living, confronted by irrational events and happenings that no human being can control.

Both Harry and Ramona, and the chaos they bring in their wake appear to be the embodiment of a capricious fate or a series of random accidents no reasonable divinity might permit. With his defense of civility and common sense demolished by their persistent intrusions into his life and their readiness to tell any lie convenient to the moment, Keese is forced to confront the emptiness of his own existence. With common sense assumptions about human behavior destroyed on the final day of his life, Keese must face the challenge of the daunting fact of daily living and its irrational mystery. In this regard, the novel follows in the tradition of existentialist and absurdist fiction, which systematically strip away the illusions fostered by social life to depict human life as a bitter and relentless struggle for understanding, as in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot, (1952) where humanity is reduced to two Chaplinesque figures waiting hopelessly in a vast wasteland.

However, the novel has a secondary theme, which is a satirical view of American contemporary social behavior. In this sense, Harry and Ramona are caricatures of

American "bad manners": their behavior offers conventional camaraderie and the spirit of "good fellows together" as a mask for the absence of obligations owed to tradition and the claims of morality. While exuding ready familiarity and bonhomie, Harry and Ramona are ready to violate every social taboo, from Harry's prying into one's bank balance to Ramona's offering easy infidelity within Keese's own house. Moreover, they refuse to take note when they have worn out their welcome.

In the end, it is not surprising to learn that they never owned the neighboring house at all but were merely posing as the new owners. They are shameless social parasites whose actions constantly threaten destruction of the unspoken conventions that allow human beings to associate together within the bounds of civility.

But if Harry and Ramona are comic monsters, their behavior also frequently offers a realistic parallel to contemporary failings in manners.

Adaptations

John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd starred in an undistinguished film adaptation released in 1981. Directed by John G. Avildsen, with a screenplay by Larry Gelbart, this film attempted to capitalize on the novel's critical and popular success by developing it as a vehicle for the popular Belushi and Aykroyd,. The female leads were Cathy Moriarity and Kathryn Walker, neither of whom made much of an impact.

The film's chances of success were seriously hampered by the miscasting of Belushi as Keese and Aykroyd as Vic (the Harry of the novel). Although the intention may have been to impose control on Belushi's manic style and to prove that he was capable of playing a victim, the casting simply does not work: Belushi is too controlled and also not very believable as a middle-aged conformist, and Aykroyd lacks the demonic energy his role requires.

Neither the script nor the direction provides much help. Gelbart's script is indebted to the novel for its best scenes and effects and seems otherwise uninspired. The direction by Avildsen is flatfooted and fails to establish the rapid pace or the proper balance needed for a film that teeters between reality and nightmare.

Key Questions

Neighbors lends itself easily to comparisons with Kafka and probably will stimulate discussion about the changing tone of American life. An interesting question is whether Earl Keese imagines many of the things that Harry and Ramona do.

Another interesting issue is whether, assuming the reality of the insults he perceives, Keese has provoked hostility by his attempt to separate himself from society in a secluded suburban home.

1. What is our view of Earl Keese as a person, apart from his relationship with Harry and Ramona?

2. What major acts of bad manners do Harry and Ramona commit? Since the concept of manners tends to shift with social values, what defines good manners in our time?

3. Why does Earl's wife fail to observe and react to the bad manners of Harry and Ramona?

4. How does the use of the Greavys reinforce the main theme of the destructiveness of bad manners coupled with aggressive invasion of privacy?

5. What incidents help to create its surreal or nightmarish quality?

6. Why does Keese believe his daughter, on her brief visit from college, to be oddly alien, or even an ally of Harry and Ramona?

7. How significant is the curious acceleration of time, which Keese notices more frequently in the later parts of the novel? What is the effect of Keese's perception of time?

8. Is the final sequence, when Harry and Ramona return for Keese, an episode of pure fantasy? Could the final sequence be an effect of Keese's heart attack?

9. Berger has commented that the reader who called Harry and Ramona "angels of death" was surely accurate. In what ways are Harry and Ramona fulfilling the mythic role of "angels of death"?

10. Although Harry and Ramona are indescribably vulgar, they appear in some ways to be more sympathetic than the beleaguered Keese. Why?

Literary Precedents

The fiction of Franz Kafka is the most obvious influence on Neighbors, an influence acknowledged by Berger himself.

The novel manages to capture the surrealistic or nightmarish tone of a Kafka story, which begins in an apparently realistic situation and moves to the farther reaches of the fantastic. Some other influences have already been suggested: the Tolstoy story, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," and the work of European absurdists and existentialists like Samuel Beckett, Eugene lonesco, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. The dark fables of Kurt Vonnegut, like Slaughterhouse-Five (1969; see separate entry), may be another precedent; but the darker side of Berger's own earlier novels—especially Crazy in Berlin (1958) and Who Is Teddy Villanova?

(1977)—is probably equally significant as a literary precedent.

Related Titles

Neighbors can be seen as one of a trilogy of Berger's satiric novels about modern America's bad manners. The others are Being Invisible (1987; see separate entry) and The Houseguest (1988; see separate entry). While Neighbors is not explicitly a fantasy, it hovers on the edge of the Gothic or the surreal, especially in its final scenes. Being Invisible, however, uses invisibility to provide its protagonist with the vision to see reality more clearly. And The Houseguest, although staying barely within the bounds of naturalism, often seems on the verge of entry into the fantastic.

All three novels describe the ways that contemporary people who could be expected to treat one with civility— neighbors, hired help and tradesmen, bosses, and society's authority figures—manage to treat people of good will with insulting contempt.

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