Picture This Short Guide

Picture This by Joseph Heller

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Contents

Characters

The protagonist of Picture This is Rembrandt's masterpiece Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer. Heller depicts the business transactions between Rembrandt and the Sicilian nobleman who commissioned the work, Don Antonio Ruffio, the artist's brilliant execution of the painting, his provocative conversations with his model, the succession of owners of the painting, and the fluctuating prices of the art work through three centuries.

Indeed, through the writer's vision, the painting becomes an epic hero who "after a journey of three hundred seven years, an odyssey much longer in time and miles than Homer's original and one richly provided with chapters of danger, adventure, mystery, and treasure, and with comical episodes of mistaken identity," comes to rest in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, where in a triumphant four-hour showing it enjoys the homage of 82,629 viewers.

Ironically, Heller's Rembrandt is a less vital character than the picture. He functions mainly as a vehicle for examining seventeenth-century Dutch mercantilism and for presenting absurdist discourses on imitation and originality in art. Heller's Rembrandt is a man obsessed with money, one whose life contradicts the quotation from the artist that Heller chose as an epigraph: "An upright soul respects honor before wealth." Only the artist's talent escapes the author's biting irony, for Heller does acknowledge that Rembrandt's brush created magic on his canvases — so much so that his painted gold chain makes a real one seem a sham.

The Athenian sections of his book focus upon two triumvirates. One is of the philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; and the other is of the political leaders Cleon, Pericles, and Alcibiades.

Socrates is definitely the most noble of the book's Athenian characters.

Heller admires his antimaterialism, unwavering faith in the rightness of his actions, and healthy skepticism. In response to Socrates' pronouncement "I know nothing at all," Heller writes approvingly, "To know you do not know is to know a great deal." As approving as Heller is of Socrates, so disapproving is he of Plato, whose idealism he relentlessly mocks. Aristotle functions in two roles in Heller's narrative. One is as the former student of Plato, who voices doubt over his master's Theory of Ideas, reliability in portraying Socrates, and ideal of the philosopher-king. Aristotle's other role is as the consciousness that comes to life when Rembrandt paints him. Given to morbid speculation, this Aristotle enables Heller to link Athens in the fifth century before Christ with the Netherlands in the seventeenth century and New York in the twentieth century, and to express a deep-seated pessimism at the human condition.

The political characterizations in the book are satirical and stereotyped.

Heller presents Cleon as a demagogue, a combination of McCarthy and Hitler.

He deflates the usual conception of Pericles as a great democratic ruler and instead sees him as a warmonger and agent in the collapse of law and order.

"Under the new constitution of the free city of democratic Athens, the rights to freedom of speech and thought were sacred, unlimited, and irrevocable; and people could be ruined or put to death for exercising them," Heller notes.

Alcibiades represents the ultimate cynic. His only moral principle is selfinterest, as revealed by his shifting military allegiances during the Pelopponesian War.

Social Concerns

In Picture This, Heller's cynicism is leveled at a number of political and social issues. These include the failure of democracy to bring "unity, coherence, contentment, good government, intelligence, equality, fairness, honesty, justice, peace, or even political freedom"; the necessity of poverty to support national economic prosperity; the perversion of power by demagogues and military leaders to achieve personal wealth and glory; and the failure of the law to protect the innocent.

Techniques

As with his other novels, Joseph Heller experiments with chronology in Picture This. This time he uses the device of Rembrandt's painting, which resurrects Aristotle, to conjoin the fifth century B.C., the seventeenth century, and the twentieth century. Simultaneously, Heller acknowledges and mocks history as an ongoing cause and effect sequence. Perhaps the best example is the monstrously long sentence following his explanation that the legislation that Pericles enacted in 432 B.C. to prohibit Megaran ships from entering ports in the Athenian empire led to war: And it led as well to that prolonged sequence of events in which Athens suffered defeat; the empire was destroyed; the democ racy was outlawed and restored; Socrates and Asclepius were tried, found guilty, and executed; Plato wrote his philosophies and started his school; Aristotle came to Athens as a student and departed as a fugitive and was later, during a different war, painted by Rembrandt in Amsterdam contemplating a bust of Homer that was a copy, and, as a consequence of this, as a conclusion to centuries of hazardous travels, and as a matter of veritable fact, made in 1961 his triumphant passage from Parke-Bernet Galleries on Madison Avenue and Seventy-seventh Street in the city now called New York to the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue and Eighty-second Street before John F. Kennedy was shot between the Korean War and the Vietnam War and was succeeded as president of the United States by Lyndon B. Johnson, who, counseled by an inner circle of educated dumbbells associated mainly with Harvard and other prestigious universities, lied to the American people and the American Congress and secretly and deceitfully took the nation openly into a war in Southeast Asia it could not win and did not, persevering obstinately on that destructive course as resolutely as did Pericles when he moved Athens ahead onto her selfdestructive course of war with Sparta.

According to Heller, we fail to learn history's lessons. Heller is uninterested in dramatic plot development; instead he flaunts his historical research, often presented in a monotonous sequence of one- or two-sentence paragraphs without transitional expressions. For instance, Heller treats his readers to thumbnail sketches of Alexander, William of Orange, Henry Hudson, Philip II, and Spinoza, among others; to discourses on curing herring, the reputation of sons of cloth merchants, Dutch shipbuilding, and the invention of the telescope; to biographical data on Rembrandt's birth weight, schooling, employment, marriage, eating habits, and affairs; and to such art history tidbits as a listing of the contributors that enabled the Metropolitan Museum of Art to acquire Rembrandt's painting of Aristotle and the fact that the model for the corpse in Rembrandt's The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp was hanged publicly for stealing a coat.

Despite the vast stores of historical information, however, Heller's perspective is entirely modernist, as he expresses doubt in the possibility of finding truth, justice, or logic in a world filled with contradictions, ironies, and disparities.

The absurdity of the world Heller emphasizes through three comic devices. One is ironic one liners, such as "One of the effects of capitalism is communism" and "Nowhere in

history is this assumption that human life has a value borne out by human events." A second and more complex means of absurdity is the writer's creation of scenes that illustrate Heller's Principle of Illogic. The best of those scenes are the travesties of justice represented by the trials of Socrates and Asclepias, and Rembrandt's bewildered querying of first his model for Aristotle and then his patron Jan Six as to how Govert Flinck's imitations of his originals can be more valuable than the originals. A third comic device, and the one that unifies the narrative, is Heller's deconstructive playing with perspective, as in the passage: Aristotle contemplating Rembrandt contemplating Aristotle often imagined, when Rembrandt's face fell into a moody look of downcast introspection, similar in feeling and somber hue to the one Rembrandt was painting on him, that Rembrandt contemplating Aristotle contemplating the bust of Homer might also be contemplating in lamentation his years with Saskia.

Themes

In 1986, when Heller was composing Picture This, which he originally entitled Poetics, he remarked that his manuscript was "becoming a book about money and war." Although clearly an oversimplification, his statement nevertheless does identify two of the novel's predominant concerns.

Money references pervade the narrative as Heller chronicles consumerism from the invention of money by the Lydians in the seventh century before Christ to the rise of banks and corporations in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century and then to the entrepreneurial maneuverings of Cornelius Vanderbilt and J. P. Morgan in the nineteenth century. Heller's exploration of capitalism centers most strongly, however, upon Rembrandt, whose financial rise and fall parallels the economic fate of the Dutch Republic.

As Heller portrays him, Rembrandt is embroiled in a seemingly endless series of financial woes concerning his wife's dowry, inheritance, and will, the high cost of real estate, collecting and paying debts, compensation from his patrons, his ex-mistress's demand for maintenance payments, and the shifting prices of his art works. With such difficulties it is no wonder that the artist explains that his figures have sad faces because they are worried about money.

The primary consequence of the invention of money, Heller wryly reminds us, is servitude: "With the invention of money in the seventh century before Christ, people became free, like Rembrandt, to borrow at interest and go into debt."

A second consequence of the invention of money, Heller contends, is war.

"They fought over money" is his succinct opening to Chapter Fourteen.

Heller is referring to the English and Dutch in 1652, but the pronoun could as easily apply to the Athenians and Spartans or the Americans and the Vietnamese. In fact, Heller explicitly underscores the cyclical nature of history, as in his statement: "From Athens to Syracuse by oar and sail was just about equivalent to the journey by troopship today from California to Vietnam, or from Washington, D.C., to the Beirut airport in Lebanon or to the Persian Gulf." War, the author believes, is inevitable in human history, and thus he cynically observes, "Peace on earth would mean the end of civilization as we know it."

Heller's sharpest cynicism, however, is directed not towards capitalism, the government, the military, or the law but rather towards art and history, neither of which he considers able to reflect truth. Heller reminds his readers that there is no proof that Shakespeare wrote the plays attributed to him, that Homer was a real person, or that what Xenophon and Plato recorded about Socrates was accurate. He punctures cherished assumptions, such as that Socrates' death by drinking hemlock was painless or that Periclean Athens was an ideal democracy. He points out that statistics are often lies.

The strongest example of the insight that art and history are merely deceptive illusions of reality is Rembrandt's painting of Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer, on which the book centers. In his conclusion Heller writes: The Rembrandt painting of Aristotle contemplating the bust of Homer may not be by Rembrandt but by a pupil so divinely gifted in learning the lesson of his master that he never was able to accomplish anything more and whose name, as a consequence, has been lost in obscurity. The bust of Homer that Aristotle is shown contemplating is not of Homer. The man is not Aristotle.

By exposing the chicanery of representation, Heller even succeeds in undercutting the achievement of his own novel, for as an epigraph to his carefully researched re-creation of ancient Athens and the Golden Age of Holland, he quotes Henry Ford's aphorism "History is bunk." Thus he invites all who attempt to "Picture This," whatever the subject or medium might be, to confront honestly their limitations.

Key Questions

Readers interested in the disciplines of history, economics, and art and in the ways these disciplines intersect should particularly appreciate Picture This. A primary issue for discussion is Heller's treatment of Western civilization in terms of the world's preoccupation with money. Also significant is his portrayal of how the marketplace affects the production and value of art works. Discussion groups might also evaluate Heller's stylistic innovations in having a painted figure come to life as a central character and in using anachronisms.

1. Do you think having a painting as a protagonist is effective?

2. Do you agree with Heller that money causes warfare and that "Peace on earth would mean the end of civilization as we know it"?

3. Why does Heller include an epigraph from Henry Ford that states, "History is bunk," given that Heller's novel itself explores two thousand five hundred years of Western civilization?

Do you think Heller succeeds in making us reassess the idea of history as a sacred collection of indisputable facts?

4. Are Heller's attempts to link ancient Greece and seventeenth-century Netherlands with modern events effective?

5. What are, according to Heller, Socrates' positive qualities? Conversely, in what ways is Heller's portrait of Plato negative?

6. Given Heller's characterizations of Cleon, Pericles, and Alcibiades, what is his attitude towards politics in ancient Athens? Does he think American politicians of the 1960s and 1970s represent democracy more effectively?

7. Do you find Heller's detailed historical research increases readers' interest in his novel or creates monotony? Is the alternating of blocks of historical information on the Netherlands and on ancient Greece illuminating or confusing?

8. What do the trial scenes of Socrates and Asclepias suggest about Heller's attitudes towards justice?

9. Is Picture This a novel? Does it blur the line between fiction and nonfiction?

Literary Precedents

Picture This is firmly grounded in classical texts. Among Heller's major sources were Thucydides' history of the Pelopponnesian War, Plutarch's lives of Alexander and Pericles, Diogenes Laertius's lives of Plato and Socrates, Aristotle's Poetics, Xenophon's Hellenica, and a number of texts by Plato, including Apology, Crito, Laws, Phaedo, Symposium, and The Republic.

Works by Hesiod, Homer, and Aristophanes also receive brief mention.

Heller quotes extensively from his classical sources; however, as David Seed notes in The Fiction of Joseph Heller: Against the Grain, Heller transforms them "by selection, paraphrase and verbal revision" — usually to emphasize his modern skepticism.

Heller's portrait of Rembrandt is influenced by Gary Schwartz's Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings (1985).

Two other sources — Simon Shama's The Embarrassment of Riches (1987) and Paul Zumthor's Daily Life in Rembrandt's Holland (1963) — helped Heller to establish the artist's cultural context.

His primary source on Dutch imperialism was John Lothrop Motley's The Rise of the Dutch Republic (1897).

Related Titles

Thematically, Picture This has the most in common with Catch-22 of Heller's previous novels. Like its predecessor, it expresses moral outrage at the carnage and barbarities of war and highlights the symbiotic relationship between war and capitalism by examining how the greedy self-interest of individuals and nations begins and prolongs military conflict. In addition, Picture This shares with Heller's first novel a powerful awareness of the absurdity of life, particularly the injustice of a supposed justice system.

Therefore the trials of Socrates and Asclepias in Picture This are strikingly similar to the questioning of the chaplain in Catch-22 (1961), for both works reveal clearly the innocence of the accused and the paranoia of the interrogators.

Stylistically, Picture This may be likened to several of Heller's other works. Heller uses the device of alternating sections he discovered in coauthoring No Laughing Matter (1986) with Speed Vogel; however, this time instead of offering two perspectives of the same event, he allows the historical periods of Periclean Athens and the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic to comment upon each other. As in God Knows (1984), Heller creates in Picture This dark comedy through having historical figures reflect upon twentiethcentury culture. The absurdist dialogue in his latest novel, best exemplified by Rembrandt's puzzlement at how imitations of his paintings can be worth more than originals and by Asclepias's futile attempts to deny the charge of conspiracy, is strongly reminiscent of Catch-22, as are such skeptical one liners as "Mankind is resilient; the atrocities that horrified us a week ago become acceptable tomorrow."

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