

World's End Short Guide

World's End by T. Coraghessan Boyle

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

World's End Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Key Questions.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	8
Related Titles.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10



Characters

The cast of characters in *World's End* is as complex as that of an eighteenth-century novel, which is the intention of the author, who makes constant allusion to past literature in all his novels. The sheer number of characters and the complexity of the relationships between them requires Boyle to place a three-page list of characters at the beginning of the novel. The list is divided into two halves, one half corresponding to the characters in the seventeenth century, and the other half corresponding to the characters in the twentieth century. Each half is further divided into four groups of characters: the Van Brunt family, the Van Wart family, the Kitchawank Indians, and the descendants of Ichabod Crane and other characters. This list is helpful, perhaps even necessary, as characters from different groups interact and as the names of seventeenth-century characters are borne by their descendants in the twentieth century.

Walter Truman Van Brunt is introduced in the novel in 1968 just before he has a motorcycle accident and loses his right foot. On New Year's Eve, 1968, Walter has another motorcycle accident and loses his other foot. Soon afterwards, he finds himself in bed with Mardi Van Wart, the daughter of a family that historically have been rivals of the Van Brunts. Walter's wife Jessica becomes the lover of Tom Crane, the descendant of Ichabod Crane, the character in Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow."

Late in the novel Walter goes to Alaska to see his estranged father Truman, whom Walter has not seen since he was twelve years old. When Walter had been a child, Truman had read to Walter from Diedrich Knickerbocker's *History of New York*, another creation of Washington Irving's. Truman studies at the City College of New York and becomes interested in Communism. His senior thesis, *Manorial Revolt: The Crane/Mohonk Conspiracy*, suggests that the landed gentry — namely, the Van Warts — have deceived the Kitchawank Indians and others from the seventeenth century until the twentieth century. Truman is living in Alaska among his books about the Hudson River Valley and reveals to Walter that his interest in Communism had been a hoax designed to disguise his true role as a spy within the Communist camp.

Truman reveals also that he had been responsible for instigating the riot the night of the concert by Paul Robeson, the opera singer with Communist tendencies. In Alaska Truman has devoted his life to writing *Colonial Shame: Betrayal and Death in Van Wartville, the First Revolt*.

In causing a disturbance the night of the Paul Robeson concert, Truman is assisted by Depeyster Van Wart, the twelfth heir to Van Wart Manor.

Depeyster is described as a Nazi and a John Bircher, so it is ironic when his wife Joanna has an affair with Jeremy Mohonk, the descendant of the Kitchawank Indians that were disenfranchised by the colonists three hundred years before. Jeremy Mohonk reads a variety of books by diverse authors, from Malcolm X to James Fenimore Cooper.

Social Concerns

World's End deals with the rights of Native Americans and with agrarian reform. By dividing the novel between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, Boyle shows how the oppression of Native Americans began with colonization even though the issue has only begun to receive attention in the twentieth century. Boyle also addresses the issue of property ownership and the disparity of wealth in the United States as the reader witnesses how the Van Wart family maintains its manor over the generations. A related issue that Boyle deals with is the Communist movement and leftist politics from the Great Depression to the Vietnam War.

Techniques

In his parody of American history, Boyle's narrative vacillates between the seventeenth century and the twentieth century. The reader thus sees how certain events in America's past have consequences three hundred years later. Furthermore, Boyle uses his double time line to suggest that modern American society is just as chaotic as the American colonies were before the country had a firm identity. Another technique that Boyle uses is the mixture of fiction and history, a device used by many modernist writers of the twentieth century. This technique always suggests that the author is rewriting history or is expressing a desire that history should be rewritten. For example, Boyle's cast of characters includes descendants of Ichabod Crane, a fictional character created by Washington Irving. Mingling with such reincarnated fictional characters are several real historical figures, such as Paul Robeson, the opera singer who had Communist beliefs.

Themes

World's End is Boyle's satirical treatise on the illogical, confusing progress of American history. There is the suggestion that American history is so chaotic, in fact, that American culture will never propagate tradition. The term "American civilization" is an oxymoron. In order to demonstrate how such a country could never produce a coherent body of literature, Boyle makes constant allusions to works of American literature in a haphazard way. Boyle even parodies his own novel within the text of World's End when he introduces Sasha Freeman, a Communist who graduates from New York University in 1927, and who has written a book called Marx Among the Mohicans. The anachronistic title parodies not only America's history but also its literature with the allusion to James Fenimore Cooper's Last of the Mohicans (1826). The frivolous nature of the allusion also suggests that literature has failed as an effective social force.



Key Questions

World's End is Boyle's most socially conscious novel, and it is also his most pessimistic. The erratic, eccentric wit of his other books becomes black humor in World's End. What was a picaresque character in *Water Music* becomes a villain in *World's End*, and what was historical coincidence becomes predestined doom. Likewise, if Boyle's many literary allusions in *Water Music* seemed designed to match his wit with his predecessors', in *World's End* the allusions seem to call into question the worth of all literature.

1. Does *World's End* merit the label of "literature of exhaustion," which has been applied to the works of such writers as Borges and Nabokov, who suggest that literature and history have exhausted themselves?
2. How does Washington Irving's playful invention of New York history compare to Boyle's more caustic attempt to do the same?
3. Is Boyle's use of literary allusion and wit suited to serious social commentary?
4. By addressing the plight of the Kitchawanks, does Boyle dignify — or rather does he trivialize — the civil rights movement among Native Americans at the time the novel was published?
5. Why does Boyle include such elements of the grotesque as Walter's loss of feet?
6. What seems to be Boyle's attitude toward formal education when he introduces descendants of the legendary pedagogue Ichabod Crane and when he mentions the academic writings of some characters who have studied at universities?
7. Besides the setting in New York during the Vietnam War, does Boyle introduce any other elements into the novel that might be interpreted as autobiographical?
8. While Boyle never alludes directly to Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, does *World's End* represent a similar attempt to discuss Communism in the twentieth century by referring to American society in the seventeenth century?
9. How necessary to the full appreciation of the novel is it that the reader recognize Boyle's many literary and historical allusions?
10. What is Boyle's probable source for the name of the ship called *Arcadia*: Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Evangeline*, or something else?

Literary Precedents

The first part of *World's End* begins with an epigraph from Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," with which Boyle's novel shares much in common.

Writing in the early years of the American republic, Irving ridiculed America's lack of history by fabricating legends about the Dutch settlers in the Hudson River Valley. Like all of Boyle's novels, *World's End* wreaks havoc with history; and Irving provides Boyle with a precedent for rewriting the history of the Dutch colonists and their descendants in New York. *World's End* even includes some characters with the last name of Crane who are supposedly descendants of Ichabod Crane, the protagonist of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," another story by Irving. Boyle also acknowledges another work by Irving, Diedrich Knickerbocker's *History of New York*, as a precedent for *World's End*.

One chapter of *World's End* is entitled "The Last of the Kitchawanks," which is an allusion to *The Last of the Mohicans*, a novel by James Fenimore Cooper. Both Cooper's and Boyle's novels deal with the conflict between European colonists and Native Americans, but Boyle's absurdity is a far cry from Cooper's Romanticism. Another chapter of *World's End* is called "O Pioneers !" which is the title of a novel by Willa Cather. Cather's novel is about settlers on the American frontier and provides a precedent for Boyle's treatment of colonization.



Related Titles

In his first novel, *Water Music* (1981), Boyle employed a dual plot in order to dramatize the fragmented nature of civilization. In that novel, Boyle alternated between Great Britain and Africa in order to show how history was evolving from the Enlightenment to the Romantic Age. In *World's End*, Boyle again employs a dual plot, but this time he alternates between two centuries instead of between two places. As in his first novel, Boyle continues to confuse fact and fiction in *World's End*.

For example, some of Boyle's characters are descendants of Ichabod Crane, a fictional character created by another author, Washington Irving. On the other hand, the cast of characters of *World's End* includes Paul Robeson, who actually lived in the twentieth century. Paul Robeson's inclusion in *World's End* also serves to introduce music into the novel, and all of Boyle's novels deal with music in at least an incidental way. The interruption of a Paul Robeson concert by anti-Communists represents something of a climax in *World's End*.



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

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

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