The Planetarium Short Guide

The Planetarium by Nathalie Sarraute

BOOKRAGS

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Characters

Despite its appearance of conventionality, The Planetarium is more innovative than the author's earlier works in that it has no principal narrator; rather, like Sarraute's later novels, it has many narrators, none of whom are easily identifiable. The reader is left to his own devices and must recognize characters by their inner states. Sarraute's intention is to minimize the importance of physical appearance or personality of all characters. Ultimately, she eliminates the matter of identity altogether and offers no more in this respect than a vague group of consciouses that do no more than develop tropisms. All of her characters have the potential to be novelists, except that their creativity miscarries before reaching the verbal stage. In short, Sarraute continues to research the primary substance of writing through her "characters."

Social Concerns/Themes

T he Planetarium, Sarraute's longest novel and her most popular one in English, is often thought to be her masterpiece. The reader approaching this writer for the first time is frequently advised to read this work because it is the "easiest." This judgment is probably based on its surface resemblances to the conventional novel. There is more plot than in Sarraute's other books, with events arranged and developed in a linear rather than a circular pattern, and there are more characters identifiable by name, personality and relationships. The apparent conventionality is deceptive, however, and the unsuspecting reader who thinks the novel is realistic will find himself misled. As always, plot and character are not as significant as are what Sarraute calls "tropisms." Scientists use the term tropism to refer to the responsive growth or movement of an organism toward or away from an external stimulus; for Sarraute, the term refers to the subtle and subconscious reactions to environment that are "at the origin of our gestures, of our words and of the emotions we believe we feel."

The twofold action centers on Alain Guimier's ultimately successful efforts to possess his aunt's apartment and to gain the attention of the writer, Germaine Lemaire. Such trivialities would scarcely interest the reader were it not for the novelist's ability to reveal a whole gamut of primitive emotions through the tropisms exposed underneath the banalities of daily life. There are no crises or adventures in Sarraute's novel, only humdrum existence.

The greater the discrepancies between the ordinary and people's violent reactions to it, hidden from society but revealed by the writer, the greater the drama. Such drama is usually sparked by feelings toward material objects. For example, when Alain's mother-in-law offers him and his wife a pair of English club chairs, which to her represent the established values that she finds sorely lacking in their household, the young couple feel gravely threatened by her silent effort to dominate them and are prepared to do battle to have instead a Louis XV bergere that to them symbolizes their happy life together. It is now the older woman's turn to experience a similar inner rage.

On a much larger scale, of course, are Alain's attempt to obtain his Aunt Berthe's apartment for himself and his wife, and the chain of tropisms exposed by the author as the young man deals with Berthe and enlists others in his cause. Each not only has his own tropisms, but imagines what his interlocutor's must be. Moreover, in addition to the differentiated characters, there is the chorus of voices representing constantly changing public opinion characteristic of Sarraute's novels.

Understandably furious at what she considers her nephew's ingratitude, Berthe, who had lavished much attention on Alain in his childhood, at last concedes the apartment after some unpleasant exchanges with Alain's father. In order to calm his sister, the latter has perfunctorily assured her that his son, who in his opinion was spoiled by his aunt, is still deeply devoted to her: and she is so eager to believe him that she gives in.

As to Alain's attempt to ingratiate himself with Germaine Lemaire, the reader follows him through a series of painful tropisms concerning her to his eventual success in winning her approval. Alain is willing to do anything to achieve this goal, from violating family privacy by telling her numerous anecdotes regarding the leather chairs and the like, to conforming to her caprices and demands. His triumph with Germaine's visit at the end coincides with his acquisition of Berthe's apartment.

An important new theme introduced by Sarraute in The Planetarium is that of art in both its active and passive aspects. Actively, art takes the form of creation; passively, it is aesthetic experience. Each is represented in ThePlanetarium by different characters. Sarraute later devotes entire novels to each of the two manifestations of art.

Techniques

Sarraute's psychological "tropisms" are the almost unconscious expressions of inner sensations underlying everyday speech and gestures that she had noted in others as well as herself.

These movements form the minute yet complex dramas underneath one's words and overt acts, providing clues to one's real feelings. Perhaps the first to perceive and to write down these inner impulses, Sarraute was challenged by the task of capturing unexpressed feeling before it becomes conscious in the subject. Continually shifting and therefore elusive, tropisms could not be expressed through exposition, dialogue, or interior monologue.

The author had to seize them in flight, analyze them, and find the language to make the reader experience them as his own simultaneously with the subject.

Sarraute's search for new means of expression in order to communicate tropisms has been constant.

Although individuals, and usually uncertain of their own emotions, Sarraute's characters share some common experiences. On the positive side, all need acceptance, security, and a sense of dominance. On the negative side, all are afraid when these needs are not met. (The word fear appears some seventy times in The Planetarium.) Thus, all the characters are linked on a psychological level. Moreover, the author emphasizes some similarities, so much so that one character sometimes seems to be a double of another. Alain even uses this term to acknowledge that he is like Jean-Luc in his obsession and fear vis-a-vis Germaine. He further admits to taking after Berthe. Both Alain and Germaine extend the matter of human resemblances to include everyone; these resemblances explain why human beings are interested in one another. These similarities on the psychological level make it almost impossible to confuse the "real" with the "imaginary," for all the characters through their tropisms react exaggeratedly to some commonplace. If, in addition, the reader is careful to take the author's clues into account, reality will emerge from the multiplicity of points of view. One of Sarraute's favorite devices to alert the reader is the repeated use of certain metaphors that will herald the same kind of tropism; once the reader is familiar with what amounts to an epithet he will know what to expect as a tropism.

Adaptations

When Sarraute undertook to compose dramatic form for the expression of unspoken tropisms, she became her own adapter. Writing for the radio, where the visual cannot be used to convey interior action, meant that dialogue alone had to support the drama.

Structured dialogue that does not reveal the prior, barely expressible groping that occurs in the subconscious was inconceivable to the author. She had to find a way to reveal internal action externally, and the means she came upon was to have her characters speak aloud in seemingly natural language, yet say quite extraordinary things that are really inner commentary. The listener, then, must distinguish between what a character is likely to say to others and what is still in the realm of the unspoken. However extraordinary its content, Sarraute's language is deliberately commonplace. The contrast between the two is thus most dramatic.

Unable to provide any physical description for what to her were only "voices," Sarraute left their characterization entirely to Jean-Louis Barrault when he staged Silence (1981; Le Silence, 1964). His solution struck her as amazingly effective for her purposes: Barrault placed the one silent character in the center with the others grouped about him; their utterances and movements were greatly exaggerated. On the other hand, Claude Regy's staging of Isma (1970) showed the actors seated side by side, facing the audience and rising briefly only when they were to reveal some reaction. The highly stylized production concentrated primarily on the careful interpretation of Sarraute's text.

Literary Precedents

As suggested above, in several ways Sarraute follows a tradition that is both classical and French. She depicts universal experiences of humanity through characters that are usually divested of all particularities. If occasionally one is recognizable as a type, it is that the presentation is in the manner of a "portrait" by La Bruyere. Sarraute's terseness in making the reader observe these representatives of a species reminds one of the style of La Rochefoucauld as well as of La Bruyere.

Saurraute's narrative techniques, which depart from all convention and force the reader to fend for himself to identify characters, may bear some resemblance to those of other twentieth-century authors. Claude Mauriac uses a similar technique in Diner en ville; however, Mauriac deems the identification intellectually necessary and assists his reader with the clues of a seating plan. In As I Lay Dying (1930), William Faulkner similarly assists the reader with minimal indications at the beginning of each chapter. With Sarraute, for whom the matter of identification is of no consequence, the anonymity of her characters is virtually complete.

Related Titles

Difficult to classify by any of the traditional literary designations, the twenty-four short, unrelated pieces of Tropisms present fleeting glimpses of people and relationships captured as if by the camera. Each focuses on a small circumstance, a fixed moment in unidentified time, a vague place with anonymous people enmeshed in their interdependence. All that remains are the tropistic feelings and experiences of humanity in general, in the true classical tradition that the French have always understood well. Like other twentieth-century writers in France and elsewhere, there is also the expression of universal existential anguish.

Each individual is condemned to perpetual solitude, yet needs other human beings, which leads to some sacrifice of the self that causes further anguish from which the average person seeks escape. In order to camouflage and even entirely suppress this anguish, most people chatter constantly in conventional language.

Much of Sarraute's later work is contained in the germinal stage in Tropisms (1963). The concept of "tropisms," expanded in duration and complexity, is the basis of all her books and symbolizes her particular contribution to twentieth-century literature.

Not only are her narrative methods already present in Tropisms in embryonic form, but a good deal of basic thematic material is present as well: anonymous characters, lack of plot, absence of historical background, scant physical description. Above all, there are the ambivalent exigencies and hazards of existence, and the use of stereotypical language to attempt to control them.

Three novels especially revolve around the theme of art and its many problems. The subject of Between Life and Death (1968) is the creation of a work of art, including both the writer's experiences and the resultant art, while The Golden Fruits (1963) focuses on the work — a novel titled The Golden Fruits — as a finished product, examining aesthetic values and the judgments of posterity. Do You Hear Them? (1972) deals also with aesthetic appreciation, this time of a piece of sculpture that opposes traditional and modern artistic values.

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