Riders of the Purple Wage Short Guide

Riders of the Purple Wage by Philip José Farmer

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Characters

The power in Riders of the Purple Wage results mainly from Farmer's brilliant wordplay and his tender portrait of the relationship between Chib and his grandfather. Chib is exceptionally intelligent and moral, but like many young people, is uncertain of his role in society. Thus, he has joined the "Young Radishes," a group of radical young artists, and with them, struggles to find his artistic identity amid the contradictions of Bird City. The Young Radishes are profoundly influenced by Omar Runic, a poet and holy fool obsessed with Herman Melville's Moby Dick (1851). (He styles his hair to resemble the Pequod, Captain Ahab's whaling ship, and he has a tattoo of Melville on his chest.) Runic loves the ocean but can never experience it as Melville did, because the nineteenth century's wild, uncharted nature does not exist in Bird City. Thus, he and the Young Radishes rail against God while His emblems in nature gradually erode and disappear. Without nature to inspire him, Chib has numerous love affairs, seeking perfect Beauty in its imperfect human representatives on Earth. As a result, his sexuality informs everything he paints, to the extent that Grandpa finally warns his against "painting with his penis." In the absence of God and nature, Chib must turn inward for inspiration and begin to paint with his heart.

Grandpa is Chib's friend, mentor, and conscience. He is also a twenty-firstcentury Trickster-figure, the futuristic spirit of the irrepressible comic defiance which Riders of the Purple Wage implies is our main defense against an increasingly regimented society. Like Grandpa — and like Farmer — the Trickster in both the Native American and Scandinavian traditions is preoccupied with sex and loves breaking taboos. He is also a mocker of conventions, a court jester whose outrageous antics keep society healthy by ridiculing pretension and vanity. Many scholars believe that the Trickster's fundamental reason for being is to achieve the status of a savior, a plateau he often reaches while affirming life by the example of his uninhibited energy and vitality.

In "Riders," Grandpa functions for Chib as this kind of apparently semicrazed yet discerning savior-figure. He helps Chib, indirectly, by example, just as Jesus taught his disciples indirectly, by parables. The obvious love Grandpa and Chib have for each other is central to Farmer's message: Chib will be able to paint from his heart because his heart is filled with love.

Social Concerns

Riders of the Purple Wage is probably Farmer's most thematically joyful and technically innovative piece of writing.

In the "Afterword" Farmer included with this novella's first publication, he explains that he was inspired to write it by the "Triple Revolution Document," a memorandum sent in 1964 to President Lyndon Johnson by a group of American liberals and social radicals. This document argues that a "triple revolution" in three areas — cybernation, weaponry, and human rights — requires a fundamental re-examination of our values and institutions. Furthermore, this revolution's resulting social problems can be solved only by "planned societies," or societies based on massive government support of education, a guaranteed annual income, and "an economy of abundance" allowing citizens the freedom to choose either to pursue an artistic career or not to work at all. This almost touchingly naive and optimistic exercise in social planning gave Farmer the idea for a plot based on a future society extrapolated from present trends.

Accordingly, Riders of the Purple Wage is set in a future Utopia where the benevolent government takes care of all the physical and emotional needs of its citizens. The "purple wage" of the title is the government salary which everyone receives just for being born.

The government also gives its citizens what becomes a mass opiate in the form of "Fido," an advanced television system, and also provides a "fornixcator" to supply orgasms on demand by sending jolts of electricity into the brain. Finally, the government has turned art into a societal fetish: Cultural and artistic exhibitions receive saturation coverage, and artists are granted the kind of recognition reserved today for movie stars and sports celebrities. Anyone familiar with Farmer's work will guess that there will be flaws in "Bird City," as the novella's Utopia is called, and, indeed, Farmer observes in his afterword that attempts to improve humanity are always entangled with "politics, prejudice, bureaucracy, selfishness, stupidity, ultraconservativism, and . . . downright ignorance." In other words, human nature will disrupt even the most idyllic existence — as Farmer illustrates at great length in his Riverworld series and much more concisely in Riders of the Purple Wage.

Essentially, Farmer explores in passing many of the social implications of the Triple Revolution Document and focuses on one in particular: the role of the artist in a "perfect" planned society. In such a place, the artist can no longer be motivated by those social and personal issues that historically have always been a main source of artistic inspiration: warfare, social injustice, early death, family breakdown, and sexual jealousy. In Riders of the Purple Wage, these are now obsolete concerns, allowing Farmer to ask, "What is the role of the artist in such a society?"

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Farmer tells Chib's story through a dazzling series of puns, wordplay, and allusions, often interrupting the narrative with bizarre headlines — "Excretion Is the Bitter Part of Valor" — and equally strange "quotations" from such imaginary works as Grandpa's How I Screwed Uncle Sam and Other Private Ejaculations. The precedent for this literary extravagance is James Joyce's Finnegan's Wake (1939). Joyce, the archetype of the rebellious artist in our era, sensed a deadening atmosphere of frustration and disintegration in modern society. His refuge (like Chib's) was in art, where he worked the most absolute and brilliant experimentation ever per-formed on the novel. Finnegan's Wake contains multiple levels of meaning in each word and jams several English and even foreign words into one. The result is a unique Joycean language that is a dismaying puzzle to some readers and soaring poetry to others. As well, Joyce borrowed his novel's title from an old vaudeville song about a drunken Irish worker who falls off a ladder, is believed dead, but comes to life at his wake when the mourners accidentally spill whiskey on him. In Joyce's reworking of this song, Finnegan becomes "Finn-again," the hero of a modern death-and-resurrection myth.

Farmer is as inventive in science fiction as Joyce was with the mainstream novel. Like Joyce's writing and Chib's paintings, the style of Riders of the Purple Wage provides multiple levels of meaning, the understanding of which points to still more possibilities, so that each new reading reveals yet another dimension. Also like Joyce, Farmer incorporates a death-and-resurrection myth into his plot: Chib Winnegan is the reincarnation of Joyce's Finnegan and also the new trickster-god who will celebrate life after the death of Grandpa, the old god. Chib loses someone dearly loved, but his memories will sustain him while he discovers new ways to explore and express those forces in life which, in their fathomless mystery, bring us together and rend us apart. Farmer has explained that Riders of the Purple Wage was one of his few works that he was allowed to spend as much time on as he wanted, and the results reveal that once he was free of commercial considerations, he was capable of expanding the boundaries of a popular genre that all too often merely repeats straightforward formulas in an utterly straightforward way.

Themes

Farmer answers this question through the paintings of his young protagonist, Chibiabos Elgreco Winnegan, and the teachings of Chib's one-hundred-and twenty-year-old grandfather, Grandpa Winnegan. Chib's paintings are really three-dimensional sculptures made by bending and twisting thousands of wires into different shapes at various depths. When a soft, red light shines through the wires, it reveals subterranean layer upon layer, rather than the mere surfaces of conventional paintings. Chib's art suggests that even in a perfect society, the artist continues to be a restless explorer, returning from his mental journeys with stunning representations of his psychic discoveries. Grandpa Winnegan expresses the second half of Farmer's message. Obviously speaking for Farmer, Grandpa tells Chib that he must learn to paint with his heart, because only then will his paintings be great and true. Thus, the novella demonstrates Farmer's artistic credo, emphasizing the artist's eternal need to ignore conventions and remain faithful to his inner visions.

Farmer gives this need an added urgency in Riders of the Purple Wage by the repetition of imagery from dead civilizations, implying that in spite of its apparent progressiveness, Bird City is actually overly concerned with the symbolically dead past. For example, Chib's name is from Longfellow's The Song of Hiawatha (1855), the legendary poetic narrative about the vanished past of Native Americans. Longfellow's Chibiabos, a minstrel, is Hiawatha's constant companion before being killed by enemies and transformed into the ruler of the land of the dead. Farmer's Chib also rules "a land of the dead," in the form of his own paintings, which obsessively deal with past figures from history and mythology — an understandable preoccupation, given his culture's fixation with the past and his grandfather's stories of the ancients visiting him through time travel. At Grandpa's funeral, Chib receives a posthumous message from the old man (and from the past he represents): As long as Chib is alive to remember, Grandpa will be "the Northern Lights" of Chib's soul. This message combines with Chib's technically innovative paintings to suggest that artists must retain the past as inspiration, but should look to the present and the future for new, challenging ways of expressing their insights and emotions.

Key Questions

Riders of the Purple Wage was first published in Harlan Ellison's Dangerous Visions (1967), an anthology of science fiction stories considered too controversial for publication elsewhere. Although this anthology includes the work of many of the greatest science fiction writers, Ellison refers to Riders of the Purple Wage as "easily the best" and "the finest" story in the collection.

Discussion groups might want to consider those elements in the novella which might have made it seem so remarkable to Ellison and which continue to make reading it an exhilarat ing experience even today. As well, the novella's version of utopia invites comparison with our society, especially in the area of attitudes toward the arts and the social function of artists. Finally, Chib's innovative techniques need to be considered in relation to the three theories of art and criticism explained in Riders of the Purple Sage by Luscus, and to the equally radical techniques Farmer used when writing this novella. In particular, what does Luscus mean by "The Pellucidar Breakthrough"?

1. In what sense can Riders of the Purple Sage be described as "experimental" or "antirealist" or "postmodernist"? What are some of the major differences between it and mainstream fiction?

2. The title of this novella parodies Zane Gray's best-selling western novel Riders of the Purple Sage (1912). What are the major differences between the world of a western and Farmer's world in Riders of the Purple Sage? For example, what sort of hardships do the characters in each world experience?

3. How does the Utopia of Bird City compare with our society today? What aspects in particular of contemporary life does Farmer seem to be singling out for satiric attack?

4. What is Bird City's attitude toward art and artists? Why are not most of the citizens of Bird City able to find fulfillment through art?

5. Is Farmer's portrayal of Bird City entirely ironic? For example, how are Chib's possibilities maximized by his environment?

6. Analyze Grandpa's statements, aphorisms, and advice. Do his remarks consist merely of horrendous puns and ribald humor, or do they contain some incisive social comment? Is Grandpa a "humanist"?

7. Analyze all the allusions to dead civilizations, particularly to ancient Egypt. For example, how are the references to dogs related to the myth of Osiris and to Grandpa's "resurrection" through Chib?

8. What is the function of Benedictine and Maryam in this novella? What is Chib looking for in them, and why do they disappoint him?

9. How does Farmer's treatment of the death-rebirth cycle compare with the Christian version and with the accounts in Sir James Frazer's The Golden Bough (1890) and Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces?

10. How does Riders of the Purple Sage illustrate Farmer's belief that for every benefit, one must give up another good? What does the novella's subtitle, "The Great Gavage," imply? How does imagery of base, foul things function in the novella?

Related Titles

Farmer's "Oogenesis of Bird City," originally published in the September 1970 issue of Amazing, consists of material originally included in Riders of the Purple Wage but later cut and published separately. Although this material is not essential for understanding Riders of the Purple Wage, it does provide the historical background of the novella's utopia, adding another level of interest to an already extremely complex work of literature.

In addition, Farmer considers Riders of the Purple Wage to be one of his "Beverly Hills Trilogy," the other two parts being the stories "Down in the Black Gang" (1969) and "Brass and Gold" (1971). Farmer wrote all three while living unhappily in Beverly Hills, which he claims he left for good after he opened the lid of a mailbox and a hand came out and took the letter he was about to drop in. "Down in the Black Gang," a harsh story of failed dreams in two feuding families, is one of Farmer's bleakest stories. "Brass and Gold" is closer to the zany spirit of Riders of the Purple Wage, but overall, is a bittersweet story of a doomed love affair between two American dreamers at odds with the "Worshippers of Mammon" dominating Beverly Hills.

Although these three stories might appear to have little in common beyond their setting, they collectively provide an often poignant satire of one of America's most materialistic societies.

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