Rites of Passage Sea Trilogy Short Guide

Rites of Passage Sea Trilogy by William Golding

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.

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".

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".

Contents

Characters

Edmund Talbot, the narrator and protagonist, is a snobbish young Englishman reporting for duty in the colonies. He directs his account of the voyage to his wealthy and noble patron, and by his narrative reveals much about his naivete, his sense of superiority, his mistakes in judgment.

Captain Anderson, who hates clergymen, and Reverend James Colley, an overly earnest and thereby ridiculous parson, are obviously at odds from the beginning. Billy Rogers, a pretty and calculating sailor, is the final source of shame for Colley.

To round out this social microcosm, Golding includes Zenobia Brocklebank, a "lady" past her prime; Mr. Prettiman, the rationalist on board; Mr. Summers, low-born but a true gentleman in his moral strength; and assorted tars and emigrants.

In Close Quarters, characters from Rites of Passage continue the story— Captain Anderson, Lieutenant Summers, Lieutenant Deverel, Mr. Prettiman, Miss Granham, the Brocklebanks, and Pike. But there are some subtle changes in Talbot's attitude toward them. He views Miss Granham with slightly more admiration; Deverel becomes more of an embarrassment than a friend; and Charles Summers and Talbot have a falling out but are reconciled in the end. No longer an active character, the deceased Colley is a presence that hangs over Talbot, who has moved into Colley's cabin.

Unexpectedly, new characters are introduced and an old one returns when the ship is becalmed beside the Alcyone.

Talbot becomes infatuated with Marion Chumley, a ward of Sir Henry and Lady Somerset, the captain of the Alcyone, and his wife. Jack Deverel, responsible for losing the mast and under ship arrest, is exchanged for Lieutenant Benet, Lady Somerset's lover and an inventive problem solver who has the ear of Captain Anderson.

Benet's willingness to take extreme risks puts him at odds with Summers, who is much more careful. In addition, the supposedly drowned Wheeler appears on the Alcyone and is returned to his original ship.

Through Talbot the reader learns about the other characters, and as he changes somewhat in this novel, he seems to become a more reliable reflector of their personalities. Talbot is still a bit testy at being dubbed "Lord Talbot" but is learning to laugh at himself and tone down his snobbishness; thus he is able to see new qualities in the others.

Talbot's narration also shows how the characters reflect the themes. Through him the reader learns how the strict discipline of sea life overrides the personal divisiveness on board. As Talbot pokes about, talking primarily to Summers and Benet, he reveals the extent of the danger and the intensity of the conflict between the two officers.

By describing how he and the others face the very real possibility they may drown, Talbot illustrates the many ways people face impending death— with nobility, courage, and dignity or with a fear so strong that a quick gunshot to the head is preferable to drowning.

In the first two novels the characters, other than Talbot, are sketchily drawn; in Fire Down Below, however, several are seen in a new, more favorable light or become more important players in the events on board.

Charles Summers' character is much more fully revealed in Fire Down Below, both directly through Talbot's narration and by comparison with Lieutenant Benet. Summers exhibits a quiet concern for his friend Talbot's physical and mental comfort. He sees that Talbot gets a bath in an unexpected rainstorm in order to cure his itching. And he asks Talbot to stand watch with him, offering a face-saving way for Talbot to escape his cabin during the night, when he is haunted by evidence of Wheeler's suicide.

Summers' foil is Lieutenant Benet, who is flamboyant where Summers is steady, inventive where Summers prefers the tried and true, and willing to risk all where Summers carefully calculates the odds. Captain Anderson listens to Benet, however, and adopts his solution to the problem of the shifting foremast. This solution involves running a hot metal bolt through the wooden mast. The procedure stops the shifting of the mast, and the ship gains a little speed, but the bolt remains hot and the mast smolders. In the end, Benet and the captain walk away, knowingly, one suspects, leaving Summers captain of a ship soon to go up in flames. Summers is proved right, but at the cost of his life. In Close Quarters, Talbot looks for a hero; in Fire Down Below, he finds him.

Social Concerns/Themes

The Rites of Passage sea trilogy comprises the novels Rites of Passage, Close Quarters, and Fire Down Below.

One reviewer concluded that the binding theme of the three novels is the "making of Talbot's soul." In the first, he is shaken out of his comfortable self-satisfaction by Colley's death. In the second, he faces grave danger, admitting fear but not succumbing to the despair of Wheeler, who commits suicide, or the blubbering drunkenness of Pike. He slowly becomes an admirable character, establishing himself in the third novel as a good friend, a young man willing to learn, and a person grateful for good fortune and graceful in misfortune.

The setting for Rites of Passage is a ship on its way from England to Australia. The passengers and crew of this ship form a microcosm of English society and offer Golding the opportunity for satire of the rigid British class system. Tied into this satire is an exploration of culpability, of the consequences of cruelty whether casual or deliberate.

While the novel examines the value judgments that derive from social systems and the mistakes that can be made, it goes beyond that social criticism to raise questions of responsibility and guilt. Edmund Talbot, through whom readers see most events on the ship, loftily comments on his fellow travelers. He can be aloof and superior until one passenger is subjected to cruel practical joking and ultimately dies of shame. Then he must examine his own role in Reverend Colley's death. There are no clear answers, but Talbot is freed of some delusions of natural superiority and comes to see that he is to a degree responsible.

In this novel there are many Rites of Passage — the voyage itself, the practical jokes at crossing the equator, the awakening of self-knowledge in Talbot, Colley's last rites. They all work together to create a mystery set at sea in which there is no single murderer; in a social world many share the guilt and the blame.

The second novel in the trilogy, Close Quarters, describes Edmund Talbot's voyage from England to Australia, picking up where Rites of Passage leaves off. The Reverend Colley is dead, and the ship is still making its way to Sydney Cove. Talbot marks his birthday with the purchase of a new journal.

This journal continues Talbot's account of the voyage, but after the deaths of Colley and the servant Wheeler, recorded in the first journal, Talbot wonders what he will write about. Talbot casts about for a hero, but one emerges only in the third book.

Soon, however, he can report that the mast has broken and the ship's progress has thus been seriously impeded.

The decrepit condition of the ship, which was a background concern in Rites of Passage, is in Close Quarters the basis for two major themes: the experience of facing

grave danger and the need for taking risks and accepting the responsibility for consequences.

The social order aboard ship is less important here than in Rites of Passage.

In fact, as the danger increases, social strictures become less carefully enforced, while the social order of the seamen receives more emphasis. As a bridge between the passengers and the seamen, Talbot reports the importance of discipline aboard ship and the care given to keeping within the bounds of one's rank. This issue becomes especially important when Lieutenants Summers and Benet disagree with each other or with Captain Anderson about how to deal with the broken mast and other problems.

The last novel of the trilogy, Fire Down Below, takes the damaged ship through storms, a shifting foremast, and an encounter with an iceberg before it reaches port in Sydney. When the novel begins, Summers and Talbot have pledged their friendship anew, Talbot has admitted he is in love, and the ship is in dire straits.

As the dangers and discomforts increase, two themes take precedence over all others: Talbot's increasing maturation and the importance of character over appearance. In fact, the two are allied. Talbot's ability to appreciate the person beneath the social veneer of titles or fine apparel improves with his maturity. His recognition of enduring human qualities such as generosity and intelligence is illustrated by his close friendship with Summers and the relationship that develops with the Prettimans. Talbot's most obvious change is his willingness to learn from those he had once deemed inferior. Talbot's lessening concern for appearances is also illustrated in his new appreciation for comfort and practicality as he and Miss Granham don seamen's "slops" rather than insist on "proper" clothes, which are unsuitable for months at sea.

Techniques

The format of the journal is a new one for Golding and one for which he received much critical praise. The story is told through Talbot's journal entries and Colley's letter. By using the language appropriate to each character and to the late eighteenth century, Golding imbues the work with the feeling of the period and moves the reader into the minds of Talbot and Colley.

Typically, Golding uses the reversal of perspective at the end of the novel, but he skillfully weaves it into Talbot's narrative by making Colley's letter part of the journal.

In Close Quarters Golding continues to use the narrative form of a fictional sea journal employed in Rites of Passage but changes the perspective slightly by having Talbot keep this journal for himself rather than his benefactor and godfather. The result is that Talbot no longer has to concern himself with keeping up an image or being entertaining; he can be more introspective and analytical. Nevertheless, the differences are subtle. The language is the same imitation of nineteenth-century idiom, which allows Golding both to spoof the fashion of novels of manners and to create a realistic sense of setting. One critic has noted that historically, the introspection found in this literary form is limited to characters' reactions to and speculation about events on board. Certainly this is true of Rites of Passage and Close Quarters.

Talbot's attempts at introspection do not approach the degree of self-analysis found in characters in many modernist novels.

Whereas Rites of Passage could stand alone as a work of fiction, as the reader's concern for and interest in Colley is satisfied by the conclusion, Close Quarters is more obviously a partial work. At the end, the ship is still foundering, and Talbot is still pining for the missing Miss Chumley. The only plot element actually resolved is the reconciliation of Talbot and Summers.

In addition, Talbot promises the reader a third book to show how he finally reaches land.

In Fire Down Below Golding continues to employ the narrative device of the fictional sea journal begun in Rites of Passage. At the end of the novel, however, Talbot shifts from the perspective of a young man writing a personal journal at the time of the events. In the last few pages, he is an old man looking back at events. ("I forget much these days.") Addressing his "dear readers," he quickly condenses the downs and subsequent ups of his fortunes: the death of his godfather, the intervention of Divine Providence in providing him a place in Parliament, and his accepted marriage proposal to Miss Chumley.

As he did in Rites of Passage, Talbot includes a portion of a letter. This time, however, instead of the wrenching emotions of Colley, the reader gets the banter of a young woman about to be married and eager to return from India to her familiar England. Finally, Talbot ends the story by relating a dream about the adventure he may have

missed by rejecting the Prettimans' invitation to join with them to build a new world in Australia. Talbot expresses a note of regret that he chose the safer path of marriage to Marion Chumley and a career in Parliament, but he has apparently had a long and happy life since the voyage.

Literary Precedents

Critics have placed this sea tale in the literary tradition of Joseph Conrad's Nigger of the Narcissus (1897), Herman Melville's Billy Budd (1924), and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1797). They have noted in particular Golding's ability to detail life at sea. This work follows, too, in the tradition of travel stories and personal memoirs, the germ of the idea for the plot of this novel having come from Wilfred Scawen Blunt's My Diaries: Being a Personal Narrative of Events, 1888-1914 (1922). In that work, Blunt recounts an incident in which a sailor lapsed into a malaise from which he never recovered.

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 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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