

Old Ramon Short Guide

Old Ramon by Jack Schaefer

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

Old Ramon Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	9
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	10
For Further Reference.....	11
Related Titles.....	12
Copyright Information.....	13

Overview

In his books and stories, Schaefer celebrates the solid virtues of the Old West. He has said that in all his storytelling he establishes a strong major character whom he pits against specific human problems. In *Old Ramon*, the title character, an aging but infinitely wise herder of a wealthy rancher's sheep, must meet a number of challenges. In confronting them, Ramon demonstrates skills and attitudes that Schaefer values highly.

Throughout the book, Schaefer intends for his reader to identify with the heroic aspects of Ramon's character.

The shepherd's skills and experience allow him and his flock to survive numerous calamities, and he possesses a profound and sympathetic wonder for the natural world around him. His lifelong profession has made him completely self-reliant. The young boy who accompanies Ramon gradually comes to admire and finally to adopt these moral and physical strengths. Schaefer intends that his young readers will also learn to respect the shepherd's values, which, in Ramon's words, are "not in the books" and which, for Schaefer, are in danger of being lost in modern technological society.

Old Ramon won an Ohioana Book Award (1961) and was selected as a Notable Book by the American Library Association. In 1975, Schaefer received the Distinguished Achievement Award of the Western Literature Association.

About the Author

Jack Warner Schaefer was born on November 19, 1907, in Cleveland, Ohio. He graduated from Oberlin College in 1929 and attended Columbia University before setting out on a varied career as a reporter, an educator in the Connecticut State Reformatory, an editor for a series of eastern newspapers, and finally an associate in a New Haven, Connecticut, advertising agency. Only in his early forties did Schaefer turn to fiction. He scored an immediate success with *Shane*, a novel the Western Writers of America honored as the best Western novel ever written. Schaefer now lives on a ranch near Sante Fe, New Mexico.

Schaefer has said that he likes to write about the West during the period when people were affected by the wildness of the land and the challenge of frontier life. This material carries a natural appeal for many young adults. While virtually all of Schaefer's books may be read for entertainment and instruction, *Shane* and *Old Ramon* (his one book aimed specifically at a juvenile audience) have proved to be the most popular among young readers.

Setting

Old Ramon is set in the American Southwest at an indeterminate time, probably around the turn of the present century. This setting is important in all of Schaefer's writings. He often writes about the twilight of the Old West, when the values of the rugged frontier were being supplanted by the domesticated, technological ways of the "civilized" East. Like Schaefer's great fictional creation Shane, Old Ramon represents the last of his kind, one of a dying breed whose character had been molded in an era when the influences of civilization had seemed far away and of little account. This produces a distinct note of sadness in many of Schaefer's stories.

He regrets the inevitable passing of people like Shane and Ramon, whose attitudes and skills will soon become superfluous as the New West supplants the Old.

Schaefer vividly details the challenges of this Western setting, which is filled with dangers as well as delights. Ramon and the boy face rattlesnakes and howling sandstorms, treacherous river crossings and marauding wolves. This conflict between humans and nature is central to the plot and themes of Old Ramon.



Social Sensitivity

Old Ramon is a salutary and refreshing entry in the field of juvenile fiction: its protagonist is Hispanic, elderly, and decidedly heroic. Ramon is a suitable and effective mentor for the boy, as well as for the novel's young readers.

This is not to imply that Ramon is a one-dimensional character of predictable goodness. The shepherd has his flaws; for instance, he is occasionally irascible, and he confesses to the boy that as a young man he was profligate with his earnings and was drawn too readily to women and whiskey. But Ramon's virtues far outweigh his past failings, so that at least in the arena of his work—and for Ramon, work and life are one—he represents a completely admirable role model for young people of all backgrounds. Further, Old Ramon is wholesome fare, devoid of gratuitous violence and objectionable language.

Literary Qualities

Critics and general readers alike have praised the clarity and directness of Schaefer's prose style. This undoubtedly reflects Schaefer's experience as an editor and journalist. In keeping with the setting and Ramon's cultural background, Schaefer attempts in this novel to give his English prose a distinctly Spanish flavor, much as Ernest Hemingway did in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

This approach may occasionally seem awkward and cumbersome, but the overall effect is expressive and lyrical: The boy looked at him, startled, and shrank smaller inside the blanket. His own small hat was down right over his ears and the bandanna was over his face and his eyes peered out from between, large and staring and blinking much. He listened and the wind was a high thin screeching above and the throbbing under this seemed almost to be shaking the very earth and the dimness increased, strange and unfamiliar, unlike any dimness known before. He shivered and pressed closer to Old Ramon. That was not the wind rushing overhead. It could be many demons shrieking and searching for them.



Themes and Characters

Old Ramon is the story of a boy's gradual attainment of adult values and perspectives. The rancher's son accompanies Ramon for the summer grazing season. In years past, Ramon had served as mentor to the boy's father and grandfather, initiating them into the mysteries of the flock and the natural world. Like his forebears, the boy acquires practical knowledge from Ramon, such as how to distinguish a wolf from a coyote or how to use tobacco smoke to drive ticks off the sheep. More importantly, the boy is exposed to the old man's basic values of fidelity, courage, persistence, and respect for the wilderness. By the novel's end, the boy is more nearly a man and more ready, in his turn, to assume the role of the rancher.

In *Ramon*, Schaefer has created one of his most sympathetic and clearly etched characters. Ramon has "the feel of the flock born in him." For this reason, the boy's father has turned the youngster over to the shepherd to learn those values that cannot be learned from books. In his classroom of the shrinking American frontier, Old Ramon imparts values that seem headed for a premature and lamentable extinction.

The plot of *Old Ramon* unfolds in a series of physical dangers and obstacles, both remembered and present: the fording of a river, a desert trek, a rattlesnake, a chorro (sandstorm), a wolf, and a marauding bear. These produce increasing suspense and tension, which culminates in a small tragedy and, more happily, in the boy's rebirth into new maturity and understanding. Schaefer skillfully manipulates the reader's emotions and expectations. Although *Old Ramon* is a simple story simply told, the young reader will find it appealing in terms of its characters, themes, and action.



Topics for Discussion

1. How is the relationship between Ramon and the boy mirrored in the differences between the two sheep dogs, Pedro and Sancho?
2. What specific motives do you suppose the boy's father had in mind when he sent his son to spend a season with Old Ramon?
3. Toward the end of the sandstorm episode, the boy tells Ramon, "I will not be afraid. . . . You are here." Contrast this sentiment with the boy's earlier angry rejection of the old man. What has taken place between the two incidents to account for the boy's change of heart?
4. Ramon recalls crossing the Mojave Desert with the boy's grandfather. Why does this adventure—and its aftermath—figure so powerfully in the old man's memory?
5. Old Ramon makes a sharp distinction between loneliness and simply being alone. From Ramon's point of view, how is it possible to be lonely in a crowded town yet be perfectly content with the solitary life of the shepherd?
6. The character of Old Ramon has much in common with other heroes in American literature, particularly in his antagonism toward a settled, domestic, predictable sort of existence. What other prominent characters in American fiction can you think of who are similarly unfettered, restless, anxious to "move on"? What does this tendency have to say about the American view of the world? About the "American Dream"?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Many critics tend to discredit such "escapist" types of literature as Westerns, science fiction, Gothic romances, and mysteries. Why, then, would Schaefer, a serious writer, consciously choose to place Old Ramon in a Western setting?
2. Other critics (and many general readers) are wary of didactic fiction— literature which seeks to teach a moral lesson or promote a particular view of the world. Do you find Old Ramon overly didactic? Do you think Ramon himself is too "preachy" and his moral instruction heavy-handed?
3. The unnamed boy in Old Ramon shares many characteristics with Bob Starrett, the youngster in Schaefer's celebrated novel Shane. Discuss the two characters' similarities. How is Shane himself like Old Ramon? How is he different?
4. The first great obstacle that Ramon and the boy confront is the river crossing. In what ways is it appropriate that this challenge comes first in the narrative? When Ramon risks his life to save the drowning sheep, what sort of implicit statement is he making about his values, his philosophy?
5. According to the ways by which our society normally measures success, Ramon has not succeeded in life: he has no money, and his profession carries little prestige. What personal qualities account for Ramon's "failure" in this respect? Viewed from other perspectives, can Ramon be considered a successful man?

For Further Reference

Drennan, William Ryland. "Jack Schaefer." In *Beacham's Popular Fiction in America*, edited by Walton Beacham and Suzanne Niemeyer.

Washington, DC: Beacham Publishing, 1986. An overview of Schaefer's chief works, especially *Shane*, *Monte Walsh*, and *Old Ramon*.

Haslam, Gerald. *Jack Schaefer*. Boise State University Western Writers Series. No. 20. Boise, ID: Boise State University Press, 1975. A brief, sympathetic discussion of Schaefer's works and themes.

Scott, Winfield Townley. "Introduction" to *Collected Stories of Jack Schaefer*.

New York: Arbor House, 1966. A concise look at Schaefer, his debts to earlier writers, and his place in the literature of the American West.

Related Titles

The principal theme throughout Schaefer's fiction is the loss of Western frontier values to the civilizing influences of the East. Although Schaefer recognizes that this change was inevitable, he regrets the displacement of the rugged characters and credos of the frontier. In his best-known novel, *Shane*, the title character is a gunslinger who struggles desperately to conform to the settled, domesticated life of a farmer.

In *Monte Walsh* (1963), Schaefer's most ambitious novel, a skilled cowboy is first constrained and then destroyed by his inability to adapt to this new environment.

Old Ramon is related to this general theme in that the values Ramon imparts are those which he had learned when humans, like the open prairie, were not fenced in by the rules of a larger society.

It is important that the boy learn these values, so that they are not utterly lost when the ancient shepherd and those of his generation pass away.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, 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 Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996