Steps Short Guide

Steps by Jerzy Kosiński

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Characters

The nameless I of Steps is a metamorphic figure who appears in a variety of roles, including vagrant boy in the villages, university student, photographer, ski instructor, soldier, and alien in a new country. The protean nature of the self is suggested in the representation. His varied movements through the chaos and barbarism of the modern world have been characterized by Jack Hicks as "the individual's deepest attempt to escape the encumbrances of fate and social control," as well as "the attempt to shore up a constantly eroding self that is sliding toward history and that is possessed in time by the consciousness of others." He is also a metamorphosing figure, invading and transforming other lives for his own self-satisfaction. He can seduce a laundry girl with the magic of a credit card and half transform her into a woman of the world or wonder how giving drugs to another woman will affect her. His ready victimization of others shows how deeply he has absorbed the oppressor's mentality in his own metamorphosis from victim.

Karl has emphasized the essential loneliness of the protagonist, who seeks dominance rather than love and friendship with equals, so that every act of reaching out to another becomes a contest. The protagonist does react against the oppressive forces in the society and rebels against the values of a collective society in his quest for personal freedom. Some of his turning toward the darker impulses of his nature has been seen as negative gestures expressing this rebellion. The protagonist's cruelty and aggressiveness, his constant manipulation of others, and his lack of any display of human warmth make him an extremely unattractive figure. Kosinski's own comment on the narrator suggests how fully the author envisions him as a product of a brutal modern world he is "always in step with the culture, unable to walk any other staircase."

Social Concerns/Themes

Steps involves the quest of a man shaped by the oppressive, brutal, and anarchic modern world to define himself as an individual. Once again, society and its institutions are seen more as threats than supports sustaining the individual. In his essay "The Art of the Self," Kosinski comments that "these formerly protective agencies like society and religion" now work to keep "the self from functioning freely." Some of the incidents recounted by the narrator bring out this grave malfunctioning, such as his account of finding a demented woman kept in a cage in a barn, where she had been sexually abused by the local farmers over several years. Even the local priest, obviously aware of the situation, had done nothing to rescue the woman. The priest only protested that the stranger did not understand the peasants.

The stringent pressures upon the individual person to conform in a collectivist society are emphasized in other episodes, such as the account of a university student, called the "Philosopher," who found that clean lavatories provided the one safe refuge where he could think in solitude; eventually he committed suicide in one of them. Kosinski also suggests the extreme depersonalization of which society is capable in the description of the architect who could design very functional concentration camps without any qualms by thinking of the purpose in terms of the extermination of rats rathrather than the murder of human beings. Moreover, as Ivan Sanders has stressed, the protagonist's escape from a war-scarred European country under a totalitarian system of government to the United States does not bring him into a brave new world. "In his new environment he is suddenly exposed to the casual barbarity of an impersonal, technological civilization." Throughout Steps Kosinski emphasizes the darker side of human nature that all too readily finds expression in society and in personal relationships.

In many ways, the protagonist proves to be a reflection of the world that he finds oppressive and restrictive, even while he seeks the freedom to realize himself most fully. As in The Painted Bird (1965), Kosinski shows that in this predatory world those like the narrator, who have been victims, strive to transform themselves into oppres sors. Freedom comes to be associated with power; the protagonist of Steps seeks to assert the power of the self consistently and remorselessly, such as in his commitment to exacting revenge for wrongs done to him.

Moreover, the narrator brings the concepts of power and dominance into his personal relationships. He carries out to an extreme the Sartrean concept that the self is the subject that preserves its integrity by converting everything else into an object. The narrator transforms the love relationship into a power play in which the other person is regarded solely as an object.

As Kosinski's comments in The Art of the Self make clear, the narrator considers the only satisfactory relationship "one of growing domination, one in which his experience — a certain form of the past — be projected into the other person. Until he has gained that dominance and the other is aware of it, his 'prey' is a rival." At the end, his

departure from his mistress shows the lack of real commitment to or involvement with the other.

Nothing in the narrator's account indicates that he recognizes any deficiency in his personal relationships, but in The Art of the Self Kosinski describes love as "the attempt to be simultaneously subject and object, . . .

the willing relinquishment of a single subject to a new subject created from two single selves, a subject enhanced into one heightened self."

Techniques

Steps represents Kosinski's most radical experimentation with the form of the novel. Here he dispenses with any kind of plot in the Aristotelian sense, as well as any chronological sequence. Kosinski links this approach with the modern artists' desire "to show time as we perceive it, experience as we absorb it. The shaping mind is at the center of the work and guides the work as it evolves." Steps consists of thirty-five seemingly disconnected episodes related by the narrator as observing participant. He has been compared to a camera eye ranging over scenes of cruelty and brutality that he has witnessed or dispassionately recollecting his own activities. The author has interspersed among these episodes fourteen italicized dialogues between the narrator and the young woman currently his lover. In their discussion of matters involving their relationship, the two explore the problem of how the self relates to others while preserving its own individuality. Thus their conversations pick up a major theme involved in the episodes described, which portray a range of activities, including victimization of various kinds, revenge, murder, and various sexual encounters.

Kosinski's pattern of sharply etched but separate incidents in Steps has been linked to his perception of his own life "as a series of emotionally charged incidents." He has told Gail Sheehy "to intensify life, one must not only recognize each moment as an incident full of drama, but, above all, oneself as its chief protagonist" Norman Lavers believes that Kosinski's episodic technique in this novel is his way of involving the readers by making them attend as fully to each episode as to events in their own lives. Kosinski himself saw this as enabling each reader to make his own individual journey through Steps, "automatically filling in its intentionally loose construction with his own formulated experience and fantasies"; he should leave each episode "with a hint of recognition."

Although no clearly discernible pattern connects the episodes, Kosinski has spoken of them as forming into a montage. Certainly the combined effect is a chilling representation of an anonymous, brutal, and amoral universe provided by a narrator who inhabits that wasteland. Occasionally, smaller connections linking episodes can be seen; the narrator may recall several incidents from a particular period in his life. At other times, the juxtaposition of incidents may have a thematic connection; for example, the narrator's obsession with revenge is emphasized when he tells how he killed the villagers' children and follows that with an account of how he ruined the career of a man at the university who had wronged him.

Kosinski's novel contains no tacit moral judgments against the brutal world it depicts; in fact, Kosinski has stated that he made each incident "morally ambiguous," thereby compelling the readers to resolve for themselves the moral issues involved.

Literary Precedents

With the writing of Steps, Kosinski joins the company of postmodernist experimental novelists, like the French writer Alain Robbe-Grillet, theoretician and practitioner of the "new novel" and American writers like John Hawkes, Donald Barthelme, and John Barth. Such writers rejected the tradi tional novel and sought to evolve forms that they judged more appropriate to the contemporary consciousness and its views of reality. For example, the influential Robbe-Grillet, with whom Kosinski is familiar, believes that conventional plots are distortions of reality and that the writer should not pretend to be able to explain the psychology or motivation of someone else. One of his key tenets is that the natural world must not be interpreted in human terms but simply presented as it is, in its "thereness" visually and sensually — "a smooth surface without signification, without soul, within vision, on which we no longer have any purchase." Characters are identified solely with the visual actions they perform or the events in which they appear. The "new novel" provides a scrupulously accurate report of observed reality that the reader can interpret in terms of his own experience and intelligence. In rendering this reality, the writer must focus on structures, since form gives a literary work its meaning. John W. Aldridge gives a very good assessment of Kosinski's place among such novelists. This critic finds Kosinski "energized by the postavant-garde iconoclasm" of the experimental writers and influenced by New Novel theories and the black humor of modern satirists. Yet he maintains that Kosinski's vision is "primarily philosophical" rather than "attempting to explore in the French manner the various possible ways of dramatizing individual consciousness"; satire is a secondary feature of his work. Aldridge sees Kosinski as "concerned rather with understanding the nature and meaning of the human condition, the relation, quite simply, of human values to the terms of existence in an essentially amoral and surely anarchistic universe." He puts Kosinski among those like Kafka, Sartre, and Camus concerned with giving dramatic force to ideas in their fiction. Although Aidridge's view of Kosinski as "primarily philosophical" is controversial, he does correctly suggest that Kosinski adopted the experimental forms to fit his serious thematic concerns.

Related Titles

The Art of the Self a Propos "Steps" is a critical essay setting forth some of the philosophical concepts of the self that Kosinski drew upon in the novel.

Kosinski also discusses the aesthetic principles that he sought to apply in his experimental techniques.

Norman Lavers provides a good analysis of the resemblances between Steps and The Devil Tree (1973). The latter portrays Jonathan Whalen's quest to find his identity through a number of short episodes arranged achronologically, as in Steps; it also depicts a number of scenes throughout the world in which people are seeking dominance over others through violence and cruelty; Whalen's relationship with Karen provides a recurrent focus in the novel, even as the protagonist's conversations with the young woman did in Steps.

Although Whalen, the wealthy young heir to an industrial fortune, has a far different background from the nameless protagonist of Steps, he also has several different selves, struggles for dominance in his relationships, and cannot give himself over to a commitment to Karen. (Please see separate entry on The Painted Bird for the relation of Steps to that novel.)

The protagonist in Steps has also been compared to Tarden in Cockpit.

Both are wanderers and adventurers with no fixed roots; both seek control over others and are manipulative and aggressive in their relationships with women; both follow a code of personal vengeance, although they also seek retribution for wrongs done to others.

Levanter, in Blind Date (1977), resembles them in many ways. However, there are some important differences, as Lavers emphasizes: Levanter is less successful in maintaining control than the other protagonists, and he is more fully involved in self-appointed missions seeking revenge for grave wrongs done to others. Levanter is also portrayed as more human and vulnerable than his predecessors; he is also the first one to commit himself to marriage.

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