

Blue City Short Guide

Blue City by Ross Macdonald

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Characters

Although he does not possess the voice or psychological insight of Lew Archer, John Weather does have the detective's singlemindedness and ingenuity; and although he lacks Archer's compassion and understanding, he is capable of feeling for those who are more vulnerable than he. Even though this novel owes much to Dashiell Hammett, John Weather is not Sam Spade; he is far less cynical. The characters in this novel tend to represent ideas in a two-dimensional way rather than presenting individual figures. The representations are well done and work within the novel to some effect. For instance, Kaufman who runs the junk shop also spouts various Marxist platitudes, some of which do not apply to the circumstances in Blue City, but primarily he suggests various worn-out European ideas seeking a home in the American present. Sanford, the elder Weather's former partner, also brings the class theme to the fore, but from a different perspective. He is wealthy, powerful, and in cahoots with the evil underworld, using their lawlessness to remain in power. Through both figures, Millar introduces the theme of class warfare or struggle but does not allow it to dominate the novel. In later works, the author would more subtly introduce such themes through his characterization.

The rest of the characters in Blue City are predictable background figures, who often lack a life of their own, from the genre of crime fiction. The police are ambivalent characters; the crooks undeniably evil; and the general public scared and unknowing. They form a moral atmosphere against which John Weather is to be judged. They are the city, the "organism with an appetite for human flesh," which Weather decides he cannot flee, but must try to reform.

It is a task he cannot perform alone, though, and he decides to search for the good men who can help him in his quest for a viable present, those who have the courage to face the world and not live in a dream of power, the past, or violence.



Social Concerns

Blue City is Macdonald's first novel in the hard-boiled style and concerned with a returning soldier who searches out his father's killers and in the process discovers the corruption and violence of postwar urban life.

Macdonald wrote in 1971 that the novel dealt with the "underlife" of an American city. Among the themes the book deals with are such issues as the relationship between political corruption and organized crime and the social effects such a combination has on the atmosphere of the city. By extension, it is also a novel about the moral foundation of the modern world, particularly the questions raised within a democratic society when the price of governance is purchased through the acceptance of an immoral and corrupt underpinning.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

This novel owes the most to Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929), another novel with a returning soldier on a quest. It also owes something in general to Hammett's hard-boiled, nonsense prose style, and to the atmosphere of corruption and moral ambiguity which dog the pages of Hammett's books. Macdonald made good use of the objective and understated treatment which Hammett, Hemingway, and Chandler helped to establish as the American prose style between the wars. It was a style based on the patterns of American speech and captures something of the drive and experience of the country.

Macdonald also borrowed from Hammett his tendency to incorporate understated poetic and symbolic overtones in his prose, as well as the use of the detective story to present the vision and ambition of a major novelist. Macdonald, and Hammett before him, found that crime fiction could be stretched beyond its generic confines to incorporate themes and issues from mainstream, "serious," writing. Macdonald extended Hammett's ideas to become not just a major crime writer but a major American novelist.



Themes

Although *Blue City* lacks a central purpose and presents a fragmented view of contemporary society, many of the themes which Macdonald introduces here in embryonic form he worked out in some detail through the *Lew Archer* series. The search for identity, especially the child's search for the truth about its parents, and the twin themes of guilt and revenge, appear most prominent in this novel, but there is also present a concern for the past and a sensual decadence, both which will appear more prominently and with greater social significance in the later *Lew Archer* books.

When *Blue City* begins, the central character, who has been absent from his hometown for some five years, discovers that his father has been murdered; and since no one seems concerned that the killer has remained undiscovered, the son begins a search for the killers motivated by both guilt and revenge. His search takes him into the depths of the city where he discovers that his father was a corrupt politician and that the city is being run by a bunch of welter-weight crooks. Moreover, the inquiry yields unexpected results which allow the young man to come to terms with his guilt about his father, and to discover who he is independent of his parentage.

This is Macdonald's most violent novel, but the corruption and violence in the book remain pretty much isolated to those directly involved in the various criminal activities which form the background of the fiction. In the later novels this corruption will be more broadly spread among the general population, and suggests a socially more pervasive sense of moral decline.

Also, in this novel the past appears less a force in the present and more elusive.



Key Questions

1. John Weather is a returning veteran who must come home to clean up the corruption which has taken over his home town, a corruption presumably which has arisen during his absence. Notice how many post-war crime novels use this premise. Why is that?
2. Compare John Weather to Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer who is also an arm of vengeance and cleansing.
3. What do you make of the idea of a whole town corrupted by one man or one organization? What does this say about the place of crime and the criminal?
4. If the group is familiar with the novel Red Harvest by Dashiell Hammett, or if the group would like to also read it, a comparative discussion of the two books might be informative. This is especially true since one was written in the aftermath of the First World War and the other in the aftermath of the Second World War. Are there differences in the novels that might suggest differences in the post-war societies?
5. Although John Weather is no Lew Archer, is there a family resemblance?

Does John suggest traits which will appear later in Lew?

6. All crime fiction deals with social problems, although usually from the low end of the spectrum. What can this underside view of society reveal that more conventional depictions of American life not expose?
7. Since Ross Macdonald is known for his evocative use of environment in the Lew Archer novels, you might look at the way he treats location in this pre-Archer work of fiction.
8. In what ways is this "revenge" novel, by the very nature of revenge, a tragic story? How so?
9. Macdonald was fascinated by the psychological. In what ways is Blue City an Oedipal story?
10. Although this novel is largely a conventional crime novel of the late 1940s, in what ways is Macdonald playing around with the conventions, changing the genre?

Related Titles

Blue City was one of four early nonseries novels which Macdonald wrote before hitting his stride with the Lew Archer books. For the most part these first works were designed as one-off books in which we can now see Macdonald experimenting with various formats in search of an authentic voice.

The fact that he began writing crime novels perhaps destined him to evolve his prose into a series as had his most obvious predecessors Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. The connections between Blue City and Red Harvest with their "color" titles, loner protagonists, and plot similarities suggest that Macdonald was familiar with Hammett's work and the softened private eye, Lew Archer, indicates that he also knew of Chandler's. All that was left for him to discover was the right locale in Southern California and his voice in Archer for the series to begin in earnest.



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