

# Water Music Short Guide

## Water Music by T. Coraghessan Boyle

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# Characters

Boyle suggests that Mungo Park's African expeditions are somehow responsible for the advent of the Romantic Age of literature. One of the main characteristics of the Romantic Age was the introduction of exotic places and themes into literature, and Park's African adventures are fit subject matter for Romantic literature. At the end of Part One of the novel, when Park returns to London after his first African expedition, Boyle suggests that London represents the eighteenth century's concepts of Neoclassicism and Enlightenment while Africa represents the Romantic Age.

As Part Two begins, Park is having trouble writing about his African experiences. In trying to adjust from the active life of an explorer to the contemplative life of an author, Park must translate his Romantic adventures into terms that are understandable to the Neoclassical sensibilities of the London readership. By writing about his adventure, he must regress intellectually by stepping back into a previous age, an act as unnatural as the adventure itself, which was following a river upstream.

The character Johnson serves to illuminate this dilemma experienced by Park. Johnson is a black man from Africa who constantly quotes great works of literature. Thus, Johnson is a man of both the Enlightenment because he is well read and of the Romantic Age because, as a black man, he is exotic from a Western point of view. In the first chapter of the novel, Johnson is introduced as one who has attempted a Mandingo translation of a Fielding novel, a project which clearly and comically symbolizes the combination of the eighteenth century and the exotic. Elsewhere in the novel, Johnson criticizes Park's notebooks for being too factual. Johnson urges Park to embellish his accounts of his adventures because the readers in London and Edinburgh want something exotic, not just the facts.

Besides offering Park literary advice, Johnson accompanies Park as a guide on both expeditions. After Park argues with Johnson and ends their friendship late in the novel, Park's death follows soon after, thus suggesting that Johnson held the key to Park's potential transition from the Enlightenment to the Romantic Age.

Another characteristic of Romantic literature is its glorification of the common man, and nobody could be more common than Ned Rise. Rise's childhood is compared to that of a Dickens character, and his education is compared to that of Eliza Doolittle, the protagonist of *Pygmalion*. He is most memorable for organizing a live sex show. When he turns to exhuming cadavers for the experiments of the physician who saved him from a hangman's noose, Rise graphically recalls the Graveyard School of poets who preceded the Romantics in the late eighteenth century. At the end of the novel, when Park dies in a waterfall on the Niger and Rise survives, a native tribe thinks of Rise as a messiah because he can play the clarinet. Since Rise plays the instrument with the nubs of amputated fingers, it is as though the music comes from inside him; and it is the unpolished yet musical Rise who personifies the Romantic Age and who comes closer than Park to discovering the source of the Niger.



Ailie, Mungo Park's wife, bears him four children and reads his many letters from Africa. She finally grows impatient waiting for him and has an affair with Georgie Gleg. In the novel's conclusion, after Park's death, the fiftythree-year-old Ailie receives a letter from her son Thomas, who has gone to Africa to follow in his father's footsteps. When Ailie receives the letter from Thomas, she does not even bother to open it, a suggestion that history repeats itself, so writing about it is superfluous.

## Social Concerns

It is difficult to extract a serious social message from such a playful novel, but there is a hint of the evils of European colonization in Africa.

Mungo Park's disappearance in the Niger River symbolizes the doom that awaits Europeans who try to conquer Africa. Park's fate is comparable to that of Mr. Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), a more serious novel on the subject of colonization. On the other hand, when Ned Rise survives the same accident on the Niger that kills Park, Boyle is sending a Darwinian/ Marxist message about the resilience of the lower classes. All of Park's formal training as a naturalist is no match for Ned's rise (pun fully intended by Boyle) from his lowly origins at the bottom of the British social ladder.

## Techniques

Boyle's first novel mixes historical fact with fiction, a technique that he exploits in later novels as well. In the "Apologia" at the beginning of *Water Music*, Boyle admits to being "deliberately anachronistic" and to exercising other liberties in the reconstruction of history. A complementary technique is Boyle's constant use of literary allusions, which would lend a fictional aura to even the most straightforward presentation of historical fact.

The novel begins by tracing two plot lines, that of Mungo Park's African adventures and that of Ned Rise's British escapades. Destiny and coincidence bring the characters together, a technique that Boyle has borrowed from the many eighteenth-century novelists that he cites. Boyle also borrows the epistolary mode from the eighteenth-century novels, most memorably when Park writes letters from Africa to Ailie, his long suffering fiancée and later his wife back in Scotland.

When Boyle reproduces excerpts from Park's travelogues, the reader recalls Daniel Defoe's use of the technique in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719).

# Themes

The main action of *Water Music* is Mungo Park's search for the source of the Niger River. In developing this simple plot line, Boyle makes so many references to so many other authors that Park's search for the source of the Niger becomes a metaphor for Boyle's search for the essence of literature.

Neither Park nor Boyle completes his respective quest; but as Ned Rise plays a clarinet along the Niger after Park's death, there is a suggestion that music is necessary to the fulfillment of both the protagonist's and the author's quests.

The novel's title reinforces these correlations between music and water, and between music and literature. The first correlation is obvious in the title *Water Music*; and the second becomes apparent when the reader recognizes that the novel's title is also the title of a piece of music by Handel, thus making Boyle's title the first of countless allusions in the novel.

The novel takes place between the years 1795 and 1805, a period of time which serves Boyle well in his exposition of both Park's physical quest and the author's literary one. Regarding the search for the source of the Niger, 1795 and 1805 were the actual years when the historical personage Mungo Park left his native Scotland on African expeditions; as for Boyle's own search for the essence of literature, 1798 was the year that the Romantic Age of British literature began with the publication of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*.



## Key Questions

Water Music is the first novel by an author who has a Ph.D. in English, and the book reads like Boyle is trying to purge himself of all the excess literary knowledge he acquired in graduate school. The novel has a cathartic effect on any reader who shares Boyle's academic credentials, and the book serves as an apology for anyone who does not. Boyle's irreverence does not lapse into cynicism because he manages to outwit many of the famous authors he lampoons. As he writes, Boyle must be reminiscing about trading barbs with his professors during oral exams.

1. Does Boyle successfully integrate the musical motif, suggested by the novel's title and by Ned Rise's clarinet playing, into the plot; or does the music appear to be just an appendage to the novel?
2. Does the Apologia at the beginning of the novel, in which Boyle admits to taking liberties with history, represent intellectual honesty or a shameless disregard for both historical fact and the conventions of the historical novel?
3. Does the inclusion of Ned Rise represent a blatant attempt by Boyle to be included in the tradition of the picaresque novel, or does Rise provide a viable foil to Mungo Park?
4. Does Boyle's use of the epistolary mode and of excerpts from travel journals have strictly a satirical purpose, or could Boyle also be attempting to revitalize interest in the eighteenth-century novels from which he has borrowed these techniques?
5. When Ernest Hemingway wrote about Mungo Park in "A Natural History of the Dead," Hemingway was trying to alter society's romanticized vision of war; is Boyle using Park to alter society's perceptions of any particular institutions or beliefs?
6. Is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* a more valid treatment of the effects of colonization on the colonizers, or is Boyle's absurdity appropriate for portraying the desultory effects of colonization on both Europeans and Africans?
7. Does Johnson's erudition represent a confirmation that European civilization can be transplanted to Africa; or on the contrary, does Johnson's learning suggest that Africans are more civilized than Europeans?
8. By calling so much attention to the end of the Enlightenment and the beginning of the Romantic Age at the time the action of his novel takes place, is Boyle trying to suggest that his own writing represents the dawn of a new literary age; or would such a claim be presumptuous?
9. Why does Boyle recall Johnson's and Boswell's visit to Inverness when Ailie goes there with Georgie Gleg?





10. How does the reader reconcile Boyle's references to serious literature with his satire of such things as a cookbook, as when he includes in the text of the novel a recipe for a baked, stuffed camel that serves four hundred?



## Literary Precedents

A comprehensive discussion of all the literary precedents of *Water Music* would develop into a discussion of the entire history of classical and modern literature. Boyle alludes frequently to other authors and their works. Some of these allusions are gratuitous while others are more substantial. For example, early in the novel, when some Arabs contemplate blinding Mungo Park, he is compared to Gloucester (from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, c.1605-1606), Oedipus, and Milton. A decrepit horse on Park's journey is compared to Rocinante, Don Quixote's hack. Fatima, a large Arabic woman, is described as "a movable feast," a reference to the title of Ernest Hemingway's memoir.

Allie Anderson's patience in waiting for Park recalls Penelope's patience in waiting for Ulysses. Ned Rise's childhood is compared to that of Dickens's characters, and his education is compared to that of Eliza Doolittle from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1916). Many of these allusions are frivolous and some are even anachronistic, such as the mention of one man in Africa who has "got his mojo workin'." This reference is to a song by James Brown from the 1960s. The effect of such an allusion is to suggest that history is chaotic and its progress is illogical.

Besides these casual allusions, other works of British literature represent more substantial antecedents to *Water Music*. One chapter is entitled "The Heart of Darkness," recalling the title of Joseph Conrad's novel by the same name (1902). As in *Water Music*, an African river is central to the plot of Conrad's novel. Even though these allusions to Conrad's novel qualify as rather substantial ones, Boyle begins the chapter entitled "The Heart of Darkness" with another of his eccentric, anachronistic allusions. The opening words of the chapter are, "The woods. Dark and deep." These words recall "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," a poem published by Robert Frost in 1923.

There are several references in the novel to William Wordsworth, whose work provides an important precedent for *Water Music*. *Lyrical Ballads*, the poetry collection published by Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798, represents the beginning of the Romantic Age of English literature.

This watershed date provides Boyle with an important point of reference.

Boyle is not the first American author to write about Mungo Park, who was an actual historical figure. Ernest Hemingway features Mungo Park in a short story called "A Natural History of the Dead," the text of which also forms part of *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), Hemingway's book about bullfighting.



## Related Titles

Water Music is Boyle's first novel, and it introduces several techniques that the author will use again in his later works. The profusion of literary references recalls that Boyle has a Ph.D. in English, and Boyle sees fit to call upon his encyclopedic knowledge of literature for the ironic purpose of showing how literature has failed along with all other civilized institutions. It is Boyle's sense of the absurd that makes him immune to charges of exhibitionism as he drops literary names.

Boyle's first novel also includes music as a theme. Music will be a feature of Boyle's subsequent novels as well. The mixture of fact and fiction in *Water Music* will become a hallmark of Boyle's novels, all of which begin with a loosely historical pretext with which the author takes comically nihilistic liberties.



# Copyright Information

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