Blood of Requited Love Short Guide

Blood of Requited Love by Manuel Puig

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Social Concerns

Set in the small town of Cocota, in the State of Rio, Brazil, this novel tells the story of the relationship between Josemar Ferreira and Maria da Gloria Rossi. Through dialogues and monologues the broad outline of their story is gleaned. The reader learns that Josemar lives in the country a few miles outside of town, and is the middle of eleven children of a poor farming family. He is despised and picked on by his father and protected and adored by his mother. While the reasons for the father's rejection are never explained, Josemar's appearance might hold the key. He resembles neither of his parents nor any of his brothers and sisters.

He is handsome, white, and has curly, chestnut-colored hair. According to unconfirmed rumor, Josemar might be the son of the local landlord; the young man shares the landlord's good looks and a passion for soccer. It is in part Josemar's appearance, (supported by the rumors about his birth) that allows him to pursue his ambitious dreams and the love of Maria da Gloria, the blond, middle-class daughter of Italian immigrants who is the obsessive object of his thoughts and a principal interlocutor of the novel.

Josemar's preoccupation with making something out of himself, with fame and fortune, is one of the principal social concerns of the novel. In spite of his sense of entitlement, his hard work, and his willingness to try different occupations, Josemar fails. He never gets to buy a car, never gets to be the elegant, progressive person he wants to be, and never escapes the poverty into which he was born. Last, but not least, he never gets to live happily ever after with the woman of his dreams. This discourse of failure is as much an indictment of the closed social system of Brazil with its vast economic underclass as it is of the weaknesses and self-delusions of Josemar.

The second social concern of the novel is the preoccupation with seduction and sexual conquest, and the complacency with which both men and women, young and old accept the figure of the macho seducer. In fact, the dynamic of the novel is provided by different and conflicting versions of the core of Josemar's thoughts and actions: the seduction and "deflowering" of Maria da Gloria.

But this approach to women also informs all relations between the sexes, not just Josemar's; his black adopted brother, his father(s), and all significant males in the novel are driven by it. They consider a man's sexual possession of a woman a sort of territorial imperative. And while Josemar, as a child, feels sympathy for his mother when she waits at home for the return of a philandering husband, he fantasizes about seducing his own school teacher. As an adult Josemar consciously reflects on his father's behavior and absolves him, accepting male lust and infidelity as the way of the world; he goes on to emulate and surpass any of his childhood models.

A particular obsession for Josemar is the seduction of virgins and its attendant problems, such as the pain and difficulty both partners might endure and the amount of blood that the act might produce. He follows with great interest and anticipation several

local girls' passages into puberty, especially Maria da Gloria's. When he first notices her she is twelve years old; he awaits her development and "seduces" her only after she comes of sexual age.

This patience reveals a certain code of conduct in sexual matters; it is a source of pride for Josemar, among his many regrets, and serves to distinguish his relations with women from relations with animals, especially the mean and cantankerous cow his father asks him to milk.

Techniques

The novel consists of twelve chapters and an epilogue. Each unit shares a similar structure and is evenly balanced in the treatment of characters, actions, and themes. The montage techniques at which Puig has excelled in other novels is discarded here in favor of a more subtle, and confounding, structure. Without clear warning to the reader or markers of any sort, juxtapositions appear within each chapter, created by the three, not always distinct, principal voices of the story.

Josemar is the main discursive subject of the novel and dominates the book; the second main voice belongs to an anonymous third person narrator, and the third belongs to Josemar's discursive partner.

The third person narrator fills in highly subjective and critical "factual" details about Josemar but does not display either omniscience or control.

In fact, this voice sounds much like Josemar's; the narrator is full of doubt and often interrupts his own discourse seeking information and approval from an unidentified and invisible interlocutor through questions such as "right?"

"is that clear?" "do you understand?"

Aside from Josemar and the narrator, there is a third voice, perhaps not always the same, but always in the dual role of witness and interrogator. At times, but not always, it is clear that the voice belongs to Maria da Gloria.

Through her distant and reproachful (yet pointed) questions, she sometimes assists Josemar in the production of a version of the events surrounding the seduction; at other times, she contradicts him and deflates his tale by creating her own. In these passages, there is no mimetic dialogue. She delivers her question, more a dare than a doubt, and Josemar or the narrator scrambles to incorporate her query into a new (re)vision of the truth.

Puig is especially equivocal in his use of time and the progressive development of the characters and their story. While Josemar has been away from Cocota for many years, and not in a position to know what happened during his absence, he is not deterred from refashioning information without regard for chronology or consistency.

Details of the relationship between the protagonists are juxtaposed, and the present, past, and distant past are in collusion with the subjects in the creation of their conflicting versions of the truth. In theory, the characters may continue their dialogues and monologues endlessly since the fictive possibilities of their predicament are inexhaustible.

Aside from the fact that Josemar is a failure, little else about this book is really clear, since neither Josemar nor Maria ever authenticates any one version of what happened between them.

Neither does the third person narrator.

The end result is that since the text provides no anchor, the reader is no better equipped than any of the participants in the fiction to relate the facts.

Themes/Characters

Unlike some in Puig's other works, none of the characters in Blood of Requited Love is especially mysterious or profound. In Blood of Requited Love the mystery for the reader lies in the question of if and when the protagonists, Josemar in particular, will ever tell the truth. And, although the contradictory details of the text contribute to the elusiveness of the story, the details of the lives of the principals are simple and routine, conforming, as they do, to the broad outlines of normalcy in a small provincial town. Lovers meet in the town square, go to dances together, see each other at soccer games, and after church. They take long walks in the country, listen to birds, and admire the stars. They go to school, make out behind shade trees, and fantasize about the future.

The town proves too small to contain Josemar's ambitions. He needs to leave to make something of himself; he works as a mason and then for the electric company. Neither job gives him the money and glory he so desperately wants, and his meager savings are spent to treat his mother's painful and debilitating arthritis. He fathers two children out of wedlock and is unable to support them. Their mother, a teacher, cares for them and helps nurse Josemar's ailing mother. To add to the complete deconstruction of the character's hopes, his mother anticipates having to sell the humble house in which they live in order to pay her medical expenses. In sum, years after leaving town in search of fame and fortune Josemar has nothing, not even a roof over his head. When he returns to Cocota almost a decade later, he has little to show for his absence except rich fictions about the past, endless tales of sexual prowess, and equally fictive accounts of his soccer feats.

Maria da Gloria, although a main character and a frequent discursive partner in the novel, reveals little of herself. From the third person narrator we learn that she is an intelligent, resourceful, and independent girl. In collusion with her mother, she appears willing to defy her father's orders that she not see Josemar, a youth whose country roots and lower-class origins make him an unacceptable boyfriend.

As for her role in the seduction, the reader never learns the extent of her complicity. After he leaves Cocota, immediately after the alleged act, he never contacts her nor exhibits any overt curiosity about her fate. We do learn that during Josemar's long absence, she suffers from a nervous condition and is seldom seen in public.

This conscious indifference on Josemar's part is hard to reconcile with his mental life, which remains dominated by thoughts about Maria, visions and revisions of the seduction, recollections about their past together, and illusions about what could have been.

Maria da Gloria eventually recovers, resumes her studies, becomes a teacher, and is poised to accept the romantic entreaties of a friend from her youth newly returned to Cocota, professional degree in hand.

Unlike Josemar, the rest of the characters of the novel, including Maria, appear resigned to their plight, and life in Cocota, with or without Josemar, continues at its predictable small-town pace.

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