Penrod Short Guide

Penrod by Booth Tarkington

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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".

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Overview

In the tradition of Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn, Penrod offers an engaging story about a young boy's daydreams, schemes, and desires.

The experiences of twelve-year-old Penrod Schofield present true-to-life challenges that a young person of his time might conceivably face. While not full of the life-threatening adventure of Twain's books, Penrod is a humorous, thoughtful account of growing up in the Midwest early in the twentieth century.

Tarkington has preserved the manners and morals, the talk and the popular pastimes, that made up life for a young person during a particular era of American history.

About the Author

Newton Booth Tarkington was bom in Indianapolis, Indiana, on July 29, 1869. He attended college at Purdue and Princeton before publishing his first novel, The Gentlemen from Indiana, in 1899. Tarkington is remembered for his realistic novels of the Midwest, including The Magnificent Ambersons (1918) and Alice Adams (1921), and for his young adult novels about Penrod Schofield.

Except for a two-year term in the Indiana state legislature, Tarkington spent most of his adult life writing, and his final output was prodigious, totaling more than sixty volumes. In addition to great popular success, Tarkington also achieved critical acclaim, winning two of the first four Pulitzer Prizes given for fiction, with The Magnificent Ambersons in 1919 and Alice Adams in 1921.

Today's readers, though, are probably most familiar with his works for young adults: Penrod and its sequels, Penrod and Sam and Penrod Jashber. Tarkington continued writing until the end of his life, and two of his novels were published after his death on May 19, 1946, in Indianapolis.

Tarkington, though a professed realist, was highly selective and decorous in his brand of realism. The American reading public appreciated his writing and made him possibly the wealthiest author of his era. In 1921 Publishers Weekly conducted a survey among writers and critics in order to find whom they considered "the most significant contemporary American authors." Tarkington headed the list, and in 1922 a Literary Digest poll named him "the greatest living American author." In a 1923 New York Times poll, he was the only writer named in a list of "the ten greatest Americans."

Characters

Penrod Schofield at twelve wears "an expression carefully trained to be inscrutable." This is the face presented to the adult world, and is a necessity for a boy who is part conman, part showman. Childhood is amoral, Tarkington believes. Only gradually are grownup values accepted. What Penrod, his best friend, Sam Williams, and their black allies, Herman and Verman, are really like is something most adults no longer remember. Tarkington's portraits of boys are authentic, at least within the limits his variety of realism required.

Tarkington's young girls tend to be rather prim and pretty — stock characters. Marjory Jones often tells Penrod that he is the worst boy in town. But she also regards him as her own personal Caliban. This opinion is flattering to Penrod, but he also wants more of her attention, and dreams of sensational ways of getting it.

Adults intrude on the scene occasionally. Mr. Schofield generally does not understand his son. He pronounces his son insane now and then, or threatens to send him off to military school for discipline. He sometimes resorts to spanking. Mrs. Schofield is much more tolerant. Tarkington does not present the adults in these stories with any depth. His purpose is to present realistic boys. The adults are only minor characters in these novels.

Setting

Although the setting is not specifically identified (except as a city with a population of 135,000), it seems likely that the story takes place in Tarkington's favorite location, Indiana, and may very well represent his hometown of Indianapolis.

In presenting Penrod's environment, Tarkington describes many of the things that make up middle-class life in an early twentieth-century midwestern town, including Penrod's school, his playmates, a carnival, and a school play.

Penrod is a period piece that describes the American Midwest during a time of innocence and prosperity for the nation.

Though Penrod is intended as a piece of realistic writing, today the setting seems hopelessly idyllic, providing no glimpses toward the modern world.

Social Concerns

The Penrod series features a boy, Penrod Schofield, who lives in the period just before World War I, when, in Tarkington's words, "the stable was empty but not yet rebuilt into a garage." Few Americans today can imagine a time when most families did not own an automobile, so Penrod and the two succeeding volumes are valuable period studies, as are practically all of Tarkington's novels. Penrod tells what it meant to be a boy in the years 19001917, much as The Catcher in the Rye (Salinger, 1951) provides an example of the psychology of an early 1950s teenager.

Social Sensitivity

Penrod is socially insensitive, and modern readers should be duly offended by Tarkington's racist attitudes toward Jews and toward blacks, whom he describes as "beings in one of those lower stages of evolution." Two black brothers, Herman and Verman, are continuous targets of ridicule, and Tarkington repeatedly refers to them as "darkies." The treatment of these characters in the novel unfortunately reflects, to a large degree, their treatment in early twentieth-century American society, and may serve as a useful basis for discussion about the world of Penrod Schofield.

Techniques

Tarkington deliberately gave Penrod and its two sequels an episodic structure. Children live from day to day, from incident to incident. The longterm view of a careful plot just does not fit a boy's psychology. Penrod, and children generally, concentrate on what the present moment offers. Tarkington was also aware that this episodic structure was tailor-made for serial publication. Penrod, like most of his works, appeared in serial form before it became a book.

He wrote not only for children, but for adults as well. The comments intended for a mature reader have irritated some critics. Leslie Fiedler in Life and Death in the American Novel accuses Tarkington of "heavy-handed cuteness" in his juvenile stories. The humorous comments on the action are sometimes couched in words that a twelve-yearold would usually have to look up in a dictionary, and then, because Tarkington occasionally resorts to humorous circumlocutions, he still might not know what was meant. For example, when Penrod is spanked, the author never uses the term directly but says: "The rite thus promised was hastily but accurately performed in that apartment most distant from the front porch." The stories abound in humor but the best comedy is in those scenes which show Penrod in action — the great tar fight at the end of the first volume, for example, which ends with most of the kids looking like endmen in a minstrel show.

Literary Qualities

Penrod is not a complicated novel and does not meet the criteria that critics set forth for a successful work of literature, although the novel continues to attract young adult readers. It lacks the symbolic and lyrical qualities of Huckleberry Finn, as well as the psychological urgency of J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye. But Penrod cannot be summarily dismissed as light entertainment for younger readers.

Tarkington, whose literary mentor was Mark Twain, wrote Penrod and its sequels in order to accurately portray the development of boys between the ages of eight and fourteen. Tarkington's theory of childhood development was that a child, in the course of becoming an adult, repeats the history of the human race from savagery to civilization. At age twelve, for example, Penrod is essentially savage but gives indications that his savagery can someday be tamed. He presents a face to the adult world that is "carefully trained to be inscrutable," a necessity for a boy who is part con man, part showman. Childhood is amoral, Tarkington believes; only gradually are adult values accepted.

For readers of Penrod, it is useful to understand the evolution of thought from Twain to Tarkington. Huckleberry Finn (1884) and Tom Sawyer (1876) were written at the end of the romantic period in American literature, as romanticism was about to give way to movements called realism and naturalism.

Romanticism does not refer to romance or to stories that have an optimistic view of life. Rather, literary romanticism means that the story's exterior suggests the turmoil hidden beneath the surface.

Realism, on the other hand, attempts to show everything on the surface and depicts a world that is hostile to humankind. Twain wants the reader to interpret a story's events broadly; when, for example, Huck taunts the runaway slave Jim with the possibility of turning Jim over to the authorities, the reader knows that Huck is wrestling with the morality of slavery. Tarkington does not believe boys develop with such vision, and attempts to show boys as they act.

Their thoughts are important only inasmuch as they suggest forthcoming actions. Realism is based on cause and effect, not on symbolic or poetic values.

Naturalism embodies a refined and more scientific interpretation of realism.

Simplified, naturalism contends that those who are strongest prevail. Nature kills or weakens everyone else. Boyhood is the time when survival tactics are developed, and the antics of Penrod and his friends are little tests of their ability to survive.

Penrod does suffer somewhat, however, from its author's decision to describe childhood from the perspective of an adult. Tarkington sometimes comments ironically on matters which, to a young person, might be important.

When Tarkington makes Penrod and his friends figures of fun, he moves away from the strength of the book, which is its re-creation of the world of childhood.

Tarkington constructs Penrod and its two sequels with an episodic plot structure; that is, the various chapters are loosely connected by events, but the plot does not develop systematically.

Tarkington believes that children live from day to day, from incident to incident, and that the long-term view of a careful plot does not fit a boy's psychology. Penrod concentrates on what the present moment offers. Critics accused Tarkington of writing episodic plots because the structure is tailor-made for magazine publication. Penrod, like most of Tarkington's works, provided a very lucrative income for the author when it appeared in serial form before it became a book.

Themes

Tarkington's second wife, Susannah, challenged her husband to "write about boys as they really are." She had brought to his attention a British book about student life at Harrow; Tarkington said "no boy ever talked like the puppets in that story." He set out to write realistic stories about boys like his nephews, or like he had been himself. The Penrod stories were the result.

He developed theories on childhood.

A child in the course of becoming an adult repeats the history of the human race from savagery to civilization. The period from eight to fourteen years is of pivotal importance in child development, he maintained in an article published in American Magazine in 1925, "What I Learned from Boys." Penrod, twelve at the time of his appearance in the stories, is nearing the end of this stage. He is essentially savage, but gives indications that this savagery is becoming somewhat tempered.

Adaptations

George Tyler, a New York producer with whom Tarkington was long associated, urged him to adapt the Penrod stories into a play. The author was skeptical. He insisted "The detail — not plot — is what has made it a best seller." Despite his objections, Penrod was dramatized, and later, in the 1930s, adapted to film.

Tarkington was right. Of the three films involving the characters from Penrod, none became an outstanding movie. The first appeared in 1931, Penrod and Sam. Seven years later, two more films were produced at Warner Brothers Studios, Penrod's Double Trouble and Penrod and His Twin Brother.

This second film especially irritated Tarkington. Since he had provided no real plots for any of the Penrod books, the studio had had to invent some. For Penrod and His Twin Brother, however, they simply borrowed the plot of Mark Twain's The Prince and the Pauper (1882). Warner Brothers owned the movie rights to the books, but this time even the very good-natured Tarkington felt they had gone too far. He sued.

Thanks to the efforts of Warner Brothers' lawyers, the author, despite the justice of his case, won only a token victory. After three years, he and his lawyer settled out of court. The company paid minor damages only, and further agreed to let Tarkington read future Penrod scripts before they were filmed.

Topics for Discussion

1. What sort of literature does Penrod's "Harold Ramorez" represent? Do you read anything today that resembles Penrod's attempt at authorship?

2. Penrod, Sam, Herman, and Verman put together a show and charge admission for entry. Is creating a show still a popular pastime for young people? If not, what pastimes have replaced it?

3. Why does Penrod want to be like Rupe Collins?

4. Characters such as Penrod, Huckleberry Finn, Dennis the Menace, and Calvin from the comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes" seem to have a lasting popularity. Why do stories about "bad boys" make interesting reading?

5. How is Tarkington's portrayal of Herman and Verman different from his portrayal of the other characters?

6. What are some of the social attitudes that have changed since Tarkington wrote Penrod?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Mark Twain is one of many authors who have written "boys' books." How does Penrod compare to Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn? Why are Twain's books more famous?

2. The nameless town where Penrod lives is described in enough detail that we have a good picture of life there. How is Penrod's world similar to the place you have grown up? How is it different?

3. We meet male and female characters of all ages in Penrod. Have the roles of men and women changed since Tarkington's day? If so, how?

4. Critics today agree that Tarkington's depiction of Herman, Verman, and their family is racist. Analyze Tarkington's depiction of blacks in Penrod.

5. Georgie Bassett seems to enjoy being called a gentleman, yet Penrod attacks anyone who dares to suggest that he is one. What does it really mean to be a "Little Gentleman" in Penrod's world? How would boys of today have to behave to earn such a title?

Literary Precedents

Tarkington admitted that Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn influenced his creation of Penrod. His Penrod was in one way more realistic, he insisted, because "Tom and Huck are realistic only in character. [Twain] gave 'em what boys don't get, when it comes to "plot."' Inevitably Penrod is compared to Twain's boys, or to Stephen Crane's juvenile heroes in his Whilomville Stories (1900). While Crane wrote of tough street kids from New York's Bowery, Tarkington found the boys of a middle-class neighborhood wild enough for his purpose.

Such nineteenth-century boys' books as Thomas Hughes's Tom Brown's Schooldays (1857), and Thomas Bailey Aldrich's The Story of a Bad Boy (1870) were familiar to Tarkington too, but he regarded their heroes as too moral to be real boys. His purpose was not to instruct young readers in how to be good boys, but to show actual boys in believable situations. Hughes and Aidrich made their boys the kind of "little gentlemen" that Penrod resents so much. He resents them because he knows that boys who are called "little gentlemen" are too good to be true.

They are unnatural, and he goes berserk in the last chapters of the book because several of his friends tease him with the phrase. Tom Brown with his Rugby code of conduct would never do this.

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New York: Twayne, 1974. This book provides an excellent general introduction to Tarkington's life and works.

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Related Titles

The sequels to Penrod are Penrod and Sam (1916) and Penrod Jashber (1931).

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