Paradise Short Guide

Paradise by Donald Barthelme

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.

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".

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".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Simon, the protagonist, is the most completely realized character in Paradise. A well-to-do and noted fiftythree-year-old architect, he is cultivated, somewhat eccentric (he listens compulsively to a collection of three old radios), and disturbed. He is troubled by dreams that reveal his fears of being ineffective and impotent. He repeatedly dreams of having trouble putting on his pants and confesses to an anxiety about being stabbed with scissors by a woman who cuts his hair.

He is troubled by guilt and self-conscious about his aging body, and he drinks and smokes too much. Simon's marriage has failed to provide hoped for satisfactions and his relationship with the three women he meets by chance and invites to share his apartment also proves to be a dead end, even though it offers the fulfillment of a male fantasy, a sexual paradise beyond the conventional restrictions of marriage.

The three women, Dore, Veronica, and Anne, are less fully realized as characters. Although they do possess distinct personalities, they are often confused, especially in pages of dialogue where Barthelme deliberately avoids identifying the speakers. Furthermore, they often think Simon cannot tell them apart. The three women have worked together as models in Denver, and being in their twenties, are much younger than Simon. Dore comes from Ft. Lupton, Colorado, where she was married to an abusive drug manufacturer who is doing time in prison for making "crack." While living with Simon she audits classes on investment strategies and reads novels by Charles Dickens. Veronica, the least developed of these three characters, also comes from an abusive past, having been beaten as a child by her father. She is repeatedly identified with her obsessive workouts on a trampoline she moves into Simon's apartment.

Anne seems to come from the south and is the only one of the three women who has never married. She has worked with young children and spent three years as a secretary in Denver. She initiates an interest in feminism among the three women during their final weeks living with Simon. Her greater importance as a character is stressed by the fact that she is the only one of the three whom Simon asks separately to stay and live with him. All three women are intelligent and witty even though they sometimes accuse Simon of treating them like "dumb bunnies."

Simon, however, recognizes their intelligence while also frequently feeling culturally removed from them by age: their T-shirts have slogans Simon cannot understand. All three women also express the theme of directionless existence. They look unsuccessfully for jobs, repeatedly discuss what to do with themselves, and dabble in numerous short-lived interests to fill up the time. Like Simon they are searching for satisfactions that will last. They are all, as Simon says, in an "in-between state," in limbo, not paradise. As one of the women puts it, they are "in some sort of waiting room."

Other characters of note in the novel include Simon's soon to be ex-wife Carol, Simon's daughter Sarah, the shiftless entrepreneur Tim, and Simon's doctor, who is identified

only as Q. All these minor characters further illustrate the novel's themes of failed relationships, aimlessness, and unprofitable searches for satisfaction. Simon's wife files for divorce and immediately begins a hopeless affair with her boss.

Simon's daughter Sarah drifts without visible purpose or emotion through dropped college courses, pregnancy, and an abortion. Tim, a professional whistler, works in a car wash and later, although not a lawyer, starts a company specializing in medical malpractice cases. Simon's doctor, although not a psychiatrist, questions Simon about his life and dreams, and instead of offering advice, tells stories of his own problems, which are remarkably similar to Simon's.

Social Concerns

Paradise, Barthelme's third novel, comically but urgently expresses a concern for the elusive satisfactions of marriage, sex, career, money, and, to a certain degree, spirituality in the confusing context of a modern urban existence. The quest for such satisfactions is, however, a failure. The paradise of the novel's title remains unrealized even though the protagonist, Simon, is allowed to sample all the presumed ingredients of such a perfect state of happiness. Simon, a successful, fiftythree-year-old Philadelphia architect, finds a bomb under his car, perhaps placed there by a frustrated contractor.

The situation provides an excuse for him to get away not only from his job but also from an increasingly unsatisfying marriage and have a year on his own without work in New York City.

Meditating on his failing marriage and questioning the substance of his career, Simon begins his midlife crisis in solitude but is soon joined by three beautiful homeless young women with whom he begins sharing his spacious and barely furnished apartment.

Sexually involved with all three women, separately and together, Simon enters what one of the women calls "hog heaven." Besides sex, Veronica, Dore, and Anne offer Simon wit, youth, and companionship. The four of them indulge in marathon sex, gourmet dining, and complex arrangements of emotional interdependence. However, they are openly critical of Simon, consistently reminding him of his age, his occasional impotence, and, as they begin to explore feminism, his possibly oppressive powers of exploitation. The three women, somewhat like Simon, are also adrift in the confusing aimlessness of the urban world. They spend hours trying to determine what to do with themselves, questing for some sort of satisfaction that endures. Paradise eludes them as it does Simon, and though he has grown emotionally dependent on them, the three women eventually leave, disappearing in the absurd chaos of modern life. Simon is left with a wife filing for a divorce involving huge alimony payments and property settlements, a daughter who drops college courses and gets an abortion with equal nonchalance, and a nonpsychiatric doctor who responds to Simon's concerns by talking about his own problems and handing out a variety of little pills. Rather than finding paradise or "hog heaven," Barthelme's characters remain in a sort of limbo.

The quest for lasting gratifications ends in disillusionment and a sense of paradise denied or, as Simon phrases it, "Paradise unearned."

Like many of Barthelme's short stories, especially those in City Life, Paradise is set in a New York City that represents what Barthelme sees as the disintegration of modern urban life.

The New York of Paradise is the city of the 1980s, populated both by the promoters and the victims of self-interest.

It is a world in which everyone is trying to get ahead while really getting nowhere. The characters of Paradise are adrift in life, never gaining the satisfactions they seek. Barthelme's New York is a place without connections or continuity. The writing style reflects the nature of the novel's setting by sometimes presenting what amounts to a collage of disjointed themes, incidents, and images. Simon sees his urban existence as isolated, a "life as a ghost, one of the rewards of living in the great city" in which there are "So many units rushing to and fro that nobody noticed much."

The New York setting of Paradise can be meaningfully divided into interior and exterior scenes. Much of the novel takes place within Simon's apartment, the emptiness of which reflects the unfulfilled lives of Simon and the three women with whom he lives. Like the lives of Barthelme's characters, the apartment is a space waiting to be filled. The futility of trying to fill this space and to find fulfillment in life is reflected in Simon's attempt to decorate the huge blank walls by hanging a single tiny painting. Although the apartment is a place of emptiness and isolation, the lives led there — the intricacies and dead ends of Simon's relationship with the three women — reflect the confusion of the outer urban world.

Outside on the streets of New York lies a world of absurd, disconnected and sometimes violent incidents. Couples make love on the flagstones behind Simon's apartment building. Two men beat up a black policewoman, Hal, who appears to be a homeless veteran, sleeps on a grate, and wanders the street screaming obscenities. A bleeding drunk appears by the building's front hall door. Discussions of life outside in the streets contain repeated references to an invasion of the city by rabid skunks.

Barthelme's urban setting emphasizes the confusion and aimlessness of modern life. It is a world of chance meetings in bars, grocery stores, and laundromats, where characters drift by each other without making any lasting connections. A striking aspect of the urban setting is Simon's vision of New York recalled at the end of the novel.

Approaching by plane to Kennedy airport, Simon observes one hundred miles of garbage in the Atlantic, a confused mass drifting like the lives of the characters and like the events of urban existence.

Techniques

Although somewhat more approachable in terms of stylistic innovations than other Barthelme works, Paradise contains many of the boundary-breaking traits recognized as hallmarks of his fiction: abrupt time shifts, fragmented dialogue, a comic tone often mixed with a melancholy seriousness, and perhaps most notably a collagelike assembly of incidents, allusions to popular culture, advertising, facts from mass media, and fragments of opinions and actions without any larger unifying context. Paradise shifts its time frame back and forth from chapters of questioning and answering between Simon and his doctor to chapters recording the events of Simon's life with the three young women whom he invites to live at his apartment. The chapters of dialogue between Simon and his doctor take place a week after the three women have moved out.

Other chapters mainly present Simon's life with the three women, largely through straightforward and often uninterrupted dialogue. All these sections are mixed with Simon's reflections on the past, his marriage, and his career. The abrupt shifts among these narrative dimensions characterizes Barthelme's nonlinear, collagelike style.

Barthelme's dialogue often has a tape-recorded quality in which characters are frequently unidentified and can only be distinguished by the use of quotation marks and recognized at best by styles of speech and occasional references to subjects identified elsewhere in the novel with a particular character. Sometimes characters appear only as the structural elements of a recorded dialogue as in the chapters where Simon is identified as "A" and his doctor as "Q." Although the letters seem to stand for question and answer, the reader discovers that Q. does not consistently ask questions nor does A. consistently provide answers. Often Q. and A. become deliberately confused as in a chapter devoted entirely to Q. telling a dream he has had about working as a pest controller. The dream could just as well be A's (Simon's) dream in that like Simon's dreams it reflects a strong concern with feeling adequate and useful. Furthermore, Barthelme's use of dialogue is frequently disjointed, as though characters are not listening to each other.

Statements follow each other without clear logical connection as in the following exchange between Q. and A.: "Q: You regard yourself as prudent.

A: I regard myself as asleep. I go along, things happen to me, there are disturbances, one copes, thinking of the golden pillow, I don't mean literally golden but golden in my esteem — Q: Let me play this track here for you, it's by Echo and the Bunnymen — A: I'll pass.

Q: I also have a video of the Tet offensive with Walter Cronkite . ."

Such disconnected dialogue comically reflects the frequent aimlessness and lack of continuity in conversation, an aimlessness and discontinuity evident in the characters' lives. This and the generally disjunct nature of the novel's style, though possibly confusing for readers not familiar with much experimental contemporary fiction, reflects

Barthelme's view of modern life as nonlinear in its discontinuity, as a series of moments and memories assembled without traditional ideas of purpose and direction. Barthelme has spoken of the setting for much of his fiction, New York City, as itself a collage in which, as in his fictional style, "unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality."

Themes

Paradise touches on a wide variety of themes as it explores the experiences, thoughts, and memories of its central character, Simon. Marriage, sexual and economic power, midlife crisis, generation gaps, male inadequacy, male fantasy, the element of fear in urban life, the responsibility of the artist, feminism, and religious ideas of guilt and grace all appear as concerns in the novel. Often, however, these themes remain undeveloped since Barthelme's style presents them as disjointed elements in an often collagelike structure.

The characters whose disjointed lives express these themes are also not so much developed as presented to the reader in a collection of sometimes unconnected moments, fragments of conversation, and loose memories.

Key Questions

Some readers of Paradise may have difficulties with the theme of adultery and especially with the frankness of the erotic descriptions of Simon's sexual relations with Dore, Veronica, and Anne. Even though explicit sexual language occupies a very small fraction of the novel, its presence may raise questions about censorship. On the other hand, the erotic content of the novel is not there for its own sake.

Barthelme is an acute observer of contemporary life and clearly sees a preoccupation with sexuality as a crucial characteristic of modern existence. Nor is Simon's realization of his adulterous male fantasies offered as any solution to the problems of life's aimlessness and dissatisfactions. His affair with the three young women quite clearly does not become the paradise he expects. It ends up being one more failed attempt at earning a lasting satisfaction with life.

The behavior of Barthelme's characters is neither condemned nor recommended. It is observed and presented.

And the presentation, although often comic in tone, is never cold. Simon is presented often with a sympathetic sadness as a man lost in life, a man with human warmth and concern but adrift in confusion. He is concerned about his social responsibility as an architect, and though relishing his isolation in the city he attempts to break out of it in responding to the needs of others. He helps the black policewoman who is beaten by two young thugs, he gives spare change to the homeless Hal, and he seeks help for the bleeding drunk he discovers one morning on his doorstep. Although Simon's society is not presented as having much moral coherence, Simon is shown as acting with sensitivity despite the lack of any systematic motivation. The sense that the satisfactions of paradise are unobtainable does not prevent Barthelme's characters from acting with human sympathy. Barthelme is often noted by critics as a master of parody and satire, treating the problems of modern life with comedy and irony. The reader must remember, however, that although satire and parody, both forms that often appeal to the young, may appear insensitive on the surface, they are usually motivated, as in Barthelme's case, by a deeply sympathetic concern for the human condition.

1. How does Q's dream about being a successful pest control worker resemble a dream that A. (Simon) might have? What sort of needs or desires does the dream indicate the dreamer has?

2. Simon in one passage identifies himself with the giraffe. What does this identification tell the reader about Simon's self-image?

3. One of the three women living with Simon says that Simon is "indifferent" towards them and that "He can't tell us apart." Is this true?

4. Does Simon seem to have a deeper relationship with any particular one of the three women he lives with? Which one? Explain.

5. Simon several times declares that he loves the three women. Does he? In what way or ways? What do they seem to offer him besides sex?

6. Anne says that Simon thinks she and the other two women are "dumb bunnies." Is this a fair assessment?

What leads her to this conclusion?

7. In the novel's last chapter Q. offers A. some more little pills — "some of these little green ones? They're supposed to be good." Simon, however, declines the offer. Is there anything significant about this action coming as it does at the end of the novel?

8. Do you find Barthelme's style of writing a novel confusing? Why? Why not? What would be lost if Simon's story were told in a more traditional way?

9. Simon tells about several dreams he has had. Experiment with interpreting them and explaining what they reveal about Simon's personality.

10. Discuss the characters of Q. and A. Why does Barthelme identify them by these letters? How are these two different? How are they similar? How do Q's problems in life resemble A's problems?

11. Discuss the characters of the three women. How are they distinct?

Do they share some of the same problems?

12. When Simon hangs a very small picture on the huge blank wall of the apartment, he says to Anne that maybe they should have only this one print "Symbolizing the situation." What does he mean by this?

13. Analyze Simon's marriage based on his memories. What is wrong at the root of his relationship with his wife Carol?

14. "It's an architectural problem, marriage," A. tells Q. Explore this.

How do Simon's feelings about architecture reveal his feelings about human relations?

15. Two terms often used in discussions of Barthelme's books are "metafiction" and "postmodernism." Do some research on these two terms and try to come up with definitions for them. Show how these definitions apply to Paradise.

16. Barthelme's writing style is sometimes compared to cubism and abstract expressionism, two styles in modern art. Gather some background information about these two styles and discuss what they have to do with the way Barthelme's novel is written.

Related Titles

The problems of social, emotional, and spiritual disintegration in the modern world appear in various forms throughout Barthelme's fiction. These problems as they appear in modern urban life are treated in City Life (1970), where many of the themes that concern Barthelme in Paradise are explored in the smaller scale of the short story. In terms of style, a closely related title is Great Days (1979), which includes several stories that treat dialogue in the same way it is used in many sections of Paradise.

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 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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