

The Wapshot Chronicle Short Guide

The Wapshot Chronicle by John Cheever

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Characters

establishing St. Botolphs and its inhabitants, Cheever has assembled a unique and engaging assortment of eccentrics to serve the thematic purposes of the novel. Clearly the hero of *The Wapshot Chronicle* is Leander Wapshot, patriarch of the family and unfaltering proponent of tradition. Descended from generations of God-fearing Wapshot men drawn to the sea, Leander is unceremoniously reduced to ferrying passengers across the bay from St. Botolphs to Nangasakit; that is, until an inopportune storm enables his wife Sarah to turn the foundered S.S. *Topaze* into "The Only Floating Gift Shoppe in New England."

Juxtaposed to Leander is cousin Honora Wapshot, possessor of the family fortune and coupled with Sarah the representation of the steadfast, independent, and emasculating female.

It is Honora who shares Leander's determination to transfer the value of tradition to the new generation of Wapshots, yet by circumstance is also Leander's rival for control of the Wapshot legacy. Sarah, on the other hand, is relatively superficial and consequently limited as a character, but plays a contributing role in determining Leander's eventual demise.

Although Leander and Honora are certainly the most developed characters, Moses and Coverly Wapshot are the most important in relation to plot development. The novel follows their exploits leading to departure from St.

Botolphs and entrance into the modern world in search of fame, fortune, and identity. However, once on their own and finding themselves overwhelmed and undermined, Moses and Coverly must both come to terms with the lessons of survival instilled in them by their father.



Social Concerns

Deeply affected by the changing social and moral climate of postwar America, Cheever became increasingly convinced that a decade founded in promise, convenience, and wonderment was depreciating in value to the point of concern. Attempting to explore this concern in his fiction while at the same time hoping to restore a semblance of order to a world in transition, Cheever turned his attention from the short story to the novel and re-created in *The Wapshot Chronicle* a picture of life in an old, New England fishing village during the first half of the twentieth century. While presenting a family history of the Wapshots, the novel allows Cheever to examine both the role of family and the relationship of the individual to contemporary society.

A keen observer of the realities underlying the surface appearance of existence, Cheever turned a disparaging eye on the "forceful absurdities of life" and began to assess the damage of a heightened sense of loss, perplexity, and disillusionment. In essence, *The Wapshot Chronicle* serves as a warning for the future. At a time in history when "something went terribly wrong," Cheever is predicting the degree of difficulty, or perhaps impossibility, of survival in the modern world.

Techniques

The Wapshot Chronicle is divided into four parts: Part One presents a chronological history of the Wapshot family; Part Two alternates in focus from Leander to the misadventures of his sons; Part Three follows Moses and Coverly on their separate paths toward career, marriage, and parenthood; and Part Four recounts Leander's death and funeral and the return of Coverly and his family to St. Botolphs. Representing an artistic departure for Cheever, the methodology of division allowed him to experiment with narrative point of view. Although criticized for being disorienting to the reader, the narrative shifts repeatedly throughout the novel from scenes involving Moses and Coverly to chapters of Leander's journal, producing a seemingly "inexhaustible flow of inventiveness."

It is Cheever's unique blend of whimsy, nostalgia, ribaldry, and pathos that creates his comic vision of a world in ruins but nonetheless capable of grace and continuance. Notably held together by "spit and wire," the novel is loosely organized around the pivotal setting of St. Botolphs and written in the lyrical style of a master craftsman.

First and foremost, Cheever is a storyteller, and *The Wapshot Chronicle* generously strokes the imagination.

Themes

Attempting in *The Wapshot Chronicle* to capture the "irrecapturable" past, Cheever creates the setting of St.

Botolphs, a romanticized version in part of his hometown of Quincy, Massachusetts, and the Wapshot family, unmistakably modeled after his own: Leander, his wife Sarah, and their sons, Moses and Coverly. Throughout the novel, Cheever charts the decline and ultimate resurrection of the Wapshots, simultaneously recognizing their limitations and celebrating their possibilities. It is essentially this cast of characters in conjunction with the setting that gives the novel its charm, substance, and conflict. An important ingredient to plot development, the setting of St.

Botolphs enables Cheever to systematically parallel the nearly extinct attributes of tradition and ceremony to the increasingly untraditional present of the novel.

The novel's central figure is Leander, the embodiment of a genteel New England aristocracy in direct confrontation with contemporary decadence, hypocrisy, and emptiness. Cheever is comparing the quality of life stemming from Leander's upbringing to that of his sons, and offers Leander as a comic, yet optimistic visionary, capable of dignity and compassion.

Criticized for being disjointed and episodic in nature, the novel is both entertainment and satire. Cheever defended the disjunction of the novel as being characteristic of modern society. Likewise, the emotional and moral tensions suffered by Leander and his family represent the social crises defined by loss of self-esteem, skepticism, and despair. Cheever satirizes the plight of contemporary man, but refuses to yield in his insistence for a life complemented by beauty and meaning.

Literary Precedents

The imaginative setting of St.

Botolphs is reminiscent of a number of similar creations including Mark Twain's St. Petersburg, Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, and William Faulkner's Jefferson. In each case the locale contributes to the quality and value of the theme while producing characters that appear as realistic extensions of the environment. Likewise, the idyllic small-town atmosphere allows for explicit contrast with the forbidden or foreboding attraction of the city, gently calling the romantic innocent in search of experience.

Based primarily on his thematic concern of the individual in relation to society, Cheever is often compared to such classic American authors as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway. This is accentuated in the case of Hawthorne, given Cheever's use in *The Wapshot Chronicle* of the traditional infrastructure of New England morality. Cheever is most effective when, similar to Hawthorne and Fitzgerald, he demonstrates a compassion for his characters engaged in a personal struggle for recognition and acceptance.



Related Titles

In *The Wapshot Scandal* (1964), Cheever takes aim at contemporary American society by detailing the lives of the surviving Wapshots hurled "into the world of missile stations, thruways, supermarkets, suburbs and questioning young men from the Internal Revenue Service." The focus of the novel concerns Leander's sons Moses and Coverly, each pitted against the forces of modern culture. As generations of Wapshots before them, Moses and Coverly are being tested by the currents of troubled, if not treacherous, waters. Plunged head-first into a world void of the traditional values, beliefs, and customs to which the Wapshots have been bred, Leander's sons struggle not necessarily to succeed but to merely endure.

Although the novel is a continuation of the family saga, Coverly quickly surfaces in *The Wapshot Scandal* as the central character, whereas Moses decreases in importance. Cousin Honora appears in the novel as more or less an eccentric figure, and considerable attention is given to the Wapshot wives, Betsey and Melissa. Coverly, like his brother, is clearly a product of the changing times, part of a vast technological structure capable of incomprehensible and incompatible productivity. Coverly's wife Betsey roams the novel like a lost soul, constantly seeking love and companionship and forever remaining unfulfilled. Melissa, on the other hand, assumes a far more substantial role in the novel. Unable to adapt to contemporary society, she is victimized by apparent comfort and respectability and is stricken by the awareness of her own extinction. Hoping to escape the emptiness and loneliness of her existence, Melissa takes a young lover in a desperate attempt to ward off impending doom. Instead, she becomes a pathetic and bewildered casualty, as does Moses who brandishes his wife's infidelity with alcoholism and discontent. It is left to Coverly, spiritually akin to his father, to muster the strength of endurance in the face of adversity. Returning to St.

Botolphs as he did at the conclusion of *The Wapshot Chronicle*, Coverly seeks to rekindle the Wapshot flame linking the present to the enduring past.

Invariably, the novel is haunted by the physical presence of St. Botolphs and the spiritual presence of Leander's ghost returned to St. Botolphs to confront Coverly during a time of introspection. Fearing that contemporary man in his obsession with progress will destroy "the excellence and continuity of things," Cheever again offers a reminder of the precariousness of human endeavor.



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

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