

Outerbridge Reach Short Guide

Outerbridge Reach by Robert Stone

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Characters

Throughout his body of work, Stone has created characters who have been described by one critic as "men and women who are fatefully, unluckily, inexorably drawn to threatening circumstances and who confront, both physically and spiritually, only the dimmest prospect of salvation." This is clearly true of all the principal characters in *Outerbridge Reach*, most dramatically for Owen Browne and to a lesser extent for his wife Anne and for Ron Strickland. Based on need rather than any sense of competition, Owen's decision to enter the race seems to others as reckless and egocentric. For Owen, the race is a test of will and commitment. It is meant to reaffirm the value of his life. Yet for Anne the concept of winning the race takes on increased importance: "It was the only revenge on life. Other people wanted reassurance in their own misery and mediocrity. She required victory."

Most critics agree that the character of Owen Browne represents a unique departure for Stone, exemplifying the range and depth of his narrative energies. Stone is particularly successful in allowing the dislocation that permeates Owen's existence to slowly take possession of his actions. As Owen begins to falsify his position in the race, he is forced to confront the implications of his decision. Less convincing as an evolving character is Anne Browne whose motivation seems generally contrived and artificial. Stone compensates for her lack of development by enabling Anne to interact with a disparate supporting cast that effectively enhances the flow of the novel. In effect, Anne plays a pivotal role in the formation of the triad that allows Stone to contrast Owen and Strickland.

More representative of Stone's fictional characters is the hipster filmmaker Strickland, described by Pritchard as someone who "prides himself on his lack of illusions, his way of penetrating to the false heart of every plausible or pretentious human affirmation." Determined to expose the false idealism that connects Owen and Anne, Strickland intends the documentary of the race to serve his purpose. From the moment of their first meeting, Owen and Strickland are pitted against each other for control of the film and eventually even for Anne, who is seduced by Strickland before finally rejecting him. Owen's death forces Anne both to reevaluate and to reclaim her own existence. The novel concludes with Anne preparing to undertake a similar race. "She was convinced that expiation was required and that their honor could be restored if she went to sea.

There, she have believed, she might somehow find him and explain. The ocean encompassed everything, and everything could be understood in terms of it. Everything true about it was true about life in general."

Social Concerns/Themes

In each of his novels, Stone allows the reader access into a fictional world that is at once vivid and disconcerting.

He attempts in his fiction to create a situation that in his own words "liberates some people from the prison of the self as it invites others to play out their personal drama on a larger stage. One sees people caught up in things that transcend the personal, but always bringing their own needs and desires to bear. People make pleasant and unpleasant discoveries about each other and themselves. The elements of drama descend on ordinary people and ordinary lives." In *Outerbridge Reach* Owen Browne and his wife Anne are cast as the "ordinary people" about to play out the unrehearsed drama that awaits them. As the complacency of their lives is jarred by circumstance, they encounter an unforeseen dimension of experience that is both foreign and unforgiving.

Atypical of Stone's narrative range, *Outerbridge Reach* represents an artistic departure for Stone as a novelist.

Known primarily for exploring what William H. Pritchard has called "the unlovely underside of American life," Stone moves forward in *Outerbridge Reach* to create a montage of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Similar to *Dog Soldiers* (1974), *Outerbridge Reach* centers on a triangle of a husband, wife, and confidant/betrayer. What is strikingly dissimilar is that Stone has created principal characters who are relatively unique in relation to his existing body of work. The husband and wife, Owen and Anne Browne, represent something of an All-American couple.

Living and working in suburban Connecticut, with Anne commuting to her part-time job in New York City, the Brownes appear outwardly content within the parameters of their existence. Yet to the discerning eye of the intruding outsider they are instead sedentary in their lives, passionless, and of most importance to the narrative design, ripe for exposure.

The primary focus of the novel is on the character of Owen Browne. An Annapolis graduate and Vietnam veteran, Owen belonged to a generation of promise who in his own estimation failed to prove the measure of his expectation. Now in his early forties, married and the father of a teen-age daughter, he has resigned his commission and works as an advertising copywriter for a yacht manufacturer. Falling victim to self-imposed discontent, Owen unexpectedly finds himself in the unlikely role of celebrity. Following the announcement of financial irregularities within the company and the sudden disappearance of the company's flamboyant owner Matty Hylan, Owen offers to take his place as a solo contestant in a round-the-world sailing race. Owen's decision is made on impulse but in essence represents an opportunity to regain a measure of self-esteem as well as a conscious attempt to prove himself. Likewise, his wife perceives the race as an opportunity for Owen to fulfill an unrealized dream and to redefine if not salvage the future of their marriage. The situation is further complicated when the Hylan



Corporation hires filmmaker Ron Strickland to make a documentary of the race as a means to gain publicity and to restore public faith in the company. In reality, Owen's decision is at once foolish and desperate, and the romantic gesture is doomed from the beginning. The journey that began as a means to validate his life ends instead in Owen's undoing. As in much of Stone's fictional oeuvre, failed idealism turns into disillusionment. This is true for Owen as well as for Anne, whose affair with Strickland is charted with the same intensity as Owen's journey into self-destruction.

Described by Pritchard as a "blend of heroic aspiration and mordantly deflationary irony," Owen's participation in the race is an attempt both to reclaim the past and to restore faith in the future. Alone in his effort to confront the physical and emotional turmoil of existence, the voyage becomes for Owen a means of self-examination and retribution. As disillusionment gives way to despair, Owen is forced to accept the futility of his endeavor.

Much as the boat itself begins to break apart, Owen begins to decompensate.

The perception of himself adrift in a world that failed to take notice is enlarged by the image of Owen adrift in the vast expanse of unending ocean.

Having lost interest in the race, Owen comes ashore on an island and finds himself in an abandoned world as reflected earlier in the novel by the graveyard of decaying ships in the Outerbridge Reach of the title. Struggling to maintain his sanity, Owen finally submits to the destructive element. He can find solace only in the comfort of staging his own death: "He had made himself unworthy of his own predicament and the truth was no longer his to convey. It had to be served alone. Single-handed, he thought, I'll make myself an honest man."



Techniques

Divided into two parts, *Outerbridge Reach* interweaves in part one the narratives of the principal characters leading up to the beginning of the race. In the second part of the novel the race itself serves to connect the quest undertaken by Owen with the personal crisis confronting Anne in her relationship with Strickland. Similar to his other novels, *Outerbridge Reach* is intricately structured, incorporating a variety of thematic variations and contrasting locales. The novel maintains a consistent level of intensity and builds to a climatic resolution as Owen's voyage and Anne's affair come to an abrupt and pitiful end.

Noteworthy in the novel is Stone's use of language to enhance both narrative flow and characterization. Alternating between expressive prose and vernacular speech, Stone is particularly adept at creating vivid imagery and convincing dialogue. As a novelist, Stone is highly influenced by film and the texture of the narrative is embellished by cinematic techniques. His ability to move from scene to scene with relative ease and agility allows Stone to create a vast panorama of experience. In addition, he enriches the quality of the narrative with numerous allusive references to Shakespeare, Shelley, Christopher Marlowe, Joseph Conrad, Hart Crane, and Herman Melville, among others.

Throughout the novel Stone enhances thematic development and characterization with a series of contrasts: the false idealism of Owen and Anne Browne with the hard-edged realism of Strickland, loyalty with betrayal, the surreal skyline of Atlantic City with the stark beauty of the Arctic landscape. Most striking is the contrast that exists within Owen merging the rational with the irrational. Owen is the victim of his own undoing, but the emotional void that consumed his existence comes to represent the prevailing factor in the lives of both Anne and Strickland. As the novel concludes, the survivors struggle to reconcile the past and to embrace the importance of possibility.

Key Questions

Outerbridge Reach is a novel that incorporates a wide range of diversified characters and thematic concerns.

It should provoke a number of divergent responses to the actions of the principal characters: Owen's decision to enter the race, Anne's affair with Strickland, Strickland's manipulation of the Brownes in making the film. In addition, the novel raises provocative questions about the importance of commitment and purpose in a world where values such as these become increasingly more difficult to find.

1. Prior to the race, there are several indications that the boat Owen is sailing is not properly made. Why does Owen choose to reject these warnings?
2. Despite the rashness of his decision, Owen is presented with the opportunity to change his mind. Discuss the possible reasons Owen chooses to continue with the race. Does he expect to win?
3. Owen's difficulty in communicating with his daughter seems to provide insight into his personality. What role does Maggie Browne play in the novel?

Why did Stone consider it necessary for the Brownes to have a child?

4. How is Owen's character defined by his exchange with the carpenter engaged to work on improving the boat?
5. Is the injury to Owen at the beginning of the race meant merely to suggest impending doom? How does the injury set the pace for what follows?
6. The contrast between Owen and Strickland is a fundamental element in the development of the novel, yet a number of critics have commented on their similarities. How are Owen and Strickland similar to each other?
7. How does Stone demonstrate through his relationships with women the complexities of Strickland's personality? How does the character of Pamela Koester help to enlarge the reader's perception of Anne Browne?
8. It is more than likely that many readers will feel sympathetic toward Owen as he becomes further consumed by the consequences of the voyage. Is it possible to feel sympathetic toward Anne? Toward Maggie? Or even toward Strickland?
9. Discuss the significance of religion within the novel. Does guilt become an overriding issue in the development of the novel?
10. As he prepares himself for death, Owen feels "filled with illumination."

What are the possible meanings of illumination?



11. Discuss the range of emotions that constitute Anne's decision at the conclusion of the novel to enter a race similar to the one that claimed her husband's life?

12. How would the Brownes have survived if Owen had decided against participating in the race? What projections could be made if Owen had completed or perhaps even won the race?

Literary Precedents

In much the same way as *Dog Soldiers* is a novel about Vietnam, *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981) about third-world revolution, and *Children of Light* (1986) about Hollywood, *Outerbridge Reach* is a novel about the sea. As such, it extends from the literary tradition that includes Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). Stone is clearly influenced by the concept of the sea as infinite authority, possessing unlimited power to transform, to cleanse, and to erase.

Merging the commonplace with the nightmarish, *Outerbridge Reach* is a complex novel that examines faith, commitment, endurance, and, in the end, human frailty, deceit, and loss.

Stone is acknowledged as being distinctively original among contemporary fiction writers, and *Outerbridge Reach* provides further extension to his literary reputation.



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

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994