The Public Burning Short Guide

The Public Burning by Robert Coover

Contents

Characters

Because of its mass and its scope, the novel has a predictably large cast of characters. These can be broken down into three classes: historical victims; historical oppressors, by far the largest group; and personifications of public attributes.

Because one purpose of The Public Burning is to treat that moment in history at which the attitudes of America solidified into an unquestioning monism, Coover treats many historical figures as having mythic proportions.

President Eisenhower's famous obscurantist rhetoric is effectively parodied and the General's insensitivity to the human issues the Rosenberg case raises is satirized. Senator Joseph McCarthy's notorious belligerence toward anything red is effectively evoked, as is Senator Robert Taft's statesmanship; the novel significantly treats Taft's terminal cancer as symbolic of a dying political order.

Most spectacularly, however, half of the novel is narrated by then-Vice President Richard Milhous Nixon.

Although this is not the only literary treatment of this man whose impact on American politics can legitimately be called "mythic" — Stanley Elkin has Nixon telephone the hero of The Dick Gibson Show, and the protagonist of Philip Roth's bitter satire Our Gang (1971) is clearly based on Nixon; while writing The Public Burning Coover also wrote a novella, Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears (1977), which parodied Nixon as a football player; Oliver Stone in 1995 directed a controversial film based on Nixon's career — no other treatment is as extensive or as sympathetic as this one.

All the familiar Nixon public attributes make up this portrait: his sweating, heavy beard, paranoia, bitter resentment of his opponents, delight in beating his opponents cruelly, public sanctimoniousness versus private swearing, and overwhelming ambition.

This Nixon, however, has something more; he has imagination and possible compassion. When Uncle Sam demands that he research the Rosenberg case, Nixon has the imagination to empathize with Ethel and Julius and eventually to recognize that they are innocent.

Other historical figures such as President Eisenhower and J. Edgar Hoover lack the imagination or clarity of vision to see that the evidence does not convict these people. The tragedy of Nixon's being wooed by the public need to execute the Rosenbergs, and thus to ignore his own belief in their innocence, is Coover's indictment of the degree to which patriotism and ambition can destroy a potentially decent man. Nixon goes to Sing Sing, not as many critics assume to rescue Ethel, but to get her confession. That is what he believes Uncle Sam wants, and her innocence, of which he is aware, is not relevant if Uncle Sam is not interested in it. Neither is her life. Thus, although Coover indicated in an interview that Nixon was needed to provide a "clown" for the "three-ring

circus" the novel is structured around, what happens to Nixon, although funny when his bum is exposed in Times Square, is anything but comic. It is an indication of how Uncle Sam's version of America dehumanizes individuals.

Although Nixon and Ethel seem to be sexually attracted to one another in the final scenes, she is his philosophical opposite. Ethel is firmly dedicated to maintaining her innocence even at the expense of her life. In her plea to President Eisenhower for mercy, however, she gives the impression that she chooses martyrdom, and her choice of death as a principled martyr does leave her beloved sons orphans. Despite this, Ethel remains an engaging character because of her humorously outwitting Nixon (writing "I am a scamp" on his backside) and her meeting her public execution with calm dignity.

The most interesting characters in the novel are not really characters at all, but personifications of public attitudes. Time magazine, son of Mother Luce, is America's Poet Laureate, giving aphoristic versions of the events of the time and commenting on these in conformity with popular interpretations of events (condemning, for example, Justice Douglas for granting a stay of execution). Betty Crocker, advertising's symbol for the bliss all women should find in the kitchen, acts as mistress of ceremonies for the executions.

Most controversial, and most responsible for the public castigation of the novel is the personification Uncle Sam.

Part Yankee Peddler, part Sam Slick, part vulgar cynic, and part recruitment poster, Sam embodies an unintellectual yet savvy patriotism, the coming order the novel laments. The pressure on the artist to support this order is suggested when Billy Faulkner speaks at the execution, and the result is an effective parody of Faulkner's famous Nobel Prize speech. Sam knows that the Rosenbergs' guilt or innocence is irrelevant. What is needed is a public rite of passage into a new order, and the Rosenbergs will do as well as anyone else to usher in his version of the Cold War, a running confrontation with that other allegorical figure, The Phantom, whom Sam describes as the source of all misfortune, "half cousin to the cholera and Godfather of the Apocalypse!"

This new order may require that some old liberties be eliminated; when Nixon accuses him of killing the Rosenbergs needlessly, Sam brushes off the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights as the "wild oats of youth" that served a purpose when the nation was in the building phase, but must not stand in the way of blind loyalty to institutions historically created to protect these principles — in short, to Uncle Sam.

In this context, the final and most controversial scene of the book, Sam's sodomizing Nixon after he has proved he can convert any public embarrassment into an occasion for patriotic display, makes sense on a symbolic level. Nixon believes that the Presidency, toward which he earnestly aspires, is Incarnation; a man is imbued with Uncle Sam's presence. In the last scene, Sam figuratively impregnates Nixon with his vital essence, preparing him for his Incarnation and bringing from Nixon a long-awaited profession of love. Most crucially, the sodomy is a form of rape; Nixon's victimization

means his final, abject, submission to what Uncle Sam represents. It is also his reward for suppressing his human feelings about the victimization of the Rosenbergs.

Social Concerns

More sprawling in its scope and more overtly political than anything else he has written except for the story, "The Cat in the Hat for President," The Public Burning is the most defiant of Coover's novels. Whereas The Origin of the Brunists (1966) creates an epistemological fable about the development of religious frenzy and the The Universal Baseball Association (1968) creates a fable about the nature of epistemology itself, The Public Burning explores the fabular nature of political history. Tiger Miller of the Brunists said, when sending out misleading copy early in the Brunists' evolution, "Such are history's documents." This could form an epigraph for The Public Burning in that Coover fashions his most explicitly political fiction around the degree to which political history is actually a set of fictions approved by those in power to explain and make legitimate their origins.

The Public Burning is centrally concerned, as the title implies, with those sacrifices a culture deems necessary to insure its survival. Coover's running allusion to Arthur Miller's play The Crucible, which was playing on Broadway in 1953 and which the character Richard Nixon wants to see, reinforces the novel's emphasis on cultural monism and the creation of scapegoats.

Ethel and Julius Rosenberg are sacrificed to maintain the myth of cultural invincibility. The novel raises many doubts about their guilt. Their accusers are sleazy and untrustworthy. One, Harry Gold, Nixon considers crazy because Gold "played these weird baseball games with decks of cards" and kept exact records — a complex irony, for Coover's Nixon would never understand the imaginative yearnings of Coover's Henry Waugh. Coover also casts doubt on the value of the secrets the Rosenbergs supposedly passed on to the Soviets: Nobel Prize physicist Harold Urey, Nixon recalls, testified that "anyone could figure out how to build the Bomb," and that the data Ethel's brother gained access to probably was already available to the enemy.

Coover implies that the Rosenbergs must die to serve the needs of a public ritual; their guilt or innocence is in some ways irrelevant.

The allusion to The Crucible, and the chapters associating the films House of Wax and High Noon with the action serve another important purpose. They reinforce a central issue of The Public Burning: the essential theatricality of the Rosenberg executions. Both of the main characters, Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg, have theatrical backgrounds, and Nixon once describes the whole Rosenberg affair as "A Little Morality Play for Our Generation." The execution is itself a public, theatrical spectacle. It takes place on Times Square, where a special set has been erected to simulate the death house at Sing Sing.

The theatrical character of the Rosenberg executions points effectively to the main theme of this novel: the need of institutions to perpetuate, even to renew themselves at the expense of individual citizens. All America watches as this husband and wife, innocent or guilty, die to satisfy a collective blood-lust and to enact the ritual of expelling

the scapegoat who did not believe in the infallibility of America as it was evolving after World War I. Like Sacco and Vanzetti two generations before them — this case, crucial to the political development of John Dos Passos, certainly a major influence behind The Public Burning, is mentioned several times in Coover's novel — the Rosenbergs must die not for what they did but for their refusal to believe in the America the majority believes in.

Techniques

This is a critic's feast. Every second chapter is narrated by Nixon, and those told in an omniscient voice capture or parody a wide range of styles from popular culture and Time magazine (some Time accounts are set on the page as poetry) to variations on popular films and newspaper idioms. The book consists of four parts treating the two days leading up to the executions; each part consists of seven symmetrical chapters; a Prologue and Epilogue frame the parts, and they are separated by three operatic sections called "Intermezzo."

These intermezzos recall the dramatic origins of the novel. In one, Eisenhower's characteristic word distortion constitutes an aria on this incarnation's vision of the coming war with the Phantom. In the second, a recitative, Pris (Ethel) appeals to Pres (Eisenhower) for clemency on legal, moral, and humane grounds; in the final, a "Last Act Sing Sing Opera," Julius and Ethel reaffirm their love and dignity as the final hope for clemency wanes.

In its variety of styles and its vast scope, The Public Burning recalls other ambitious metafictional texts of the decade: John Gardner's The Sunlight Dialogues, Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, much of John Earth's and John Fowles's best work. Whatever controversy may surround its subject matter and theme, it is an audacious, thoroughly original, and impressive work of fiction.

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