To Sail Beyond the Sunset Short Guide

To Sail Beyond the Sunset by Robert A. Heinlein

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Characters

Heinlein's success with characterization has always been mixed. As critics have long noted, most of his protagonists conform to a basic pattern; they are highly competent individuals (men, women, or aliens) who have mastered the skills to survive and flourish in a hostile universe. Profoundly individualistic and skeptical of all authority, they are yet willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of their community.

Cynical and cantankerous, they retain a deep, if selective, sentimentality.

Heinlein is generally quite successful with his protagonists, who, gifted with something of his own voice, are witty, allusive, and prone to folksy, even corny humor. They generally share his remarkable gift for explaining how things work, of making what could be dry lectures into fascinating discourses.

And he skillfully depicts a mentor relationship — the wise old man (or woman) explaining things to a gifted, but as yet naive, individual.

Those who dismiss Heinlein as fascist, racist, or sexist forget that for Heinlein, the characteristics of the competent individual have never been restricted to white males — or even to human beings — but to an elite of brains, talent, and courage. In his later novels, however, the characters are less likely to demonstrate competence or offer the wonderfully lucid explanations that grace such novels as Have Space Suit Will Travel (1958) or The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress (1966). They are more likely to indulge in long monologues and harangues — to the detriment of the story.

Heinlein has always had difficulty with secondary characters and antagonists. His villains tend to be caricatures and his secondary characters are either stock figures or clones of the protagonist. Heinlein never hesitated to identify himself with a woman, a black, an alien, or a sentient computer — so long as that character shared his own hardheaded skeptical intelligence. What he rarely did, at least successfully, was to sympathize imaginatively with characters whose ideas he disliked. Thus the basic conflict tends to be between fully realized characters and one-dimensional caricatures — with a subsequent loss of dramatic tension.

Such is the case in To Sail Beyond the Sunset. Maureen is a vividly drawn character and her father is effectively depicted as her mentor and hero. Even their similarities in speech and thinking are justifiable as reflections of their close relationship. Her first husband sounds a good deal like her father, but given her incestuous feelings toward her father, it is certainly plausible that she would have chosen such a man.

But virtually all the other characters who are positively depicted sound like Maureen and her father. Even characters drafted from other Heinlein stories or novels, where they had their own distinctive voices and personalities, lose much of what originally made them memorable. Except perhaps for Lazarus Long, all seem but pale reflections of their former selves. The absence of a genuine antagonist for Maureen really harms the

novel. There is no genuinely "other" mind and voice for her to test herself against, and thus all of her victories seem too easily won.

Social Concerns/Themes

ToSail Beyond the Sunset, published on Heinlein's eightieth birthday, proved to be his final novel. While some critics have seen the novel, along with his other late works, as an expression of solipsistic despair, it seems more a defiant affirmation of life in the face of debilitating illness and approaching death. Indeed the title and the epigraph are taken from Tennyson's poem "Ulysses," in which the hero refuses to rest after his long journeys and instead sets out once more: Come, my friends Tis not too late to seek a newer world.

Push off, and sitting well in order smite The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths Of all the western stars, until I die.

The heroine and narrator of her own story is Maureen Johnson, known to Heinlein's readers as the mother (and later lover) of his most famous character, Lazarus Long, hero of Time Enough for Love (1973). Maureen, who was rescued from death in the twentieth century and whisked to the fortyfourth century by Lazarus and his extended family in The Number of the Beast (1980), spends most of this novel in prison on a parallel earth, which allows her to tell us the story of her life. Maureen gets to do what Heinlein characters love most — talk.

Perhaps the central concern of Maureen's story is sex — a theme common to all of Heinlein's novels since Stranger in a Strange Land (1961), but increasingly important since I Will Fear No Evil (1970). More precisely, it is a celebration of sexuality and a scathing attack on prudishness, repression, and attempts to limit sexual expression to socially approved forms. In fact, at one point Maureen suggests that the only unnatural sexual practice is monogamy. Maureen is a devotee of sex — with a man, with a woman, alone, in couples, in groups, as often as possible.

And when she is not having sex, she delights in talking about it. But while Maureen is in many ways attractive in her unabashed sexuality, the novel's treatment of sex is ultimately unsatisfying. Part of the problem lies in the book's length (over four hundred pages) and in the frequency of the sex scenes. While Heinlein is by no means pornographic and rarely even very explicit in his sexual descriptions, the coy sex scenes grow increasingly tedious.

A second and more serious difficulty is that Heinlein's ideas about sex are not complex enough to demand elaboration over several hundred pages. His ideas are in fact simple: Sex is good — perhaps the highest good. Anyone mature enough to have sex should be free to have sex with any consenting partners. The only rules of sexual morality inferable from the novel are the necessity for consent, the importance of good sexual hygiene, and the absolute need to make provision for any children.

Heinlein has always been a trenchant social critic, and there is good satire of the hypocrisy of American social norms for sexuality. But the model of sexual life proposed here — a large and constantly expanding group marriage that seems free of tensions or

disputes — is not rendered in a convincing way. Aside from a few reservations, explained as holdovers of an obsolete moralism, none of the numerous husbands and wives experiences any difficulties. The greatest writers have always recognized the exhilarating and agonizing complexities of sexual love. While there is certainly justification for celebrating sexuality,a more complete vision would also recognize the darker side of sexual obsession, jealousy, manipulation, and betrayal, as well as the countless ways that people have used sex to control and hurt one another. Heinlein sees that darker side as a by-product of traditional morality, but he fails to make an effective case. His Utopian view seems too simple and unrealistic.

Fortunately, both Maureen and Heinlein have other things on their minds. The heart of the novel is a loving re-creation of life in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mid-America — especially Missouri, where Heinlein grew up. There is a pastoral, elegiac tone, a fondness for that time that is deeply moving. It is rather ironic to suggest that a great science fiction writer — a man who taught a whole generation to think about the future — wrote the best part of his final novel about the past. But then, it is only our past up to a certain point. What becomes increasingly clear is that Maureen inhabits an Earth, indeed a universe, that is a close parallel to ours — a world in which the Japanese attacked San Francisco, not Pearl Harbor, and in which Leslie LeCroix was the first human to land on the moon. Most importantly, it is a world in which the stories from Heinlein's well known Future History series are the reality.

This combination of fictive autobiography and a parallel universe allows Heinlein to retell twentieth-century history in his own way. He can use one time line to comment on the other, for example, to contrast the internment of Japanese-Americans in our time line with the riots that killed thousands of Japanese-Americans in Maureen's. Thus he can suggest that the policy of internment was not as cruel and unjustified as most Americans now believe. At other times, Maureen simply editorializes about what went wrong in the twentieth century — the decay of education, the disappearance of good manners (which Heinlein sees as a sure sign of disaster for a society), the loss of patriotism, and an obsession with rights to the neglect of responsibilities.

As always, Heinlein is hard to pigeonhole. While his characters are, like him, profoundly skeptical about democracy, they are intensely patriotic Americans. While Maureen seems at times a conservative's dream woman — deferential to her man, proud to call herself a "brood-mare" — she is also a woman who takes no guff from men, who earns degrees in science, law, and philosophy after raising seventeen children, who becomes an influential member of the board of directors of a major industrial concern, and who articulates stinging criticism of male sexism. Heinlein celebrates free love on one page and expounds on the need for strict disciplining of children on the next. Heinlein is his own most complex character, and the novel's structure allows him free reign to comment and complain about American society.

One other theme warrants at least brief mention — Heinlein's notion of "the world as myth," the idea that we create what is usually called reality. It is a sign of Heinlein's ability to surprise that in his last few novels he asks a question normally associated in science fiction with Philip K. Dick: What is "real"? To what extent is the world shaped or

even created by our senses — our minds? Heinlein even appears to have fun with critics who have long identified solipsism as one of his central themes. Here (and in The Number of the Beast) Heinlein proposes — perhaps jokingly — Pantheistic Multiple-Ego Solipsism, the notion that all of the countless universes are just something we all got together and imagined.

While Dick's explorations of the fragile nature of what we call reality are often disturbing and even terrifying, Heinlein seems mostly to be enjoying himself and offering a heartfelt tribute to the power of human imagination.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The basic structure of the novel, a fictional autobiography, dates back to the earliest English novels, in particular those of Daniel Defoe. To Sail Beyond the Sunset could in fact be profitably compared with Defoe's Moll Flanders (1722), the story of another "irregular lady." Both Defoe and Heinlein came from Calvinist backgrounds; both were firm believers in commerce and exploration; both were fascinated with how things work; and both pioneered in forms of literature scoffed at by the "high culture." Their protagonists share a number of traits, especially a radical individualism. Moll and Maureen are survivors, women who seem to come out on top despite the dangers and difficulties they confront, and both are pleased with their ability to compile a fortune. Both ignore social customs and traditional morality whenever it suits them.

The differences between the writers and their novels are also instructive.

While Defoe doubtless took some pleasure in depicting Moll's sexual irregularities and her life as a thief, he takes equal pleasure in subjecting her to the throes of a guilty conscience and an ultimate repentance and conversion experience. Heinlein, on the other hand, portrays Maureen as something of a moral exemplar in her forthright sexuality and her refusal to be dominated by repressive social norms. The tension that always exists in Defoe between the lover of adventure, intrigue, and wealth, and the believer trembling before God is lacking in Heinlein.

A number of critics have remarked on the strains of Calvinism in Heinlein, what one has perceptively called "Calvinism without theology." Heinlein was raised as a Methodist, and while he abandoned traditional religious beliefs at the age of thirteen, some marks of his early training persist in his exploration of free will and determinism, and especially in his belief in an elect group — an elite not of grace, but of superior intelligence, courage, and determination. Heinlein's elect, like that of Calvinist theology, is marked off by worldly success and riches.

Maureen is certainly one of the elect.

She is smarter and more successful than the mass of humanity, and her eventual home on Boondock in the forty-fourth century is clearly Heinlein's equivalent of heaven, where she joins in a community of the saints, her extended family of husbands and cowives, where, as the last line of the novel puts it: "we all lived happily ever after."

One other literary precedent or influence deserves mention. Samuel Clemens is represented in the novel as a hero of Maureen and her father, and Clemens himself even makes a brief appearance. Critics have often suggested a number of parallels between the two writers. At his best Heinlein's voice is similar to Twain's plainspoken, conversational, and graced with a pungent wit, and a knack for striking metaphors and tall tales. He also shares Twain's skepticism. Both writers spend a good deal of time satirizing their societies and lampooning sacred cows, and both reject their childhood religion and turn a jaundiced eye on the behavior of the faithful. And both produced their

best work in what were ostensibly juvenile works — The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) and Heinlein's juvenile series.

Related Titles

To Sail Beyond the Sunset is related to a sizeable proportion of Heinlein's science fiction. It is the fourth novel in a sequence that began with Time Enough for Love (itself a sequel of sorts to Methuselah's Children, 1941) and continued with The Number of the Beast and The Cat Who Walks Through Walls (1985). But one of the premises of these novels is the ability to travel not only through space and time, but to parallel universes, which allows Heinlein to incorporate most of the characters from his Future History series (a group of stories and novels later published as The Past Through Tomorrow, 1967), and nearly any of his other books. Characters from Methuselah's Children, The Man Who Sold the Moon (1950), The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, and Stranger in a Strange Land, all rub elbows. The effect is at times witty, but not nearly as successful as Heinlein or his fans would have hoped — perhaps because there is relatively little plot. Once Maureen gets to the forty-fourth century, beyond Lazarus, accumulating a larger and larger family from his past and from the present times of several universes, the characters have little to do but talk. Despite the uneven quality of the novel, however, it is unfortunate that we can no longer look forward to the next Heinlein novel.

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