War with the Newts Short Guide

War with the Newts by Karel Čapek

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Characters

Although eclectic and complex, Capek's novel borrows principally from two literary forms: the technological dystopia and the adventure story. Dissimilar as they may be, a conspicuous link between them is their treatment of characters. In the dystopian tradition the focus is often on broader societal trends which individuals and their peripeties tend to reflect and exemplify. In the adventure story the emphasis is on exciting and colourful action, frequently at the expense of psychological depth or extensive character individuation. Moreover, the genre often relies on its stock of robust and colourful character types associated with recurrent geographical settings, such as the African interior or the South Seas.

Capek's novel brilliantly evokes and at the same time parodies the diverse conventions of the adventure story, including some of its readily identifiable character types.

Captain van Toch, the first of the subordinate players in the global drama of Warwith the Newts, is their especially engaging specimen. A wily South Sea captain, his appearance (portly), manners (informal), habits (drinking), temperament (choleric), language (cursing), and trademark (garrulousness), are both true to the image and dis torted out of proportion so that, while representing his stock, he also becomes its gentle caricature.

Much as with the entire cast of the novel, instead of dwelling on the Captain's exterior, the narrator characterizes him almost entirely through his speech. The most artful embodiment of this technique may be in the book's opening pages, which ought to be a staple in all creative writing classes. From the first sentence Capek unceremoniously buttonholes the reader via a long monologue from Captain Van Toch, whose voluble tirades and shouting matches with the natives or his crewmen will continue to be a perfect vehicle for characterization and an endless source of hilarity. Similarly, little formal exposition precedes the encounter with H. G. Bondy, the ruthless financier and quintessential Robber Baron, or Mr. Povondra, his servant, whose point of view provides a local (not to say parochial) corrective to the epochal events that sweep the planet. Beside these major-minor actors in the global drama of the Newts, the plot dishes out a couple of sailors, a handful of journalists, a few scientists, some learned professorial types, groups of military personnel, and dozens of anonymous individuals who (typically with hilarious results) personify and/or caricature their social roles or professions.

Consistent with a typically socio-historical orientation of the Utopian/dystopian genre, the principal agents in the novel are two group antagonists, the humans and the human-like newts. The trick of dispensing with an individual hero is a radical experiment for an adventure story, no matter how packed with satire or philosophical insight.

At times adopted by Wells and later perfected by Lem, such a non-heroic plot flows naturally from Capek's intention to employ the conventions of journalism to paint a savage picture of increasingly totalitarian and militaristic Europe.

Only his unforgettable salamanders are entirely a product of his imagination. The size of a ten-year-old child, they walk on hind legs, have four prehensile fingers and five toes, live mostly in water but can breathe both sea and atmospheric oxygen. They are highly intelligent and adaptable, articulate and nonaggressive, and almost too eager to ascend the ladder of industrial civilization.

These all-too-human salamanders are the book's most multifaceted and complex symbol. Within the parameters of the author's narrative thought experiment, they are both a catalyst and a microscope with which he studies a civilization which, however hale on the outside, nurtures multiple forms of fascist and militarist cancer within. The Newts are a blank page onto which every government, every industrial, cultural and religious organization projects their fears, prejudices and hostilities. It is for this very reason that it is so easy to identify them with almost all types of victims, slaves and minorities that were hunted, persecuted or exploited in the course of history.

Things change, however, when the Newts realize their power and, under the leadership of Chief Salamander, begin to flex their military and industrial muscle. In no time they begin to resemble Hitler's Germany, with their territorial demands echoing the hysterical calls for living space (Lebensraum) that the Nazi regime adopted as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. It is no accident, of course, that the salamanders have been indoctrinated in this belief by Germans like Dr. Hans Thuering who proposes that the Baltic Newts display distinctly Aryan traits, being more blond (i.e. lighter in colour), walking more erect, and exhibiting cranial superiority to other members of their species.

Social Concerns

After the publication of War with the Newts, when Hitler's campaign of political and military intimidation continued unopposed, it became painfully clear that Capek's warnings had fallen on deaf ears.

Thomas Mann's daughter, Erika, consoled the author in his distress: "Your story of those sly, clever creatures which were first trained by man for all sorts of uses, and which finally, turning into a mob without soul or morals but with dangerous technical skill, plunge the world into ruin, this story is so contemporary and exciting, so comical and entertaining, that it wins friends everywhere." More than six decades later, it continues to do so.

A modern and modernist classic almost from day one, War with the Newts was daring and eclectic enough to ignite a debate about which genre or literary tradition it mined the most. Since the author populated this roller-coaster adventure with sapient and human-like lizards, it seemed a kind of fantasy, but since he used the newts as a scalpel with which to better dissect contemporary civilization, it ended up being viewed as an odd kind of Utopia. Utopia is a good place (eu-topia) that is also a no place (utopia), leading one to expect a fantastic yarn with a blueprint for the "human use of human beings" in some comfortably distant future. But not so in War with the Newts.

Wild and fantastic as it undeniably is, there is nothing futuristic or other-worldly about its savage critique.

In the Epilogue to the first book edition (the story was originally serialized in a Prague journal, Lidove Noviny), Capek chided those who would dilute the socio-satirical impact of his masterpiece. "There is no Utopia here, only the present. There is no speculation about the future, but a mirroring of that which exists and the surroundings in which we live. It was no matter of fantasy . . . but reality. I cannot help it; literature which is not concerned with reality and with what is actually going on in the world, which does not react as strongly as word and idea possibly can—such literature is not my concern." This vision of literature as a social instrument filled almost everything he wrote in the years between his 1915 doctoral thesis at the Charles University of Prague and his untimely death in 1938, on the eve of the bloodiest war in history.

By 1921 Capek's philosophical and highly whimsical plays, R.U.R. and The Insect Play, were a raging critical and popular success, becoming rapidly translated into dozens of languages and staged in all coun411 tries of the developed world, ending up among the most performed works of the entire century. Capek became a household name from America to Japan, while the word robot (which, although attributed to Karel, was coined by his brother and occasional co-author, Josef) made literary and scientific history. Yet after 1927, almost overnight Karel virtually stopped writing plays.

Why? Deeply convinced that he needed to impact his readers in a more direct way, he forwent the source of his critical repute and popular acclaim, devoting himself instead to

journalism and journalistic fiction. It is hardly a coincidence that War with the Newts is a romanfeuilleton that not only mocks and mimics myriad journalistic conventions, but unflinchingly reports on the state of the world tailspinning into a World War with an emergent global power—the Newts.

The publication of the novel in 1936 caused a worldwide stir, with reactions running the gamut from calls for laurels to lynching. In the United States it was reviewed in the most prestigious national magazines such as Time, The New Republic, and The Saturday Review of Literature, with Harry Levin opening his piece in the Nation by perceptively maintaining: "It is hard to see, after this book, how the Nobel Prize Committee can go on ignoring Karel Capek."

Sadly, the Swedish judges proved themselves loath to alienate Hitler, lampooned and denounced in the figure of a war-bent dictator of the Newts, and failed to muster the nerve to honour the Nobel short-listed War with the Newts. Urged secretly by the Swedish Committee to quickly submit another novel that would "not attack anyone or anything," Capek replied with polite but deadly sarcasm: "Thank you for your good will but I have already written my doctoral dissertation."

Considered on its own merit, without the shadow of war menacing Europe and its literary curators, War with the Newts is an all-around winner. A true literary chameleon, innovative and difficult to pigeonhole in the best of times, Capek proves in this novel-allegory that his satire can be as hard-hitting as isotropic. War with the Newts typifies his endless depth and variety, for within its two hundred and thirty pages he succeeds in blasting and lambasting the excesses of arms trade, science, religion, modernism, the League of Nations, anthropocentric anthropology, racism, labour (mis)management, nationalism, capitalism, fascism, bolshevism, communism, colonialism, imperialism, militarism, pretentious intellectualism, sensationalist journalism, the fashion industry and the media circus, Hollywood's nouveaux riches and their extravaganzas, and historical "objectivity," doing it with an unerring eye for the most risible aspects of modern civilization. Making readers convulse with laughter while cringing in alarm of self-recognition, the book makes abundantly clear that a talent like Capek's may come only a few times in a century.

War with the Newts is like Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels: simple enough to delight a casual reader, deep enough to drown a tenured philosopher. Its roller coaster plot opens with the discovery of a new sapient lizard species who, in the hands of Captain van Toch, are soon turned into efficient pearl divers. The operation expands, the Newts are shipped around the world and settled in new habitats, and in no time the Captain is having an audience with G. H. Bondy which paves the way for a more efficient and mass-scale use of the intelligent and articulate salamanders. As their industrial exploitation intensifies according to the iron logic of twentieth-century capitalism, the Newts become an indispensable grease for the machinery of global trade and progress. As such they become hunted, enslaved, murdered, exhibited in circuses, bred in captivity, tortured, abused, preyed upon, and trained for armed combat, in a symbolic romp through Capek's condensed version of the darkest moments in the history of our civilization.

But War with the Newts is not about the past. With a prognostic audacity matched only by his accuracy, the author peers into the future to offer the reader a terrifying foretaste—or for us, descendants of World War II, a sickening aftertaste—of the worst excesses of Nazism. Like the latter's meticulously administered genocide that proved not above using human bones for industrial fertilizer or human skin for lampshade leather, the executives of Bondy's Salamander Syndicate plan a systematic processing of the Newts. Towards the end of the boardmeeting scene that would have been a jewel of comedy if its modest proposals were not so deadly accurate, the German member of the executive board begins to debate the value of these human-like creatures as a source of meat or skin. . .

If there is one social concern that takes precedence over all others, it is the author's fear of the inevitability of another war and his desperate efforts to stave it off by means of his comic-satirical masterpiece. Even though the mightiest work of art is powerless in direct confrontation with a machine gun, it can whip its readers into action, especially with a satire so accurate as in War with theNewts. When the world lies in ruin, warns the author, and the time of reckoning is at hand, there will be no one to blame for paving the way for Hitler simply because everyone will be to blame. On the last pages of the book, Mr. Povondra's son sums it up in these words: "Everyone did it. The different countries did it, finance did it. They all wanted to make the most out of those Newts. They all wanted to make money out of them. We used to sell them arms, and what not. We are all responsible for it."

In his uncompromising, albeit good-natured way, Capek laughs at the obsolete thinking which—as history would soon prove him correct—would fatally deceive Europe into appeasing Hitler's megalomaniac crusade for a greater Third Reich.

Mr. Povondra's obstinate mantra of, "We are a neutral state, and therefore they can't attack us," would have been a good joke if he did not believe it so fervently. The book leaves no doubt that the similarly pious prayers of, "the Newts can't get to us, that stands to reason," are as hollow as the prewar faith in the inviolability of the Western defense lines. For just like Capek forewarned, neither neutrality nor the famed Maginot line of French fortifications would prove of any consequence to the lightning Blitzkrieg of the Wehrmacht panzer divisions.

It is not an accident that Chief Salamander, "the Genghis Khan of the Newts, and the destroyer of continents," is revealed to be a man on the last pages of the novel. His real name—again reinforcing the identity between humans and newts—is Andreas Schultze, and like Hitler he is an ex-World War I sergeant who whips the Newts into conquistadorial frenzy. In this, Schultze is aided not only by the governments of all world powers, who shower him with arms, munitions, and credit even after the declaration of war, but also by human Quislings who front him in negotiations with the nations of the defeated Earth. Just like the real-life British and French prime ministers who tried to buy Hitler off with the sovereignty of Rhineland, Austria and Czechoslovakia, these lawyers-for-sale maintain that it "would be better for mankind to accept the generous offer of chief Salamander, who is to-day still willing to buy the world from human beings instead of seizing it by force."

But even though War with the Newts is a scathing allegory on the rise of Nazism and on Europe's ill-bred policy of appeasement, it would be a mistake to chain Capek's masterpiece to any single critique, theme or concern. His madcap novel-satire is quite simply an anatomy of contemporary civili zation, of which Hitler as Chief Salamander is only a part. Nazi national socialism, American slash-and-burn capitalism, Soviet communism, or Newt militarism are all the target of the book's satire as different versions of a self-serving lust for power.

And if the ocean-dwelling tapa boys of Captain van Toch are live toys that humans greedily play with without reflecting on their destructive potential, the writer leaves no doubt that in the end these toys are us.

Techniques

In 1917 Karel Capek got his first job as a journalist and it is fair to say that, while his journalistic prose is invariably artistic, his fiction is frequently journalistic.The compliment could hardly be higher as, according to his 1962 biographer, "the sum total of his journalistic writing . . . embodies the spiritual testament of one of the most humane, civilized, and flexible minds of our century." Capek has an uncanny ability to employ and spoof the techniques of popular journalism while addressing philosophical, scientific, political and social themes. At the same time, he removes these Dostoyevsky-type inquiries from the Grand Inquisitor and, while joyously borrowing from assorted facets of modernist art (e.g. cubism, futurism, expressionism), he repackages them into fables, allegories, fantasies and Utopias.

Stylistically, War with the Newts is again a cocktail—shaken and stirred—of the most diverse elements. This rollicking melange of modes of narration, techniques and even fonts, flows from the author's commitment to experimentation going back to his doctoral thesis. At that time he argued that the single most dominant characteristic of twentieth-century painting was "the projection of several spatial views in a single pictorial content." In narrative terms, his commitment to "grasping of objects from several sides and from several distances, the division and juxtaposition of an opinion," was thus the equivalent of what cubism attempted in the visual arts by means of collage, distortion and exaggeration of symbolic detail.

The point of view of Capek's narrator is never at rest, meandering effortlessly from the personal to the global, from the incidental to the historical. Moving in and out of the characters' minds, poking into remote corners of the world only to zoom out into a bevy of media reports, the narrator resembles a movie editor, busily cutting and splicing a cornucopia of feature and documentary material. In a matter of pages he can cover the linguistic gamut from the elevated hypocrisy of an executive boardroom to the slangy gossip of superstitious sailors, followed by two chapters of hilarious inner wranglings of a movie mogul's son, wrapped around the finger of his airhead girlfriend.

In these and countless other narrative incarnations into which he slips within a single chapter, Capek's voice betrays the dexterity and assurance of a Fritz Lang and Charlie Chaplin combined.

This flexibility and versatility are not an accident. In one of his early interviews Capek announced that he intended to write one hundred novels which would cover all literary genres. Ambitious almost to the point of hubris, this program reveals his characteristic literary curiosity and openness, defying the line between highbrow intellectualism and mass appeal. In a 1925 Czech article, "Karel Capek About Himself," he explained the source of this eclecticism: "I think that the greatest literary influences on me were my childhood reading, folk speech, and Latin prose; then everything else, good or bad, which I ever read.

Perhaps I could mention three or four authors who have not influenced me, otherwise I seek to learn from everyone who comes to my hand."

War with the Newts is divided into three parts, the middle of which, "Along the Steps of Civilization," is one of the wittiest, most imaginative and most accomplished seventy pages that ever appeared in print.

Dispensing with conventional narration, Capek records the increasing impact of the Newts on the world arena through a mass of newspaper cutouts. Documenting the phenomenon of the Salamander Sapiens, they display a kaleidoscopic variety of styles and points of view, closely echoed in the cornucopia of fonts, typographical conventions, footnotes, references, headlines, letter and even margin sizes, that must have given a headache to any typesetter. Filled with mock-studious acknowledgments of sources, credentials and multilingual references, the section boasts even a self-reflexive footnote reference to the very War with the Newts in question! By means of such a quasi-journalistic tour de force, this short segment manages to render a welter of information with a wit and precision that has Nobel Prize written all over it.

Although concentrated in "Along the Steps of Civilization," the author's extravaganza is equally impressive in Books One and Three, entitled respectively "Andrias Scheuchzeri" and "War With the Newts."

Truly a master of modernism and the modern spoof, the author dishes out reproductions of business cards, facsimiles of handwriting, bold or italicized type for gossip column headlines, journal-style event summaries in point form, scientific expedition reports, a newt skeleton reproduction, CAPITALIZED headlines read by a salamander, an interview-type series of Q&A, posters and freak show advertisements, typewriter fonts, an old-time gothic print, minutes of a business meeting, a mock-anthropological appendix a la Margaret Mead, excerpts from an essay in philosophy, and even a handful of telegrams.

All this adds up to a picture of unparalleled variety and sophistication, liberally spiced with wit and humour a dozen times a page. It is, of course, hard to write about humour without ruining it completely, and for that reason that last word must go to Karel Capek himself. An avid gardener, in the days before War with the Newts he once published the following prayer: "O Lord, grant that in some way it may rain every day, say from about midnight until three o'clock in the morning, but, You see, it must be gentle and warm so that it can soak in; grant that at the same time it shall not rain on campion, alyssum, helianthemum, lavender and the others which You, in Your infinite wisdom, know are drought-loving plants—I will write their names on a bit of paper if You like— and grant that the sun may shine the whole day long, but not everywhere (not, for example, on spiraea, or on gentian, plantain lily and rhododendron), and not too much; that there may be plenty of dew and little wind, enough worms, no plantlice and snails, no mildew, and that once a week thick liquid manure may fall down from heaven. Amen."

Themes

Although he was one of the most versatile and erudite writers of the century, today Capek is remembered mostly for his scientific/philosophical/satirical plays and novels. Alongside H. G. Wells he is also recognized to be one of the most important practitioners of pre-war science fiction. His writings on social, scientific and philosophical topics are of great value, inasmuch as they deal with issues rife not only in prewar Europe, but in the technological world of today: the dangers of modern warfare, the culpability of scientists for the fruits of their research, the nature of technological might, the allure of totalitarianism, or the illusory nature of an industrial Utopia.

Crucial though they are both to his fiction and nonfiction, these concerns arise from his quest for a narrative embodiment to an even more central theme: a moral definition of an individual and his role in a democratic society. This is not to suggest that these two goals are distinct from each other. Quite the contrary: much as in War with the Newts, Capek the philosopher/scientist is indistinguishable from Capek the social analyst/historian. For, sexual and emotional makeup apart, the thinking and oppressed salamanders are uncannily human, from the head to each of their five toes.

After all, Captain van Toch, who plays the seminal role in the Newts' integration into the human economy, is at the bottom a good man. He obeys a kind of code of honour even while he makes the Newts toil for him in an ironic parallel to the good old days of imperialism, during which Europe bore the white man's burden by bringing the torch of progress to savage lands, often by torching cultures too resilient to the ideals of the civilized world. On the surface, G. H. Bondy, the archetypal Captain of Industry who inherits from van Toch the idea of exploiting the Newts' industrial potential, is also a decent chap. He is, after all, deeply concerned (about his earnings), mindful of his fellow men (all of whom sit on the board of the Salamander Syndicate), and attentive to the Newts' needs (to the extent required to optimize their market value).

The theme which unites Capek's works is his constant striving to recast political, social, economic, scientific, religious and philosophical issues as moral ones. Not that the author sacrifices his penchant for satire and grotesque even among the most gruesome facets of contemporary reality. When he pillories the American South, where the presence of the Newts serves only as a handy excuse to burn and lynch more blacks, his ironic distance packs more punch than any earnest sermon. In another wrenching episode, and with similar detachment, he mocks the learned scientists who slay and vivisect salamanders in the name of knowledge, even while the sentient victims cry out to God for help. Whether the victims are black-skinned people or black-skinned Newts—insists the author—such actions and policies are simply morally indefensible.

For, as the book reveals, the Newts are human in more than a symbolic sense. A report of an early paleontologist hypothesizes that the Salamanders may be living antediluvian fossils of the early man, while their genus name—Andrias Scheuchzeri— links them to the Greek word for Man: andros.

On another level, War with the Newts is a sustained investigation of the impact of science (as seen through new technologies, inventions, economic developments, philosophical dilemmas, quasi-religious miracles) on the social and moral character of mankind. Like in the works of Stanislaw Lem in the recent decades, Capek's critiques of scientism and technology worship stem not from any neo-Luddite prejudice, but from a humanist outlook on the relation between people and technology. It must be remembered that the author was not only trained as a scientist, but throughout his lifetime retained a keen and perceptive interest in scientific and technological breakthroughs. So much so, in fact, that when a new machine, the vocoder, was unveiled at the New York Trade Fair in 1936, Capek immediately incorporated it into his book as a medium to ridicule the voice of Chief Salamander, "dreadful . . . croaking . . . hollow and quacking, as if it were artificial."

Although Capek's principal themes of science, technology, society and the individual, can be isolated in a critical analysis, they rarely appear independent of one another in his plays, novels, or journalism. His mixed reaction to visiting London in the days before War with the Newts is a characteristic example. He admired the industrial and commercial acumen of the capital city at the height of the British empire, but despaired of its mass, drab and slum-uniform character. If there are so many people around, he remarked, then human life cannot be worth very much, and soon enough, of course, the Nazis would prove him terribly right. The savagery wrought upon the pacifist Newts in the name of industrial progress seems to be abetted by their apparent anonymity and ability to reproduce in vast numbers.

Much is usually made of science fiction's futurological visions, and Capek's novel is remarkably exact in its predictions of what in 1936 was still only a ghost of a world war, and what for us is the memory of the systematic campaign of military conquest and concentration camp slaughter. Territorial aggression, national weapons trade, ill-policy of appeasement, lightning-fast nature of modern warfare, totalitarian extermination and exploitation of conquered countries, cynical violations of neutrality, mass transportation of newts in special boxed railcars, special fenced-in camps—all these acquire a sinister light for readers of War with the Newts armed with the legacy of World War II.

Adaptations

There seem to have been only two attempts at adaptation of this satirically entertaining and complex novel. In 1958 Kenneth Sylvia reworked it into a play, entitled Day of the Newt, and in 1975 Robert E. Johnson wrote a screenplay based on War with the Newts which, however, was never produced.

Key Questions

Capek's mock-journalistic adventure story is a hard-hitting but hilarious anatomy of what, in one of his artistically most successful films, Charlie Chaplin epitomized as the Modern Times. In your discussion of this novel you may wish to consider the following questions: 1. Does Captain van Toch exploit the Newts or does he aid them in their struggle with sharks and other underwater predators?

2. In what ways do the salamanders prove to be sapient and human-like?

3. What specific moments/periods of our history can you identify in Capek's satire?

4. Could the war with the Newts have been prevented or even avoided altogether, and if so, how?

5. Can you think of another writer who employs and parodies the conventions of journalism with equal success?

6. What is your candidate for the funniest scene in the novel and how does it figure in the overall tragi-comic plot?

7. What parallels with Oswald Spengler's The Decline of the West are conveyed through the fictional Wolf Meynert and his The Decline of Humanity?

8. Did you find the novel a brisk and entertaining read? What makes it so?

9. Have Capek's warnings lost any of their pertinence or power several decades after the conclusion of the World War?

Literary Precedents

War with the Newts did not spring out of nowhere either in intellectual or literary terms. Its themes and narrative treatment have prefigured in other works almost from the beginning of Capek's career. One early story which must be mentioned in this context is "The System" (1908), authored jointly by Karel and Josef. A link in the literary chain which culminated in War with the Newts, it is a thrilling story of mass apathy, revolt, carnage and violence, and a parable on the dehumanization of people as the price of modern technological civilization.

A more immediate source for the principal narrative vehicle—a species of intelligent and talking animals—may be Pierre Mac Orlan's "La Bete conquerante" (1920).

The story begins with a farmer who, intending to slaughter a pig, unwittingly affects its brain in a way that allows the animal to acquire the power of speech. In no time the talking and thinking animals are pressed into the yoke slavery, servitude and industrial labour, but the human owners lose direction among their new-found indolence, causing the animals to revolt and take over the world. A later incarnation, on a smaller and simpler—albeit no less satirical—scale, is George Orwell's unforgettable Animal Farm.

In 1922 Capek published an important novel called Factory of the Absolute (also known as The Absolute at Large or even The Manufacture of the Absolute), which anticipates his later masterpiece in concept, structure, and even the character of G. H. Bondy, the unscrupulous industrialist. Even though less even than War with the Newts, it has the same mix of humour and tragedy, philosophical sweep and analytic skill. In the light of such strong parallels, one should remember Capek's declaration from the year of Factory of Absolute: "I have written a number of books, and each is completely different, one happy, one sad, one abstract, one not. And because some people have deduced from this that I write something different every time . . . I don't want to spoil their fun; I will instead divulge a weakness that is much, much worse; the fact that it seems to me I am always writing the same thing, that only the coat is a bit different."

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