

Thy Brother's Wife Short Guide

Thy Brother's Wife by Andrew Greeley

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Characters

Thy Brother's Wife is more a novel of plot and ideas than of characters.

The characters are essentially embodiments of ideas and instigators of plot.

The dynastic father, Mike Cronin, is a hard-driving, self-made millionaire whose Irish charm aids his seductions of countless women. Paul Cronin, the son he has destined for the Presidency and for the husband of his beautiful foster child Nora, is the evil figure of the novel who is willing to lie, cheat, and even kill in order to succeed in the path his father has chosen for him. The most intimate knowledge the reader has of Paul comes at the end of the novel when he takes a suicidal boat ride on Lake Michigan.

Greeley manages to realistically convey the psychological conflict of a man torn between hope and despair, between a drive to survive and a terrible fear of exposure. Both Mike and Paul are larger-than-life characters who represent both social and moral ideas.

They personify the historical upward mobility of the Irish Americans as well as the choice of evading moral responsibility and commitment. Paul's evil nature is the logical extension of his father's rise to the top.

Sean Cronin, the priest destined to become Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago, is more sensitively drawn. Although not an obviously autobiographical figure like Kevin Brennan in *The Cardinal Sins* (1981), Sean is a character who shares some of Greeley's most intense concerns, such as the role of celibacy in the priesthood, the Church's position on birth control, and the commitment to the priesthood. Sean's precipitous rise within the Church shares the larger-than-life aura of Paul and Mike Cronin, and the novel is told from his perspective. Greeley intends Sean to be read as a symbol of love and commitment, humanly flawed but faithful.

The most important character on the symbolic level is Nora: "a sturdy spring flower . . . with the lithe body of a woman athlete . . . Her flawless complexion was framed by rich auburn hair that fell halfway to a willowy waist." Idealized in her physical description, she also represents the ideals which Greeley extols in the novel: the ability to give in fully to her adulterous yet pure love for Sean and then to castigate him for feeling guilty about their love. She has a healthy attitude toward both commitments and lapses.

It is she, at the end of the novel, who loves Sean and herself enough to push him into keeping his commitment to the Church. On the realistic level, she may seem too good to be true, but on the symbolic level, Nora represents the feminine, loving and forgiving side of God.



Social Concerns

Greeley's major focus is on social concerns within a Catholic framework, such as the responsibility of the church toward the urban poor and the suburban family. *Thy Brother's Wife* is especially concerned with the roles of women and sexuality in the context of Catholic morality. It focuses on the difficulties, particularly of Irish Catholics, in reconciling the sensual and material pleasures of this world with the spiritual purity and self-denial preached by the Church.

The novel is set nostalgically within the context of John F. Kennedy's years in the White House. In Greeley's eyes, that era marked a confluence of historical events productive of hope and glory for American Catholics. The Irish had been assimilated enough to send one of their own to the White House, and at the same time Vatican II was stimulating waves of renewed enthusiasm within the international Catholic Church. The worldly protagonist, Paul Cronin, politician son of a multimillionaire, works with Bobby Kennedy and sees him assassinated. Paul is an evil amalgam of all the character flaws imputed to the Kennedy men. Paul's brother, Sean, destined to rise parallel to Paul within the Church hierarchy, ends up on the papal birth control commission in Rome, meeting with Pope Paul VI and expressing Greeley's own well-known views on sexual morality within the Church. As a sociologist of religion, Greeley has argued that the papal encyclical against artificial birth control undermined all the positive aspects of Vatican II and ultimately led large numbers of Catholics away from the Church. The two brothers thus witness what Greeley sees as devastating blows to the hope and enthusiasm of the early 1960s. Greeley is frequently called a "romantic" in a derogatory sense, but in a more literary sense, his faith in redemptive imagination as an antidote to the failure of political reform resembles the ideology of the Romantic period. Despite his vows of celibacy, Sean's passionate love for Nora is meant to show a participation in God's love of which Paul is incapable.

Techniques

Except for some background in Chapter 2, the narrative of *Thy Brother's Wife* proceeds rapidly, in clearly specified chronological order. The style is simple, almost terse, and the fictional characters are intertwined with the nonfiction setting and history.

The most literary aspect of the novel is its use of allusion to construct its role as "Holy Thursday," the first book of *The Passover Trilogy*. A note on the Jewish and Christian Passover, treating it as a springtime feast of liberation and renewal, precedes the narrative and explains the function of passages from St. John's Gospel which are used as epigraphs to major sections of *Thy Brother's Wife*. By emphasizing the links between Judaism and Christianity (and their links, in turn, with primitive fertility rituals), Greeley seems to broaden the boundary of his novel beyond the parameters of Irish Catholic Chicago. The first epigraph prays for community and for keeping people from evil. The narrative opens "after supper on Holy Thursday," 1951 and closes just before Mass on Holy Thursday, 1977. The protagonist, Sean Cronin, sings a hymn which expresses the main themes of *Thy Brother's Wife*: "Where charity and love prevail/here God is ever found" and "Our brotherhood embraces all/whose Father is the same."

Themes

The central theme seems to be the relationships between passionate sexual love, sterile and exploitative lust, and the all-encompassing love of God.

Sean the priest spends his life in love with Paul's wife, Nora, while Paul is incapable of loving her. Greeley believes that the love of a woman offers a powerful and fruitful model for humans of God's love. Sean Cronin is a fallible human being who is yet faithful to his commitment to the priesthood.

Nora is a sacrament, a powerful symbol of what God's love is like. Greeley seems to want to shake up his readers' preconceptions about faith and morality, and to open their hearts to the essence of Christianity, which is love.

Key Questions

A reader needs to be neither Catholic nor Irish to form strong opinions concerning Andrew Greeley's novels.

Discussions can center on both the manner of his storytelling and the content he presents. Because of this, they can serve as excellent exercises in how various and often opposing literary opinions can be formed, and whether or not they are supported by valid or invalid evidence.

And because so much of what he writes is drawn from his own research, Greeley can also serve as a springboard from fiction into other genres. The seeds of his novels can be found in many of his sociological and theological books as well as in his poetry and personal journals. In many cases, actual scenes from the novels can be traced quite directly to passages in his other writings. "Fiction is the best way of getting . . . insights through the secular barriers into general culture," he has said. Greeley's works can provoke an interesting debate about why a writer whose works are grounded in the empirical data he uncovers might be called unrealistic by critics.

1. When asked in an unpublished interview what he hoped would be the major topic of discussion among those who read his books, Andrew Greeley replied without hesitation: "That God loves them." Using *Thy Brother's Wife* or one of the related titles, discuss whether Greeley's intent comes through to a reader or whether there is truth in the assertion made by one reviewer who maintained that if this kind of epiphany is Greeley's intent, then he needs to rewrite.

2. There is a cliché which asserts that "You can't tell a book by its cover."

While many critics of Greeley believe he makes best-seller lists because of his suggestive covers, the cover photograph of *The Cardinal Sins* is actually part of a series by Rena Small entitled "Non-exploited Women's Bodies." How do you "read" the cover of *Thy Brother's Wife*? What expectations does the cover create for the story? Were these expectations fulfilled when you read the novel? Why or why not?

3. In several talks he has given and articles he has written, Andrew Greeley complains that no book reviewer can resist using the word *steamy* in reference to his works. Using *Thy Brother's Wife* or one of the related titles, find a sexual scene and examine the description closely. Compare what you read here with a passage from another popular fiction writer. How "steamy" is Greeley? Does the "steam" blur your vision of his message?

4. Read Andrew Greeley's *Faithful Attraction* (1991) or *Sex: The Catholic Experience* (1994), studies of marriage and sexuality based on extensive sociological data gathered by Gallup Polls and National Opinion Research Center surveys. How does *Thy Brother's Wife* or one of the related titles serve as a dramatization of the empirical data about marriage and sex uncovered by the survey? Discuss why you think Fr.

Greeley may have taken up his third career as a novelist.

Literary Precedents

Thy Brother's Wife can be seen as an historical novel in the tradition established by Sir Walter Scott. Even though the era is only two decades earlier than the publication date, the nostalgia for a lost period of hope and renovation is highly romantic. The book is ambiguous about its relation to history. On the one hand, fictitious characters interact with real people and events; on the other hand, a "Disclaimer" precedes the narrative in order to establish that it is not a roman a clef. The author's "Personal Afterword" claims for the novel a place in the tradition of religious parables. The texture of the book is a mixture of historical reality, myth, archetype, romance, and allegory and perhaps best lends itself to being read as the same blend of fact, legend and lore as Greeley's first novel, *The Magic Cup* (1979).



Related Titles

Thy Brother's Wife shares many features with Greeley's next two novels in The Passover Trilogy, which are set in approximately the same time frame and which continue to develop the same themes of sex, love and commitment, whether to God or another person.

While the second book, *Ascent into Hell* (1983), follows very closely the format, chronological narrative and style of both *The Cardinal Sins* and *Thy Brother's Wife*, *Lord of the Dance* (1984), shows considerable advances in subtlety and artistic technique.

Whereas *Thy Brother's Wife* represents the community of the Last Passover Supper on Holy Thursday, *Ascent into Hell* represents the forgiveness of Good Friday. In the prefatory statement on Passover, Greeley maintains that three experiences define the Judaeo-Christian religion: "Community, Freedom, and New Life." Each of the three novels emphasizes one of these motifs. *Ascent into Hell* celebrates the freedom gained through forgiveness.

Scriptural allusions to Jesus's seven last words on the cross serve as epigraphs for the six books into which the narrative divides. A "Personal After word" asserts that although the novel appears to be about a priest's conflicts over breaking his vows of celibacy, it is "primarily a story of God," not unlike Biblical tales of human vices.

Ascent into Hell pushes the concerns of *Thy Brother's Wife* to a new level.

Rather than showing an interlude of incontinence in a life committed to priestly celibacy, the second novel depicts priests and nuns who reject their vows and marry. Rather than using an idealized female character to suggest the power of love, Greeley wants this novel to present through the character of Maria "a sacrament of God and a revelation of how God works."

The novel received mixed critical reception.

The third novel of the trilogy, *Lord of the Dance*, met with improved critical response and marked two new departures in Greeley's fiction writing — moves into the genre of mystery and the subject matter of parapsychology.

Instead of the liturgical and Biblical allusions used in the first two books of the trilogy, *Lord of the Dance* uses the image of dance as a symbol of the act of creation. Nietzsche provides one of the major epigraphs: "The only God worth believing in is a dancing God."

The notions of God as avenger, rule maker and rational creator are replaced by images of God as joyous free play and life. Each part of the novel takes its name from a different dance form.



Noele, the red-haired and green-eyed protagonist, both literally and symbolically represents Christmas and Easter, birth and rebirth. Noele's psychic powers represent Greeley's findings that parapsychology is for many people an important aspect of spirituality.

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