The Rosy Crucifixion Short Guide

The Rosy Crucifixion by Henry Miller

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Characters

Following the introduction in Tropic of Capricorn (1939) of the woman who would be at the center of the "great tragedy of love" Henry Miller planned to compose about his life in Brooklyn in the 1920s before he left for Paris to write Tropic of Cancer (1934) he turned toward a plan for a multi-volume series of books tracing the way his nascent artistic consciousness began to develop amidst a complex, unsettling relationship with the woman based on his second wife June Smith. He called this series "the Rosy Crucifixion," and he wrote three loosely related works entitled Sexus (1949), Plexus (1953), and Nexus (1960).

Characteristically, in Sexus, Miller has centered the narrative in the mind of the character called "Henry Miller" — his version of himself in his autonovels — but has gone further in the composition of Sexus than in any other book to examine the facets of his psychic foundations and to try to understand his great difficulties with both the woman who dominated his life and the effect their tempestuous relationship had on his writing.

The protagonist of Sexus has just emerged from the Cosmodemonic world of Capricorn, elated by his rapturous response to the woman called Mara (and then Mona in Nexus) and hopeful that his worst times — financial, artistic and familial failure — are in the past. He is concerned that their relationship, following the excitement of initial acquaintance, has become a chain of bouts of explosive sex leading to periods of anger and silence. He is troubled by his doubts about his abilities as an artist, wondering if he has a genuine talent and whether he will ever write anything of value. He hopes that Love will be a source of redemption for his previous false starts and unhappy, degrading affairs, but suspects that both art and lust have their source in a common place, and that he is not going to be able to achieve any satisfaction until he has more completely understood his own impulsive reactions to all of his sources of inspiration. In the course of the narrative, he both questions his motives and gives in to his instincts, a process that leads toward the total psychic fragmentation at the book's frightening conclusion. This point of decline is necessary, however, if he is to ever understand his most basic self.

The awesome creature depicted at the conclusion of Capricorn retains much of her power in Sexus, but as Miller learns more about her, the negative aspects of this force become evident as well. Mara responds to the author's fierce eloquence as his avowals of passion create an irresistible romantic aura, but this kind of love is too close to worship and the character remains mysterious for both the author and the reader, although this is always part of her allure. Eventually, Miller's lack of respect for himself contaminates the relationship so that they are both in a prison of lust that reduces their humanity to caricatures of sensuality.

Mara's need for other people and her retreat from the protagonist at the novel's conclusion are consistent with the inadequacies of the entire relationship.

The only other "characters" in the book are brief depictions of Miller's retrograde male friends — limited, narrow, blustering men with stereotypical attitudes about masculinity and very little understanding about any aspect of feminine experience; and at the conclusion of Sexus, a woman who has become friendly with Mara and who is presented as a kind of phantom figure of ambiguous sexuality, and then is developed and probed a bit further (albeit uncertainly) in Nexus.

Social Concerns

Like many American writers, Miller both loved an idealized conception of "America" which he had drawn from the work of nineteenth century writers like Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and was appalled by the social structure of life in the United States which he saw around him. Almost instinctively a kind of outsider, Miller celebrated an earlier version of a more positive society (especially in Black Spring [1938], which recalls a world in which "the foam was on the lager and people stopped to chat with one another") which he felt was receding into a dim past, replaced by the mechanical, mercenary world of the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company. In Sexus, he begins with the same kind of anger that shielded him from the worst features of the corporate monster but in the course of trying to discover the nature of his true self, removes all of the barriers that have protected him from any destructive force. This means that he is more seriously affected by the economic hardship he faces than in previous books, although this is just part of the pressure he feels upon his relationship with Mara.

Through his gradual progression toward the condition of psychic fragmentation at the conclusion of Sexus, Miller illustrates some of the central concerns of his social critique. Without making any larger statements, his own involvement with unbridled sexual extravagance is a demonstration of the dangers of a complete absorption in the senses, the use of sex or any other escapist behavior that avoids confronting the real problem at the core of psychic suffering. This manifestation of indulgent and self-centered behavior extends to the other men Miller socializes with, and is balanced by the apparent reconciliation with his family that Miller presents in Nexus. Since the direction of Sexus and Nexus is toward the establishment of an artistic sensibility which could resist and even over come social rejection, the role of the artist in a hostile or indifferent society is peripherally addressed, with the idea of an artist as an outcast or isolated visionary explored in terms of the kind of individual strength and assurance an artist needs to survive. The fact that the would-be writer is planning to leave for the more supportive environment of Europe at the end of Nexus is significant as well.

Techniques

Sexus contains some of Miller's most vivid erotic writing, but its most interesting subject involves Miller's deepest probing of the psychic landscape which operates as a parallel world throughout his writing. In this case, his entrance into a mental landscape to avoid the unpleasantness of external reality carries him beyond areas of inspiration for artistic reflection and toward the fundamental psychological framework of his artistic imagination. This is an area he has not wanted to confront because he has suspected that a careful look at the sources of his energy might lead either to insanity or artistic sterility.

However, he realizes that his survival as a human being depends on an understanding of his most deeply concealed urges, and that a mutually rewarding relationship with a woman is impossible without such an examination. As the circumstances of external reality and his interior landscape fuse at the conclusion of Sexus, it is clear that he is risking his shield of masculine arrogance and his innate capabilities as an artist of language in order to save his soul or human spirit. This is the most dramatic single moment in all of Miller's work, and it gives the books in the triad a focus of immense concentration.

Although his emergence from this ordeal in Nexus is ultimately unsatisfying as he reintegrates the fragments of his personality without really showing any effects of the journey, his attempt at rendering self-analysis into prose fiction makes Sexus one of his most interesting books and establishes it as a key text in understanding his art. At the conclusion of Nexus, he has become the man who will go to Paris to write Tropic of Cancer. Even though Nexus does not make this man convincing, the testament of Tropic of Cancer remains to justify the effort at explanation.

Literary Precedents/Related Titles

The triad consisting of Sexus, possibly Plexus, and Nexus is structured in terms of the classic archetype of the Dark Night of the Soul in which the protagonist follows a path of descent to the depths of the psyche where a form of illumination occurs, and then a return or ascent to a position of newly formed psychic stability. This is one of the oldest patterns of human behavior expressed in literature, including notably the visit of Odysseus to Hades realm in The Odyssey, and Dante's tour of Hell in The Divine Comedy. The book which follows Sexus sidesteps the issue by presenting a character somewhat similar to the "Henry Miller" who was in a condition of absolute despair at the conclusion of Sexus, and then follows him and the woman called Mara through several hundred pages of mild domestic, homogenized narration. The book called Plexus, ostensibly part of the triad, lacks the fire and passion which is crucial to Miller's most compelling writing, and Miller realized that he had not actually advanced the Rosy Crucifixion (his designation for the entire grouping) or even written about the same "characters." Therefore, he began Nexus with the precise words (although italicized) that concluded Sexus. This novel was written eleven years later, however, and that much further from the events of the 1920s which were the basis for the project, and consequently, the protagonist now is much more reconciled to his situation so that the realm of ecstasy that should balance the realm of despair is actually in Cancer where the wild, manic energy of creation is displayed at its most overpowering. Nexus appropriately ends the pattern of ascent on a note of quiet acceptance which is a testament to the success of the journey, but the issue of psychic dissolution has been finessed instead of resolved. Nonetheless, the archetype that Miller employs is suitable for a multivolume "novel" that has as its essential narrative path a journey into psychic landscape.

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