

The Recognitions Short Guide

The Recognitions by William Gaddis

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.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Recognitions Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Related Titles.....	8
Copyright Information.....	11



Characters

While he does not appear in at least one-third of the scenes, Wyatt Gwyon is the book's main character; his struggles are the focus of *The Recognitions*, and the other characters judge themselves in relation to him. Raised by a Calvinist aunt, Wyatt spends a year at divinity school to please her, but then sneaks off to Europe to study painting, in particular the Flemish painters of the late Middle Ages. Discouraged from practicing his art, he wanders from bad job to bad marriage until Reckfall Brown, a Mephistophelian businessman, tempts him to forge Flemish paintings for a percentage of the profits. Besides Gwyon, Brown, and a corrupt art critic named Valentine, a few of the other important characters are Otto, Esther, and Esme. Otto, the comic double of Wyatt, often echoes or even repeats Wyatt's lines or actions, but he has none of the drive or the tortured consciousness of Wyatt, and so fails while Wyatt endures. Esther and Esme — Wyatt's wife and model, respectively — are two Greenwich Village women of opposite type. Esther is physically broad, ambitious, and writes prose; Esme is ethereal, easily influenced, and a poet. Both, however, love Wyatt (and both take Otto from time to time as a consolation prize) and are frustrated at not being able to secure his love. Esther is too "masculine" for Wyatt, while Esme, a manic-depressive schizophrenic addicted to heroin, is too unstable.

Social Concerns

The *Recognitions* is primarily a satire of American society. "Much of our fiction," Gaddis declared in 1986, "has been increasingly fueled by outrage or, at the least, by indignation." Like most mainstream American radical writers from Henry David Thoreau to Allen Ginsberg, Gaddis seeks, in his words, to draw upon that indignation in order to call "attention to inequalities and abuses, hypocrisies and patent frauds, self-deceiving attitudes and self-defeating policies" in American society and (whether overtly, or by implication) to offer some means by which these social ills may be corrected.

Gaddis is not, however, naive enough to think that "through calling attention to inequalities and abuses these will be promptly corrected by a grateful public," for he knows that "the state is the public's fiction, and gratitude is not its most prominent attribute." Very few of the flaws of American society are left unscathed by the jagged, sometimes furious prose of this massive novel. Gaddis bores tirelessly beneath the surface of our manners (social, sexual) and institutions (religious, corporate, cultural) to show that their very foundations are unsound.

Techniques

Speaking of one of his paintings, Wyatt says, "There isn't any single perspective, like the camera eye, the one we all look through now and call it realism, there I take five or six or ten." *The Recognitions* was written within the same multifaceted aesthetic. It contains a virtual encyclopedia within its pages, including references to mythology, witchcraft, anthropology, alchemy, and art history; has several narrators; is written in several styles and in several languages; and spans three decades and three continents. *The Recognitions* is several novels in one: a how-to book on art forgery, a sweeping social satire, a pilgrim's progress, a bildungsroman, and a roman a clef. Add to all this Gaddis's cryptic stage directions and dialogue, searing language and black humor, and it is not difficult to understand why a reader might emerge baffled, if not overwhelmed, and certainly intimidated.

Themes

Like T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Recognitions* is one of several major works in American literature that concerns an individual trying to survive in a civilization that is rapidly falling apart. Wyatt Gwyon, himself no moral hero, reflects the state of his world in his struggle to accept his religious heritage and to realize his artistic yearnings in this atheistic and pragmatic modern age. Gwyon, like all the characters in *The Recognitions*, both rejects and seeks desperately to find some sort of salvation in an apparently godless world.

Gaddis also develops several other themes. Reflecting a world which lacks a proper moral exemplar, Gwyon's friend, Otto Pivner, must come to terms with living without his father, a theme that runs through much of American literature as well as Gaddis's three novels. Elements of alchemy crop up repeatedly. On the more representative level, a Faustian strain runs throughout; and Gaddis draws upon the poses, works, and characteristics of Christ, Dante, and the quest knight, among many other archetypes.

Literary Precedents

There are countless literary works that might serve as precedents, but foremost is T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

The Waste Land employs the same techniques of reference, allusion, multiple perspective, and contrasting voices; the same kinds of fire and water imagery drawn from religion and myth.

Both works suggest the need to return to the same kinds of moral, spiritual, and artistic values in order to rebuild our culture.

A pointed influence is Goethe's (and perhaps Marlowe's original) *Faust* (1805, 1833). Dostoevski other Russian writers, including Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Chekhov, are apparent. As a satire of American life it echoes the works of Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain.



Related Titles

The novel *J R* (1975) is a scathing, sometimes hilarious, and sometimes brutal satire of American capitalist ideology and practice. Named after an obnoxious eleven-year-old boy who realizes the American dream with impossible speed and just as quickly sees it destroyed, the novel depicts a society that values above all else (particularly morality and love) the making of money. *J R* is a harsh look at corporate America and the people who make it tick, but it also contains powerful appeals to human values in the face of materialism and corruption.

"Money" is the first word of the novel, and the grasping for it is its major theme. The three main plot lines of *J R* revolve around the acquisition of, disputes over, and schemes for making money: Stella Angel and Amy Joubert each battles and schemes to gain controlling interest in her father's company; *J R* builds a small empire from money he first earns from mailorder junk mail flyers; and in the midst of this world, five artists desperately try to create and justify art, and to impress upon people like *J R* that there are other things of value besides money. In Edward Bast's final conversation he pleads with *J R*, "listen all I want you to do take your mind off these nickel deductions these net tangible assets for a minute and listen to a great piece of music, it's a cantata by Bach..."

J R can't you understand what I'm trying to, to show you there's such a thing as, as intangible assets?" Another overriding theme is distinctly American: failure on a grand scale. The "main body of American literature and novelists," Gaddis once said, "have been struggling with the bitter truths of conflict and failure in American life." *J R* is no exception.

The titular character, *J R* Vansant, a fairly typical sixth-grader at the outset, acquires incredible wealth and brings the American economy to the brink of ruin simply by dedicating himself totally to "the traditional ideas and values that have made America what it is today." Using money from one small venture to finance a slightly larger one, and then borrowing against that for more capital, he forms *J R* Family of Companies, extending his grubby fingers into nearly every aspect of the American economy, including the Bates and Moncrief companies. His paper empire collapses at the end, but he emerges unscathed and bursting with new ideas. Teaching at his school, which is being hounded by local politicians and members of the board of education because of its adoption of some controversial educational technologies, are Amy Joubert, Edward Bast, and Jack Gibbs. Joubert's father, Monty Moncrief, owns Typhon International, which, in turn, owns many other companies in the novel. Amy is fighting to gain controlling interest in the company, but with none of the greed and underhandedness that most of the men in this and other Gaddis novels show.

Bast is a young composer who reluctantly agrees to act as *J R*'s business representative in order to have the time and money to finish an operatic suite based on Tennyson's "Locksley Hall."



Gibbs, Stella's former lover, is trying to revive his life-long book project called *Agape Agape*. Bast and Gibbs, together with Tom Eigen (who is trying to write a play about the Civil War amidst the distraction of public relations work for Typhon and his disintegrating marriage), another writer (Schramm), and painter (Schepperman), represent the human, artistic minority voice of free enterprise society. Though admirable, they nonetheless are capable of being quite insensitive, egotistical, and are usually drunk. Other classmates of J R include Linda and Rhoda; other business rats include Cates, Davidoff, and Hyde.

"Pay attention here," Jack says to Edward Bast, "bring something to it take something away." Jack may as well be talking to the reader of J R, as its narrative mode appears to demand an active, rather than passive, readership. It is written almost entirely in dialogue, with only dashes, and rarely an identifying phrase ("he said," "she said") signalling a change in speaker.

Over seven hundred pages of such dialogue are not broken up into chapters or sections; indeed, there is hardly a moment in the novel that the reader might see as an appropriate place to pause. Needless to say, this technique makes extraordinary demands on the reader. We must guess who the speaker is at the other end of a phone conversation; we must decipher whom Jack might be talking to in bed; we must deduce even such basic information as the time of day, location, and speaker.

Although J R is a long novel, it is still quite condensed. Were it conventionally written, with descriptions of setting, character, and action, it would be well over a thousand pages. Unlike *The Recognitions* (1955), all the action takes place in only two months or so; but during those two months events occur at an implausibly fast pace. At the onset, in the midst of a failing economy, the Bast family conflict begins, marriages are on the brink, and a teacher's strike is impending; a few hundred pages later we have witnessed two suicides, a marital separation, the rise and fall of a corporate empire, an affair between Gibbs and Amy, Eigne losing his job and family, and Amy's husband abducting their son to Geneva. In the even more accelerated action of the last three hundred pages, J R's corporation spins wildly out of control (ruining several other companies and thousands of careers), Bast succumbs to nervous exhaustion, Indians revolt, a civil war breaks out in Africa, and the stock market collapses.

There are several quotations from T. S. Eliot's poems, namely "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1909-1911), "Hysteria," *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Sweeney Agonistes*. Kafka's *The Castle* (1926) is also alluded to, as are four British nineteenth-century works: Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" (1886), Kipling's "Mandalay," Wilde's "Impressions of America," and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), which are associated with Bast, Gibbs, and Eigen, respectively. Also, like *The Recognitions*, there are many references or allusions to Greek myth and philosophy.

In its use of a boy as a major character, J R follows a rich tradition in American literature, in which children, from Pearl to Huck Finn to Ponyboy, see more profoundly than adults the true meaning of the adult world. And in his examination of the function and value of art in an excessively materialistic society, and the artist's own selfdoubt, Gaddis echoes the introspectiveness of Hawthorne's artist figures and the alienation of



James's. Finally Steven Weisenburger has pointed out that Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung (1876) is an aesthetic analogue to J R. Wagner's work, he claims, is to J R what The Odyssey (c.1050-800 B.C.) is to Joyce's Ulysses (1922).



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 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

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