

Elements of:
By the Waters
of Babylon

By Stephen Vincent Benét



- ◇ “By the Waters of Babylon” is narrated in the first person from a limited perspective. The story immerses readers in the protagonist's journey, integrating moral lessons and various points of view.
- ◇ Falling within the genre of speculative fiction, the story is set in a post-apocalyptic world where technology is revered as divine, prompting readers to contemplate humanity's relationship with technology and its consequences.
- ◇ "By the Waters of Babylon" offers insight into the author's perspective on war and its aftermath. It reflects the tumultuous period following World War I, the rise of fascism, and the Spanish Civil War.

Moral Lessons & Points of View





Theme

- ◆ Benét builds the central narrative of “By the Waters of Babylon” around John’s coming-of-age and his quest for new knowledge, which takes him east to The Place of the Gods, a mysterious, long-abandoned city that members of his tribe are forbidden from visiting. This pursuit of knowledge is depicted as a critical aspect of human nature and the driving force behind the development of human society
- The story’s narrative centers on John’s journey to the Place of the Gods as part of his initiation into manhood and the tribe’s priesthood. John’s journey exemplifies the “hero’s quest,” a familiar story arc in ancient myths and modern tales. Throughout this journey, John encounters challenges and experiences personal growth, reflecting the universal theme of the coming-of-age quest.
- Benét portrays the Hill People as superstitious, highlighting John’s firm belief in visions and the tribe’s adherence to unexplained traditions and taboos. This contrast between superstition and the remnants of advanced technology in the Place of the Gods shows themes of tradition versus progress.
- The rivalry between the Hill People and the Forest People underscores the destructive consequences of cultural differences and the cyclical nature of conflict. Through this rivalry, Benét explores themes of war, destruction, and the impact of historical animosities on future generations.

Characters

- ◇ The narrator and protagonist of the story, John is a young member of the Hill People tribe, poised to undergo a rite of passage into adulthood. He embarks on a journey to the forbidden Place of the Gods, seeking knowledge and understanding.
- ◇ The head priest of the Hill People, John's father serves as a mentor and guide to his son. He embodies the wisdom and traditions of their tribe, providing support and counsel to John throughout his journey.
- ◇ John discovers the dead god in the ruins of the Place of the Gods. The dead god represents the remnants of a technologically advanced civilization. Its presence challenges John's beliefs and initiates a shift in his understanding of the world.

Symbolism

- ◆ Metal symbolizes the tribe's evolving comprehension of technology and adherence to superstitions, the metal gathered from the Dead Places represents a merging of past knowledge and present beliefs.
- ◆ Towers represent the remnants of an advanced civilization; the towers in the Place of the Gods are architectural marvels that contrast sharply with the natural surroundings. They evoke a sense of wonder and curiosity in John.
- ◆ Wells reflects literal and metaphorical knowledge depths; the wells in the Place of the Gods symbolize the mysteries and secrets hidden within the ruins. They serve as conduits for John's exploration of the past and his quest for understanding.