

They Whisper Short Guide

They Whisper by Robert Olen Butler

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.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

They Whisper Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	5
Techniques.....	6
Themes.....	7
Key Questions.....	8
Literary Precedents.....	10
Related Titles.....	11
Copyright Information.....	12



Characters

Ira Holloway's desire for intimacy comes early. He establishes a special emotional tie to Karen Granger when he is ten years old, because he looked at her feet in the X-ray machine in his uncle's shoe store. His need for attention prompts him, in high school, to sneak into the girls' rest room and scribble praise of his supposed sexual prowess on the walls of toilet stalls.

In Vietnam, because he was fluent in Vietnamese, he recognized that while another American serviceman assumed the prostitute with him was exclaiming in ecstasy at appropriate times in their conjugal moments, the woman was actually calling out "You pig!" and other, even less complimentary epithets. Ira Holloway's name presents a challenge to native speakers of Vietnamese, so the women at the sex shop or steam bath he frequents call him Mr. "Ai" which, with a rising tone, means "love" in Vietnamese. Since he himself is received so readily by the women he approaches, it never occurs to him that the curses directed at another might ever apply to him. He blithely describes in graphic detail the mechanics of lovemaking the women use with him, and the procedures he uses with them.

Should one speculate on other significance in the name "Ira Holloway," there was an American military installation in South Vietnam named "Holloway." Also, when considering the protagonist's erotic fixations and wanderings, some could well consider his life, in the long term, a "hollow" existence, or could say he repeatedly sought Freudian enclosure in the female.

Fiona, as she settles into the roles of wife and mother, moves from being apparently carefree, teasing, and passionate to being a driven, compulsive lover, almost sadistic in her angers.

While she works for a time in an art gallery, she refuses to manage an exhibit of paintings based on a motif she reads as too suggestive of female labia, and quits. Growing steadily more compulsive about the rite of confession, Fiona begins to demand that Ira prove she has stimulated him immediately after they have been to Mass or confession: "I want to make love with you for the first time without guilt." As is common with persons victimized as children, Fiona carries a sense of sin and guilt which she truly should not own. Seven years of psychiatric sessions, though, have not pried the problem from her self-image: They have only pried the fees from her pocketbook. She becomes progressively more ritualistic in her demands and likely to fly into a rage of self-deprecation and jealousy if Ira cannot physically respond to her within a minute or two.

She equates orgasmic pleasure with divine grace, and any failure to achieve ecstasy on her own terms she sees as a mark of personal failure due to unforgiven sin.

Although Jewish and Christian traditions have included various interpretations of sexuality over the millennia, and the sex act in a variety of relationships has been



condemned, sexual relations within the context of marriage have long been revered as a sacred gift.

Fiona's legalistic patterns for acceptable intercourse with Ira and her irrational outbursts at the least lapse from her timetable portray her blindness to the principles of grace and forgiveness in the very rites she compulsively pursues. The doctrine of incarnation, interpreted through Fiona's tortured life, reduces to the streetwise philosophy of the alienated: Religion is just so much bad sex.

Several other women and girls Ira has seen or known, some casually, some very intimately — populate his reveries throughout the novel. Miss Hue, Miss Chien, Miss Trang, Blossom, Sam, Miss Xau, Amanda, Tran Thi Hoa, Rebecca Mueller, Kesree, and others appear and disappear as he contemplates the waxing and waning of his love for Fiona and his efforts to shield their son John from the worst of her behaviors. Other men figure only slightly in Ira's pastiche of sensual experience.



Social Concerns

More sensual than Butler's prior novels, *They Whisper* gives a male protagonist's world view, focused almost wholly on his attraction to women, his few experiences of intimacy without sexual involvement, his lavish sexual involvements, and his frequent fantasies of involvement. Ira Holloway marries Fiona, a lapsed Catholic who eventually discloses that, as a child, she was molested by her father. She turns to a rigid, fixated practice of her faith, linking the efficacy of the rite of confession to Ira's ability to perform sexually on demand. Thus, Butler presents the reader with a man who perceives the world primarily in terms of his own sexual satisfaction — without any consequences such as AIDS, herpes, chlamydia, or any of a hundred other realities which actually confront the erotically athletic person in everyday life.

Through Fiona, Ira sees contrasts to his own schedule of desire as irrational demands or outbursts of a woman who is mentally ill. The women who serviced him in the sex shops of Saigon when he was a young GI, the women he dallies with during his marriage to Fiona, all seem readily attracted to him because he has "soft eyes" and is somehow irresistible to them. The women are able to come into his life and leave without major consequences for either of them, and Ira stays with Fiona essentially to protect their son, assuring him that they conform to many of her religious practices and weather her vicious rages because she was abused as a child and needs to be protected as an injured adult.

Butler, while taking the reader into very detailed experiences with Ira, Fiona and various secondary characters, presents a situation in which women's desires for sex are rendered via a male's perspective, while the intricacies of women's expectations in a relationship are either enacted in Fiona's jealousy that runs beyond reason, or in the here-today-gone-tomorrow lives of Ira's short-term lovers.

The function of religion in Ira's life is little more than accession to ritual as a means of containing the mental illness of an abused child grown into an adult professional victim. While Butler as a novelist expresses more concern for a reader's ability to share the experience of the story's characters than for a reader's ability to abstract ideas or morals from the story, he has woven an effective video-age tale which would allow a thoughtful reader of either gender to step back a moment and consider the consequences of living with the warps and blindnesses which Ira and Fiona display. Their world is fundamentally organized by competition between male sex drive and insane rage of an abused and abusive female.

Religion is not a source of solace or strength for change, but another weapon in the battle of the sexes.

Techniques

Related as a first person narrative by Ira Holloway, the novel moves through its 333 pages in the hardback edition with modest breaks at the end of a section, and with a single enlarged capital letter opening the next passage.

Other novels by Butler show clear chapter identities: Each chapter is numbered and begins fresh on a page. *They Whisper*, however, has no clear "book chapter" divisions; rather, less intrusive breaks between sections parallel the scene divisions in a play or film script, and the reduced blank space interrupting the flow of words allows the mind to hold the novel as more nearly stream-of-consciousness in form.

In *They Whisper*, as in his other work Butler uses the blends of past and present to create the sense of Ira's reverie flowing forth and back in the stream of consciousness. Sentence structures vary from short grammatical statements to occasional fragments within standard dialogue, to rambling run-ons.

Sections varying in length from a paragraph or two to several pages are rendered in italics to mark the feminine voice Ira hears whispering to him in his reverie. Such passages may display a fine sense of descriptive detail, and may carry a reader's thoughts toward "female perspectives," but still, they are reported by a male persona, and still they reflect what the male ego wants or needs to hear whispered, not necessarily what the woman in focus might actually think or say.

Erotic passages appear more frequently in *They Whisper* than in *The Alleys of Eden* (1981). The vocabulary in erotic scenes varies from clinically precise to back-alley blunt. A reader first encountering Butler's writing in the short story collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992) will recognize that the literary art that garnered the Pulitzer Prize is usually quite genteel in its vocabulary, while the novels include harsher exchanges, and *They Whisper* is at times quite generous with terminology of the street and the locker room.

Themes

Ira's purity of desire for intimacy outstrips whatever sense he may have of traditional notions of morality, or even recognition that a "liberated woman" in his modern times might not wish to be viewed constantly as a sexual object. For Ira, any female who comes into view — physically or via memory — is a subject for detailed sexual fantasies and seduction: Good sex is true worship; bad sex is distorting and distorted religion. And somehow, although he claims to be an equal opportunity admirer, a reader never finds Ira in bed with a decidedly homely or overweight paramour.

Father-son bonding arises as Ira moves to protect John from Fiona's fixations and rages. When John is old enough to have a fascination for trains, Ira and he spend Saturdays riding the trains in and around New York — even though Ira commutes to and from work by train five days a week. Ira is not beyond including a day with a lover in the father-son train schedule, and he frequently assures John that going to Mass with mother is simply a means to help counter her fits of insanity. Thus, while Ira expresses great love and concern for his son, the vision of life and of relationships with women that he can convey to the boy is simply his own — nothing broader or more balanced than what he himself lives out.

Fiona enacts the wounded woman cycle in the story. Abused as a child and recalling the scenes of abuse as an adult, she alternates between feeling incapacitated by the early exploitation and being a domineering, manipulative, raging emotional abuser herself.

Although she never cites the phrase directly, she lives out the Old Testament maxim that "The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation."

Key Questions

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, television shows, radio talk shows, movies, books, and magazines have steadily included more erotic topics, more clinical detail in the management of such topics, and freer use in public of terminology once restricted to locker rooms, boudoirs, and the streets. Writers more often include terminology which, in the early days of television broadcasting, would have been consistently censored. In the last years of the century, certain items of the old taboo vocabulary are permissible, while others are still banned or beeped from a broadcast.

As mentioned in the discussion of precedents, in *They Whisper*, Butler falls in line with an ancient pattern of a character in some way associating human erotic experience with an understanding of the supernatural. Although he states that he writes in order for his work to share sensory experience rather than provoke ideological debate, the experiences presented in *They Whisper* certainly are ripe for discussion of male and female perspectives on erotic experience, for discussion of the relative success of Fiona's interpreting divine grace and the doctrine of confession and absolution through personal erotic experience, and for discussion of Ira's apparent ability to float through multiple sexual contacts with "no strings attached," no surprise pregnancies, and no surprise maladies.

1. While Ira Holloway frequently tells of the religious background of his women in Vietnam and repeatedly conveys Fiona's perspectives on Catholic rites and doctrines, he seems to find no enduring personal guilt when moving from lover to lover either before or during his marriage. Is Ira a man without morals? Is he a man without religion? If he finds religion of no consequence for himself, why does he agree to go to Mass and confession with Fiona?

2. While Ira remembers his opportunities for sex and passion in Vietnam and seems to have scant regrets for lovemaking there, certain events do arouse guilt in him. What events does he regret, and why?

3. Declaring intense need to be close to women and to share various intimacies with women, Ira Holloway sometimes relates his close study of a woman seen in passing, detailing how he imagines her body parts, almost millimeter by millimeter. The "women's voices" in his head tend to express similar passion for him. How realistic are Ira's portrayals of women's interest in him? Would the average woman feel comfortable having either a stranger or a friend gaze at her intently, as though he were undressing her with his thoughts? Would the average woman realistically dream so frequently and so intensely about male anatomy as Ira dreams about female anatomy?

4. Ira's erotic experiences and fantasies are usually graphically detailed.

Could Butler achieve the same or better effects by using the "less is more" principle and reducing the overt sexual descriptions? Does the reading public now tolerate explicit erotica or demand it?



5. What is Ira Holloway's occupation? Where does he work? Where does he live once he has a family? Why does he settle in a town so far from work?

How does his commuting affect the family?

6. What was Fiona's line of work?

How long does she work outside the home? When does she quit her job, and why? How does she expect Ira to respond to her resignation? Does he react as she predicts?

7. Fiona becomes pregnant and bears a son. How does she respond to being pregnant? How does she respond to the expectation that she nurse the baby?

How long does she nurse? How do the pregnancy and birth experiences affect Fiona's marital relations with Ira? How does Ira feel about the physical and emotional changes he sees in Fiona?

8. What connections does Ira draw between the Catholic tradition of confession and the practice of psychiatry?

What value does Ira see in either approach to discovering self and gaining wholeness? Does Ira himself feel a need for either confession or psychoanalysis? Does he avail himself of either approach in a sincere manner?

9. How does Ira seem to identify or define jealousy? Does he experience jealousy himself, or is it — in his view — a woman's weapon for irrational argument?

10. How does Ira perceive Fiona's intensifying religious activity? Do her contacts with the parish priest help Fiona hold her anxieties in balance?

Does Fiona seem to understand the Catholic perspectives on the grace of God and the premises of confession of sin, absolution from sin, penance, and resolution to amend one's life?

11. In relating the joys and sorrows of Ira and Fiona, has Butler drawn the reader to a serious consideration of the relationship between wholesome human love and the love of the divine for the human, or has he simply produced one more lurid novel for an increasingly voyeuristic reading public?

12. Literary critics long have warned against "the intentional fallacy," which is assuming that an author is always directly reporting his or her own beliefs, feelings or experiences. Allowing Butler the freedom to create characters who are not drawn exactly from his own experience, how many factors in *They Whisper* appear to parallel or be drawn from Butler's personal history?

Literary Precedents

In naming biblical books as literary precedents, Butler did not specify that canonical embarrassment to the pious known as *The Song of Solomon* or *The Canticle of Canticles*, but the Old Testament does contain it, nevertheless, and its imagery shows a lover's graphic attention to the neck, breasts, and skin tones of the beloved. To explain the presence of such erotica in the sacred writings, theologians must see it as an image of the love of God for Israel, or the love of Christ for the church. Down through western literary tradition, there have been recurrent connections between the intensity of human-to-human sexual love and the divine love for the human being. Always, whether in the writings of mystics such as St.

Theresa of Avila, the bawdy of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, the comic portrayals of lovers in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (c.1600), or Butler's *They Whisper*, the writer risks the charge of impiety or outright blasphemy when the erotic, and especially the pagan erotic, is brought near traditionally sacred rites and images.

Without declaring specific connections to prior works, Butler has produced a novel which returns to the premise that human sexuality offers an intense way to perceive the divine — a premise ancient in both Western and Eastern traditions. In Ira's discussion of love with Nguyen Thi Hoa, the Buddhist premise that human unhappiness results from uncontrolled desire is overtly explored.

The plaint that a traditional crucifix should show Christ completely naked on the cross if a true perspective on incarnation is intended appears in Butler's *Sun Dogs* (1982) as well as in *They Whisper*, and certain approaches to lovemaking found in *They Whisper* will also seem familiar to readers of Butler's earlier novels.

Related Titles

Although *They Whisper* is not plotted as a novel about Vietnam, but about a man's attempts to interpret his world through Eros, the main character is posed as a person who took full advantage of most every opportunity for sexual contact during his tour of duty with a military intelligence unit in Vietnam. Thus, *They Whisper* has passages that parallel portions of *The Alleys of Eden*, *Sun Dogs*, *On Distant Ground* (1985), and *The Deuce* (1989). In addition, the use of reverie and flashbacks in the mind of the narrator connect Butler's novels.



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

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

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