

# The Thinking Reed Short Guide

## The Thinking Reed by Rebecca West

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# Contents

<a href="#">The Thinking Reed Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns/Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>



## Characters

Isabelle is one of Rebecca West's most fully drawn characters, fraught with complex human contradictions and problems. Unlike the other characters in the novel who seem to stand for society in decline, Isabelle is a fully drawn modern woman for whom previously prescribed roles often do not apply. Her first husband, Roy, is killed before the novel's present time, providing Isabelle with freedom and money to go to France. Moreover, it is her American background and values she shared with her husband that provide a sense of loss, as well as the point of view necessary for her to look at European society. From this detachment, Isabelle tries to examine what she finds in Europe.

But Isabelle is more than a spokeswoman for West's condemnation of post-World War I Europe. Isabelle's emotions entangle her, in a very real way, in what she knows is wrong because Isabelle is also impulsive. Her reconciliation with Marc at the novel's conclusion is the result of her impulsive behavior. Yet one wonders at the novel's end if Isabelle can resolve the contradictions within herself to live happily with Marc as she promises him in their reconciliation scene when she says she will have his child.



## Social Concerns/Themes

The most praised of West's novels, *The Thinking Reed* expands upon themes first set forth in *The Return of the Soldier* (1918). West's concern here is the malaise of Europeans after the First World War, a malaise created in fact by the war. The world through which Isabelle, the novel's main character, moves is a world without order, and the disorder which eventually results, symbolically, in the Stock Market Crash of 1929, looms near the novel's end. Through Isabelle's American perspective and her affairs with several European men, West critiques French and English, as well as American, culture after the war, finding culture without the order it had before the Great War.

Isabelle, an American from St. Louis, lives in France and in the course of the novel becomes involved with four different men: Laurence Vernon, an American whom she nearly marries; Andre de Verniers, a French aristocrat who is completely corrupt and decadent; Marc Sallafranque, an automobile manufacturer as corrupt as de Verniers; and Alan Fielding, an English painter who befriends her when her marriage to Marc breaks up after she miscarries her child. These men represent certain aspects of society in decline, and Isabelle has only one lasting relationship (with Marc) with any of them.

These relationships have much to say about European society — conspicuous wealth, lack of real love, and shallow, materialistic thinking — but they also say much about Isabelle. West continually moves from a critique of society to a rather harsh critique of her main character. Isabelle cannot resolve what she knows with what she feels. Her intellect conflicts with her sexual and emotional needs, thus her marriage to Marc. Isabelle does not see the contradictions which surround her: She readily blames society for many others' problems but finds her own problems personal and individual. West heightens this conflict between self and society at the novel's end when Isabelle misunderstands her Uncle Honore's dire warnings about the Stock Market.

Marc and Isabelle have reconciled, and Isabelle refuses to allow society's problems to impinge on her personal happiness. West's society at the end of the novel is still disordered and on the brink of economic collapse. Isabelle's critiques of society ring ironically hollow as she does not heed her uncle's warning but is content, like those she often criticizes, to be concerned only with herself.

## Techniques

The novel is narrated by an omniscient, third-person narrator. West uses this technique for two reasons. One, she is able to use Isabelle as an instrument to critique European society, and, two, by creating narrative distance with Isabelle, West can also more forcefully point to the complexities in Isabelle's character. Thus West gains more with a third person narrator than with a first person narrator such as Jenny in *The Return of the Soldier*. West also uses the "off-stage" voice of Isabelle's Uncle Honore, who communicates from America with Isabelle in Paris about financial matters. His letters to Isabelle provide a common sense, American counterpoint to the instability and turmoil of Isabelle's public and private worlds. West found Americans honestly straightforward when she visited America in the 1920s; certainly Uncle Honore (and to an extent Isabelle) is modeled on her perceptions of Americans.

Again *The Thinking Reed*, like *The Return of the Soldier*, is controlled by West's use of irony. The contrasts between Isabelle's views of European society and her inability to act upon her critique is ironic. And Isabelle's refusal to act on Uncle Honore's warnings about world economics in 1929 is an historical irony West plays with as Marc and Isabelle happily reconcile what the reader has seen is a bad marriage. In *The Thinking Reed*, West illustrates why many have called her a superb ironist.

## Literary Precedents

Many novels contemporary to West's elaborate the social and cultural malaise of the 1920s caused by the First World War. In America, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) illustrates the shallowness of the rich in the Jazz Age. In England, Ford Madox Ford, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf, in various modes, critiqued a valueless modern society. Behind all these writers lies T. S. Eliot's central critique of postwar modern society, the poem *The Waste Land* (1922). Many waste land motifs run through West's novel. And West's harsh condemnations of modern economics has precedent in the novels of Charles Dickens, such as *Bleak House* (1852-1853). Although these precedents provide a context for understanding West's novel, *The Thinking Reed* remains one of West's most original and innovative novels. And therein rests its popularity and value for the contemporary reader.



# Copyright Information

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