The Sot-Weed Factor Short Guide

The Sot-Weed Factor by John Barth

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Characters

Ebenezer Cooke, the protagonist of The Sot-Weed Factor, is the son of a Maryland sot-weed factor or tobacco planter, although he is raised as an orphan in England together with his twin sister, Anna. After an education at home supervised by the family's tutor, Henry Burlingame, Ebenezer goes off to Cambridge where his wild imagination and inability to take the world seriously make him an indifferent student at best. Ebenezer's disposition here recalls the problems of Todd Andrews in The Floating Opera (1956) and is the source of many of his future difficulties. After Cambridge, Ebenezer embarks on a career as a poet in London. Hopelessly naive, he takes his own innocence and virginity as a sign of his calling, and he obtains a commission as the poet laureate of Maryland before he is sent to the colony to oversee his father's estate. Cooke's career as a poet is historically accurate and significant; there was an historical Ebenezer Cooke who wrote well-known satires upon life in colonial Maryland, including one which shares the title that Barth employs for his own novel, and parts of these poems are included in this narrative.

Cooke and his scheming servant are intercepted by pirates while crossing the Atlantic, and after being taken prisoner they are forced to walk the plank. They swim to shore and make their way to Maiden, the site of Cooke's father's estate. Ebenezer, however, loses his estate in a bizarre afternoon of impromptu colonial justice. He regains it with great difficulty, largely with the help of Burlingame, his former tutor, who is embroiled in dark political intrigues in America involving Lord Baltimore, William Penn, the French, and the Indians. These political schemes and Burlingame's myriad disguises are an expression of Barth's concern with the absence of any sure knowledge of the world and with the often obscure effects of any single human action.

Ebenezer's sister, Anna, follows him to America, largely to pursue her passion for Burlingame, and these three are reunited at Maiden after Ebenezer reclaims his estate from those who had turned it into a brothel and opium den.

Joan Toast, a former London prostitute and Ebenezer's first near-mistress, uses her good graces and legal authority to help him. Although syphilitic and dying, she marries Ebenezer, and it is his consummation of the marriage that allows him to regain legal title to his inheritance. At the end of the narrative, Burlingame disappears into the machinations of colonial political life, and Joan Toast dies along with her infant son. But Anna's son, Andrew, lives, and is raised by Ebenezer and his sister at Maiden.

With the publication of his satire upon Maryland, Ebenezer's laureateship is withdrawn, but he is offered it again later in life. However, Ebenezer declines this offer, and dies with little recognition. This mixture of disappointment and good fortune at the end of the novel restates Barth's assertion of the ambivalent effects of almost any human action.

Social Concerns/Themes

The Sot-Weed Factor returns to Barth's earlier exploration of the existentialist notions of action, choice, and value.

Whereas his earlier fiction considered these questions in a contemporary context, Barth's third novel introduces an existential perspective into late-seventeenth-century colonial America.

Throughout the novel, he suggests that the absence of any absolute order and the necessity of confronting the imperative to act is a persistent human dilemma; in addition, he suggests that early America was a lawless and perilous place, filled with murky political conspiracies and a thorough disregard for any sense of fair play.

Barth is also concerned with the difficulty in establishing a coherent sense of self and the assumptions that underlie any notion of the self. In part, this is accomplished through his use of twins in the novel to suggest opposition and the merging of contraries.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The Sot-Weed Factor is a flamboyant imitation of an eighteenth-century novel. The narrator adopts the tone and locutions of period narrators, and his descriptions of early colonial life in Maryland and life in London are designed to recall descriptions from the literature of the time. However, the importance of this narrative strategy is twofold and distinctly contemporary: On the one hand, this parodic imitation of an earlier novelistic style draws the reader's attention to the conventional nature of narrative; on the other hand, the density of authentic historical detail suggests to the reader that Barth is recreating a plausible, although wildly humorous, colonial milieu. By exploiting the tension between these competing claims, Barth suggests the absence of any but a fictional order and at the same time the compelling necessity for choice and action as suggested by the realistic aspects of the novel.

One of the most conspicuous features of The Sot-Weed Factor is its immensely complicated plot, and in this respect Barth's novel resembles most closely its eighteenth-century models, particularly the intricate narrative of Henry Fielding's Tom Jones (1749).

Another important literary antecedent is the work of Captain John Smith, whose account of the early exploration of Virginia and the Chesapeake area is hilariously parodied in Barth's novel.

Consistent with the use of parody throughout The Sot-Weed Factor, this satiric imitation of John Smith's accounts calls into question much of early American history.

Key Questions

1. Does this novel express or imply a yearning for the past? What are some of the crucial similarities and differences between the America of Cooke's time and the America of ours?

2. What does Cooke's life story suggest about the desirability of innocence?

3. Are there any real people in the world like the character Henry Burlingame? Does this fictional portrait seem intended to teach us something about human nature? Is it exaggerated in order to point up important themes in the work? Is it designed for maximum comic effect?

4. What is likely to be the average reader's response to the sexual behavior of these characters? Can one generalize about the presentation of sexual matters in The Sot-Weed Factor? Are the more outrageous scenes mainly humorous? Disgusting? Thematically significant?

5. What does this novel imply about the nature and roles of women in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century British and American society?

What does it imply about the nature and roles of women today?

Related Titles

The Sot-Weed Factor continues the existential themes of Barth's first two novels. In its concern with value and action, it recalls the dilemma of Todd Andrews in The Floating Opera. In its preoccupation with the construction of individual identity and spiritual paralysis, however, The Sot-Weed Factor is a sequel to The End of the Road (1958).

Since, in fact, Barth has described these three novels as a "nihilistic trilogy," they might well be read as complementary texts. In its treatment of the quest of an innocent figure, The Sot-Weed Factor also looks forward to the adventures of George in Giles Goat-Boy (1966) and ultimately to Barth's preoccupation with myth, found in much of his later writing. Descendants of the Burlingame-Cooke connection also return in LETTERS (1979) to continue their shady and equally inconclusive intrigues.

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