

S. Short Guide

S. by John Updike

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Characters

The entire novel *S.* is told in the voice of Sarah Worth as represented by letters and tapes mailed to relatives and friends from a motel near the Arizona commune. Other voices enter only when Sarah reports conversations in her letters or happens to catch the guru's voice on her tape recorder. The main character is thus a narrator whose point of view dominates the novel, but her limited understanding is apparent, and the reader must look between the lines for the truth of what is happening.

Sarah Worth is modeled after Hester Prynne, the heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). She has a daughter named Pearl, a husband who is a physician, and a mother descended from the Prynne family. As a modern character, however, she also has a dentist, a lawyer, and a hairdresser. What she needs, of course, is the fulfillment of heart and soul that also fascinated and eluded Hester Prynne. Adultery with a pious hypocrite, as Hester discovered, only compounds the feeling of loss and despair.

Sarah also wanders "in the dark labyrinth of mind," and like Hawthorne's character finds "a home and comfort nowhere."

At the religious commune Sarah is given the name "Kundalini" which Updike defines as "coiled up" or "the serpent of female energy." Sarah has left her husband at the beginning of the novel in part to assert her independence and feminine power, but in Arizona she finds several women competing for the attention of their supposed religious master. She learns more about jealousy and seduction than any promised form of enlightenment, but she does have an affair with the guru before discovering that he really comes from Boston. After liberating herself from him at the end of the novel, Sarah is still unable to sort out the needs of flesh and spirit. At least she is not without material resources. Several pieces of inherited silverware are thought about with comic regularity, and she does manage to embezzle hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Treasury of Enlightenment.

The other important character in the novel is the cult leader, Updike's contemporary version of Arthur Dimmesdale. Sarah commits adultery with Art Steinmetz for two reasons: She thinks he radiates divine power, and on a deeper level she may feel that he is a replacement for the Jewish boy her parents would not allow her to marry in the first place. Art is a chameleon who presents himself as the Arhat, or "deserving one," who claims to have reached a high level of enlightenment.

His particular deserts include women, limousines, and the power of religious language. Sarah and Hester, no doubt, are attracted to their men of God because sex and religion are twin expressions of their desire for satisfaction and fulfillment. Both find a mixture of faith and hypocrisy because the false saviors are designed by male authors to attract and disappoint their frustrated heroines.



Social Concerns/Themes

S. is a novel about a woman's search for sensual and spiritual fulfillment. In typical Updike fashion her attempt to find Nirvana involves a series of comic turns and remains inconclusive. The heroine leaves her husband and respectable life in Massachusetts in order to join a religious commune in Arizona headed by a man who pretends to be a holy master from India. Life at the commune turns out to be a charade of spiritual enlightenment, a comic rite of sexual initiation, and a wild mixture of jealousy, fraud, embezzlement, and self-deception. The leader of the commune is an imposter who actually comes from a poor suburb of the heroine's native Boston. She is more disappointed by the revelation of his class status than by the exposure of his pseudo-religious credentials. The comedy of adultery is complete when the narrator learns that her husband is about to marry her best friend and confidante.

Updike's contemporary romance is a mixture of social and religious satire.

He explores the delusions of trying to escape from an empty marriage, the pratfalls of a religious commune, and the infinite capacity of the heart and soul to experience desire and betrayal.

The road to Nirvana in *S.* is a sad and comic journey into a contemporary maze of self-deception.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

S. is a contemporary example of an eighteenth-century narrative tradition, a novel in the form of letters. Updike updates the epistolary form by introducing tape-recorded messages. He also limits and controls the narrative by having all the letters come from a single character. In this way Sarah's mind is the stage for all that happens in the novel. Her feelings and thoughts, however compromised and mistaken, are the comedy and drama of Updike's narrative.

Another of Updike's techniques is the frequent repetition of the Hindu vocabulary in vogue at the religious commune. Not only is Sarah given a new name, she also learns a whole new language for dealing with her thoughts and feelings. One source of the guru's power, of course, is his apparent ownership of a foreign and exotic language.

Updike clearly has fun by writing his novel in both English and Sanskrit. He even provides a glossary of words for the unenlightened.

The most important precedent for Sarah Worth is Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Updike makes this quite clear by quoting two descriptions of Hester Prynne to serve as an epigraph for his novel. The many echoes of Hawthorne not only challenge the reader to make connections, but they also lend historical depth to Updike's contemporary story.



Key Questions

Updike's satire of religious communes has attracted a fair amount of commentary, but the most controversial aspect of *S.*, by far, is the female narrator. She is the Updike character whom feminist critics most love to hate. A less heated discussion, perhaps, may stem from questions about Updike's debt to Hawthorne.

1. What are the targets of Updike's religious satire? How is life at the Arizona commune a charade of spiritual enlightenment?
 2. How is the comedy of the novel based upon the self-deception of the narrator? Does she remain a likable heroine despite her comic errors of perception and judgment?
 3. If the narrator is betrayed by the desires of her own heart and soul, how reliable is her account of what happens? What allows us to read between the lines of her reports?
 4. How does Updike parody the religious language used at the Arizona commune? Are the characters able to think clearly in either English or Sanskrit?
 5. How successful is Updike's choice of narrative strategy? Does he manage to update the epistolary novel for a modern audience?
 6. What does Updike borrow from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*? To what extent is Sarah Worth a late twentieth-century Hester Prynne?
 7. Do these heroines share a common response to their experience of adultery with a pious hypocrite? How are both women left to wander "in the dark labyrinth of mind"?
 8. Why does Sarah embezzle money from the Treasury of Enlightenment?
- Do the multiple layers of deceit add comedy as well as suspense to the religious satire?
9. Why is this novel a particular target for the wrath of feminist critics?
- Should its narrative strategy be criticized as inherently unfair and sexist?
10. How successful is *S.* as an example of contemporary fiction? Where does it stand in relation to Updike's other work?



Related Titles

The subject of adultery is seldom missing from Updike's twelve earlier novels. The success of *Couples* in 1968 was the occasion for Updike's first appearance on the cover of *Time*. Adultery and its consequences remain central in the series of novels from *Rabbit, Run* (1960) to *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), and the subject even receives a supernatural treatment in *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984). Updike has explored numerous points of view for adultery in his fiction, but lately, in *The Witches of Eastwick* and now more thoroughly in *S.*, he has presented the subject from a female perspective, or, some contend, a caricature of such a perspective.

Updike's fascination with Hawthorne's fiction is apparent in much of his recent work. It was the topic of his 1979 lecture at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and Hawthorne was again on Updike's mind when he wrote about witchcraft and adultery in *The Witches of Eastwick*. His novels, *Roger's Version* (1986) and *S.*, are both modern derivatives of *The Scarlet Letter*.



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

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