

Blood and Sand Short Guide

Blood and Sand by Vicente Blasco Ibáñez

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Characters

Blood and Sand endows its main character, Juan Gallardo, with an intelligence and drive that elicit sympathy and admiration. He takes risks, not only for the challenge of the art but because he wants to escape his fate: to be a cobbler. The figure of Gallardo is carefully and convincingly drawn by the writer, believed to have used as a model a bullfighter of his generation.

The same degree of authenticity is evident in all aspects of the book related to the sport: the preparation, the dressing of the matador, the raising and testing of bulls, and the behavior of the crowd. In fact, the art of bullfighting is as much a protagonist in this novel as any of the main characters.

Sol, the love interest, is depicted as an exciting and dazzling figure drawn to Gallardo by his celebrity. She never promises love and devotion; he, however, is totally captivated by her beauty and sophistication. She leaves him, suddenly, to look for adventure elsewhere. Her unexpected absence causes him to lose his equilibrium in the ring, suffering a serious wound. This marks the beginning of his undoing as a master bullfighter.

Carmen, the devoted wife, has a relatively small role in the novel. She serves primarily as a background figure, as a reminder to the reader and to Gallardo of what he has given up in his quest for stardom. She, however, never abandons her husband and is last seen praying in the chapel during his tragic final fight.

There are a number of memorable minor characters in the novel, such as Gallardo's brother-in-law, and the picadores, who have to witness the improvised stitching of their wounded animals so they can continue the show.

There is also Dr. Ruiz, a medical man cum historian of the sport who proclaims bullfighting, in its thirst for blood, the modern heir to the Inquisition. These types help to enrich the already impressive portrait of the world of the bullfighter.



Social Concerns/Themes

Using as the background for the action the most uniquely Spanish theme, the bullfight, Blasco Ibanez traces the career of a talented and ambitious young bullfighter, Juan Gallardo, as he overcomes his modest origins and becomes a hero in the ring.

Stardom soon comes to this artful and courageous matador. He receives the adulation of many, among them a wealthy and spoiled woman, Dona Sol, niece of an important and aristocratic breeder of bulls. The love affair that develops between the bullfighter and Sol is nothing but a diversion for the young woman.

The bullfighter's humble birth, and even his profession, deny him from ever being a suitable mate for someone as socially prominent as Dona Sol.

Gallardo, however, does not realize that class barriers are not easily removed, and that he is only a brief and insignificant interlude in her life.

The use of the bullfighter for the amusement of the wealthy, without regard for the consequences, is perhaps the most blatant statement that the book makes. This is true of the relationship between Sol and Juan and between the bullfighter and his adoring yet fickle public. Bullfighting, beautifully and painstakingly described in the novel, is also targeted for criticism.

It is exposed as barbaric and cruel, and as a form of bloodletting unworthy of a civilized society.

Gallardo's spectacular achievements bring him fame and fortune. He is seduced by both, just as he is seduced by Dona Sol, and in his infatuation he abandons his common sense and clarity of vision. Fame, however, is ephemeral; it lasts only as long as the bullfighter excels. The slightest sign of weakness is enough to turn his fans into a jeering crowd. The only constant elements in the matador's life are the certainty of death and the most positive, the devotion of his long-suffering wife. When Gallardo's world starts to come apart, he is incapable of reclaiming his old self. One's roots should never be severed; they are the only truth in a person's life.



Techniques

The novel opens when Gallardo is already a famous man, ready to appear before cheering fans in Madrid. His background is disclosed in the following chapter. The action of the novel flows in a logical manner, and the reader witnesses the development and deterioration of the love affair between the bullfighter and Sol. Her name means "sun." The sun, here used as a synonym for the fiesta de toros, together with the blood and the sand of the title ensnare the protagonist; he is trapped, in a trap of his own making that he cannot escape.

The author, in a self-confident and forceful manner, uses the characters and the narrative to advance his ideas.

The reader is carried along by the excitement of the bullring yet, at the same time, is repelled by the other side of the magnificent show. The blood and gore are inescapable. The bullfighter, the book suggests, is just as much a victim of a public who thirsts for blood, the bull's but also the bullfighter's, as he is of Dona Sol.

Interwoven throughout the narrative are detailed descriptions of local customs, such as Holy Week in Seville, confirming the author's reputation as a master painter.

Adaptations

Please see the biographical entry on Blasco Ibanez.

Literary Precedents

Blasco Ibanez is, surprisingly, the first Spanish fiction writer to use the national sport as a theme for a novel.

Literary precedents must then be found in Prosper Merimee's novel *Carmen* (1847), a theme later repeated in Bizet's opera of the same name. The emphasis of *Blood and Sand* on the psychological aspects of the seduction of Juan Gallardo allows one to distinguish this novel from Blasco's two earlier stylistic models, the naturalist and the moralist.

This book did, in turn, serve as inspiration for Hemingway's famous novel about bullfighting, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926).



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