

No Adam in Eden Short Guide

No Adam in Eden by Grace Metalious

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Contents

No Adam in Eden Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Adaptations.....	7
Key Questions.....	8
Literary Precedents.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10

Characters

In many ways *No Adam in Eden* is the story of Armand Bergeron and his odyssey from a French-Canadian farm to prosperous baker in upstate New York. Metalious traces Bergeron's life back to his ancestors in France and follows the gradual decline of his spoiled and bitchy daughter until the end when his granddaughter, Lesley, finds contentment in the bed of her Italian-American husband. Gone from this novel are the small-town types which inhabited *Peyton Place* (1956) and *Cooper's Mills*. The doctor betrays his patient and Bergeron; he is neither wise nor kind. For the most part the haughty and prejudiced do not get their comeuppance. Armand, whose only sin is ignorance, lives a life of misery, married to a woman who with psychotic intensity seems to delight in torturing him both sexually and emotionally. Armand and his wife Angelique live and work at cross purposes.

Angelique desperately wants to be rid of the burdens put upon her by her sex and her economic dependence. She can escape neither and ends her life embittered and abandoned.

Social Concerns

The main social concern, a topic touched on only lightly in Metalious' previous novels, is that of ethnic assimilation. The focus in this novel is on French-speaking Canadians who migrate to the United States in search of greater economic opportunities but instead find prejudice and exploitation.

The social strata take on an additional layer in this novel, for the characters must not only overcome the usual economic and social barriers but also race prejudice as well. The novel follows several generations of a family in their migration from Canada through their entry into American society, albeit on the lower rungs.

A great deal of the recent critical commentary on Metalious has focused on her place as an American writer of French-Canadian heritage. The focus of many of these articles has been on the changes in the traditional French culture brought to this country by immigrating families when they experienced a more open and diverse culture in the United States. Certainly the fiction of Metalious cannot by any stretch of the imagination be thought of as conventional. Her characters and the circumstances of their lives demonstrate how individuals must make accommodations to changing circumstances in a rapidly evolving world. That many of these changes go counter to the more traditional old-world French society with its patriarchal family structure and hierarchical Catholic religion puts the values under scrutiny in the novels squarely at odds with not only French-Canadian traditions but also with standard American values as well.

Techniques

Metalious' last novel received very few reviews, and those it did get were for the most part negative. One of the things the reviewers pointed out with frequency was the lack of structure and general looseness of the book. It did not really seem to have a plot. In many ways its lack of a conventional plot makes *No Adam in Eden* an interesting work. It is as though in her foundering, in her desperation to create another book, Metalious fell back on a highly elusive style, one totally foreign to mass market popular fiction, a style that worked against the grain of her genre.

Themes

The theme of female emancipation is again of concern here but does not fare well. The only female who ends very happily is the one who completely submerges herself in motherhood and the dominance of her sexually powerful husband. It is the end rung on the ladder of descent for females begun in *The Return to Peyton Place* (1959). The few women who do achieve a measure of freedom do so at a great cost both to themselves and to their families, and they become unpleasant persons in the process. Clearly the way to happiness is subjugation.

The past takes on increasing importance since one's past, in this case an alien one, determines one's present.

The grip of the past is an iron one, however, and the structure of the novel is dominated by the flashbacks, which reach ever farther into the past as if in search of causes for present maladies.

The plot is of the thinnest sort; the story being carried forward primarily on the reminiscences of backwardlooking characters. In no other Metalious novel is the past so important and so inexorable in its influence.

The theme of ethnicity is also explored here for the first time. Immigrants may share the American dream, but they rarely enjoy the fruits of it, as one generation may overcome poverty but will never rise much in the social scale. It is not a new theme but one which is rarely dealt with, at least in so negative a way, in popular fiction of this period, where the norm seems to be that hard work and honesty do pay off in the long run.

This is an extremely dark book.

There is little happiness for anyone. It is a book of regrets, backward looking and negative. It is cynical and, until the end, lacking in hope.



Adaptations

Hollywood has used the subject of alcohol abuse in numerous movies like Billy Wilder's *Lost Weekend* (1945) and Blake Edwards' *Days of Wine and Roses* (1962), but never has it produced a film with the devastation of *No Adam in Eden*, although the novel sold few copies and was never released in paperback and therefore did not gain the recognition which might have made it a marketable film commodity. It is also such a depressing book, one without an upbeat ending, that its very nature may also have prevented it from ever being filmed.



Key Questions

1. Discuss the meaning inherent in the title of the novel.
2. Compare this novel with others which treat the problems of alcohol and the social as well as personal destruction it causes.
3. Does the extremely dark nature of this fiction have meaning beyond a personal one for an author who was dying of her disease?
4. Metalious depicts a very bleak view of male/female relations in this book. What does it say about gender relations in general?
5. This novel is the one most often cited by those who wish to write about the French-Canadian aspects of Metalious' background. How is this novel ethnic in nature?
6. Unlike her other more successful books, *Peyton Place* and *Return to Peyton Place*, the prose quality of this novel is excessively restrained. How does that affect the reading of the work?
7. What other major themes does this novel raise that perhaps were not raised by her other writing?
8. The theme of death looms large in *No Adam in Eden*. What do you make of it?
9. The very darkness of this work of fiction brings to mind her indebtedness to the great English writer Charles Dickens. How is the novel Dickensian, how not?
10. In what ways is this book a summation of Metalious' other novels with the themes carried to extreme?

Literary Precedents

Although Metalious is not normally thought to be a novelist who wrote out of the mainstream of American literature, many of the themes contained in her books do exhibit concerns usually thought of as traditional. This is true of her last novel, *No Adam in Eden*, which by its very title announces an anti Edenic theme. From its very beginnings the literary traditions of this country have played with the notions of America as having an Eden-like environment in which it might be possible to recapture an innocence long associated with humankind before the biblical expulsion from the garden. Metalious, like many other American writers before her, called such possibilities into question and explored a world devoid of conventional notions of redemption.

Her rejection of the very idea of an Edenic America was formed from her own duality of perspective as both ethnic and economic outsider.

The main figure in *No Adam in Eden* further extends this alienation from the American mainstream by exploring, often in excruciating detail, the place of the alcoholic in such a world. Even though the character of the alcoholic outsider was not new to Metalious, she particularized her figure in exacting detail, partly as a result of her own experience as an alcoholic, but also as an outsider in other ways. The open way she approaches the subject of substance dependence in this novel makes it one of the first to do so with such uncompromising honesty. It is a very painful book one which is reminiscent of the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald.



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