Bread Short Guide

Bread by Charles Gilman Norris

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Characters

The heroine of Bread, Jeannette, is an uncommonly beautiful girl with a fine intelligence and a superb will. Her initial foray into the world of work is, arguably, a selfless gesture. After years of scraping by on her mother's meager earnings, Jeannette sacrifices her education to go to work and support her sister. Jeannette recognizes the importance of marriage for a young woman at this time, so she sacrifices her own chance in an effort to give Alice a better opportunity to find a husband. At one point, she even passes one of her suitors, Roy Beardsley, on to her sister. In this and several other instances, Jeannette seems to have almost no romantic interests, to be almost completely rational. The final scenes, however, make it clear that Jeannette does have a deeply emotional side, one that is crushed in the final pages under the weight of her loneliness.

If Jeannette is all business, her sister Alice is reared solely for a domestic position. In attempting to convince her mother that she must take a job, Jeannette argues that the extra income would improve Alice's stock on the marriage market. The younger daughter comes to function as a kind of foil, a mirror image of her elder sibling. Alice accepts the earnest young man Jeannette refuses; she bears children and raises them happily; she sacrifices her freedom and comfort for the good of her marriage. Through Alice, Norris presents the conservative ideal of womanhood. He makes his apprehension about this ideal clear by having her voice anxiety when her husband falls ill. If Roy were to become terminally ill or die, Alice and her children would, in a time before welfare, be at the mercy of her sister.

Neither Alice nor the author who created her seem to find this fact acceptable.

Mrs. Sturgis is more like her younger daughter Alice than her first child, Jeannette.

Norris makes self-sacrifice Mrs. Sturgis' distinguishing trait. In the opening pages, she sells priceless heirlooms to send Jeannette to business school; at another stage, she resists all attempts on her daughters' part to send her to the dentist to attend to a severe toothache. Mrs. Sturgis would rather endure great pain than put her daughters to the slightest inconvenience. Today's readers might find Mrs. Sturgis' utter selflessness irritating. In thinking only of her daughters, she shows no consideration for her own welfare.

Martin Devlin, Jeannette's husband for a brief period, seems to have the opposite problem. He so thoroughly enjoys amusing himself that he neglects Jeannette's needs.

His associations with a yacht club and a poker circle irritate Jeannette because they show contempt for her efforts to make them financially stable.

Social Concerns

One need not even delve so far as the opening sentence of Bread to uncover Norris's chief social concerns. Norris dedicates his novel to "The Working Women of America." Their struggle for acceptance in the workplace, equal pay, and security as independent people are the principal issues with which Bread concerns itself. In the final analysis, however, the novel appears somewhat ambiguous because Norris also seems anxious about the state of the American home abandoned by the working woman.

While on the one hand a progressive piece arguing for women's equality, Norris's book retains a conservative strain, underscored by the statement on the first edition's jacket-copy that "the vanishing American home may find in these pages a cause and an effect." For the cause, women have his sympathy; they cannot live without bread, and when abandoned by their husbands and families they must secure their living. The effect of women's entrance into business, however, is viewed by Norris as potentially devastating in that it robs the nation of productive citizens whom working women would rear if not employed.

Jeannette, Bread's protagonist whose development from adolescence to middle-age readers witness, sees first hand the importance of women to secure economic security for themselves and their families. The opening pages relate a not uncommon event in the Sturgis household whereby Mrs. Sturgis, Jeannette's mother, does not have the funds available to feed her two daughters. Left to fend for herself after the death of her husband, Mrs. Sturgis makes ends meet by giving piano lessons and accompanying some of New York's finest singers.

Despite being employed by famous entertainers, Mrs. Sturgis cannot pay all of her bills, and her girls must interrupt her lesson to ask for money for bread. The situation presented in this opening scene is repeated throughout the novel in various forms.

Though she eventually achieves economic security, the balance of Jeannette's life is spent securing her bread, ensuring that she will have a clean place to live and enough food to fill her table. Norris is careful to present his heroine as someone who does not suffer from an excess of ambition. She wants to be comfortable, but her dreams do not extend beyond having the wherewithal to enjoy occasional theatre excursions and a few smart clothes. Jeanette is described as uncommonly beautiful, but vanity never prompts her to profligate spending. Norris emphasizes her skills for thrift in the pages that describe her brief married years. While she strives to keep the house's finances in check, her husband spends recklessly, eventually driving her back to life in business.

Coming to a decision to return to work is as difficult for Jeanette as finding the work in the first place. Mrs. Sturgis violently opposes her daughter's wish to find a job, but necessity eventually triumphs over principal. Norris makes his heroine a remarkably sharp girl to make a point about the scarcity of jobs for women. Jeannette graduates from her business school—a kind of secretarial training facility—quickly and with remarkable marks. Nevertheless, her job search is extremely stressful and difficult. It

turns out that there are essentially two avenues open to her: retail and secretarial work. Opportunities in industry, medicine, and other fields women now occupy do not exist in the years of Jeannette's first job search (around 1890). Norris makes his disgust with this scarcity of good jobs for women clear by making Jeannette clever enough to handle better work than is available to her. Eventually, she leaves her secretarial desk behind and takes an executive position, an opportunity that would not have been available to a woman when she first started working twenty years earlier.

Even when she secures the position as head of the advertising department she encounters enormous resistance from her male coworkers. One executive even resigns and takes his staff with him to another company rather than work as the equal of a woman.

This issue is one that remains a problem for women even in the twenty-first century.

Though the acceptability of women in the workplace has become much less an issue in recent years than it was in Norris's day, critics of discrimination based on gender still perceive the presence of what they generally refer to as the "glass ceiling," a reference to both the limitations placed on advancement by women in business and the disparities between the pay men and women receive for the same work. Late in the novel, Bread almost dissolves into a diatribe as the narrative stops and readers sit in on a long dialogue between Jeannette and her friend, Miss Holland. At one point, Miss Holland asks a series of rhetorical questions: Did you ever stop to consider the injustice to which working women are subjected?

Do you realize there are about twelve million working women on pay-rolls in the United States, that twenty dollars a week is a very high wage for any of them to receive, and six million of them, or half of the entire number, earn between ten and twelve a week?. . .[Women] may perform equal work with men but very few of them are paid as well. The average annual earning power of the male industrial worker now is a the rate of a thousand dollars a year; that of the woman industrial worker five to six hundred.

This quotation emphasizes the similarity of Miss Holland's argument to those still made today by women who still earn less on average than their male counterparts. Jeannette experiences the ultimate inequity first hand, earning less for her job than a predecessor who did not perform nearly as well.

After criticizing businessmen who refuse to fairly compensate their women employees, Jeannette and Miss Holland point their fingers at another entity that allows women to privation: the American government. America was still about a decade away from instituting a system of social welfare at the time of Bread's publication.

This system would provide a financial safety net for women like Mrs. Sturgis who, through either death, disease, or lack of education, are unable to support their children. Norris argues that such a federal guarantee of financial security for mothers is not only humane but also essential to the health of the republic. At one point, Jeannette asserts that even when they do not participate in business, women contribute to the American

economy. Though Norris does not give the details of her calculations, Jeannette concludes that "the mother of five children has an economic value of ten dollars a week." When reading this passage, it is important to keep in mind that in the early part of the century there was a great dealof anxiety about who would populate the nation. Xenophobia or the fear of foreigners affected much of the American population then, though the subjects of those fears are now readily accepted. Note, for example, the disdain Jeannette has for the Jewish girls she works with at her first job. These girls are most likely Eastern European and not fully acclimated to the American way of life. By asserting the value of American women as child-bearers, Norris is making a case (now somewhat offensive to our sensibilities) for ethnic purity. Jeannette's proposal that "the Government ought to give you an annual income the rest of your life for every child you bring into the world" makes sense because every child would be a "pure" American rather than a supposedly less productive foreigner.

This concern for the welfare of the republic also motivates Norris to focus some attention on the American home and the problems caused by a woman's absence from it. As much as he argues for equal pay for women, Norris still seems to consider the maintenance of the home the primary role for American women. Though she is neither as financially secure nor as prominent a citizen as her oldest sister, Alice, the homebody, seems happier at Bread's conclusion. She is raising a house full of children and doing it well. By punishing his heroine with crushing loneliness in the final pages of his novel, Norris suggests that this task is ultimately more important and more rewarding than merely earning one's bread.

Techniques

Norris's technique places Bread firmly in rather generic category: realism. Meaning more than a preference for the possible over the magical, realism refers to a variety of literary techniques and values. In the case of Bread, the reader should recognize three main traits that qualify the work as a realist novel.

First, Norris pays close attention to detail and uses the seemingly insignificant minutiae to make profound statements about the personalities of his characters.

This technique was perfected by two of Norris's American predecessors, William Dean Howells and Theodore Dreiser. In works like Howells' The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885) and Drieser's Sister Carrie (1901) such facts as the decoration of a room or the make of the suitcase a woman carries bear a great deal of narrative weight. In Bread, Jeannette's clothes, entertainments, and other possessions place her squarely in a class of urban workers whose luxuries are fleeting and whose security is slight. Other details, the construction of the New York subway for example, ground the work historically and make the experience of reading Bread more rich for scholars with an interest in cultural history.

Another aspect of Bread that marks Norris's technique as essentially realist is his willingness to portray events in the lives of utterly ordinary people. A survey of the expanse of western literature would reveal a marked predilection among historians and poets for recording the lives of kings, gods, and warriors. The protagonist of Bread is none of these and could, in fact, be any of us. The shift in fiction's attention toward more plebian characters has a good deal to do with the creation of a true mass culture in the early twentieth century as novels and literary magazines became more affordable.

Bread still captures our attention today because it teaches us a good deal about how the majority of New York's population lived its life around 1900. Neither the heights of wealth and fashion depicted in Edith Wharton's novels nor the depths of poverty captured by a documentarian like Jacob Riis are found in Bread.

The third technical aspect of Norris's novel that links it to realist technique is Norris's tendency to situate his characters amidst great social forces that sweep them helplessly along. Jeannette is a clever and strong-willed woman; nevertheless, there is a sense in which every decision in her life is made for her by the need to earn a living or American society's disregard for the equality of women or some other force beyond her ken or control. Realist authors, especially those grouped in the subset called naturalism, tended to describe their characters as victims of an unfeeling world rather than agents of their own fate. Though not as bleak or deterministic as Stephen Crane's, Norris's technique does show an acceptance of the notion that people are to some degree helpless to forge their own paths.

Themes

Though she vows never to marry, then never to marry again, Jeannette remains, throughout Bread, dedicated to her family.

She supports her mother in her old age and gives as much support to Alice as she can afford. Though she never has children of her own, Jeannette adores her nieces and nephews. The strength of these relationships point to Norris's thematic concern with familial bonds. The great irony of Bread lies in the fact that Jeannette takes up work for the good of her family and is prevented from having her own family by that very work. Entering business, then, becomes a double-edged sword.

Another theme at work in Bread involves the force that drives Jeannette into the world of work. The Sturgis family is certainly poor at the novel's opening, but nobody is actually about to starve to death. The straw that breaks Jeannette's back is actually her trip to a dance where she realizes that her clothes are shabby and unfashionable. This experience humiliates her family's position and inspires her to seek a better life for herself, her mother, and her sister. Thus, ambition becomes both a pervasive theme and a trait of Jeannette's character that drives the plot along.

Jeannette's ambition is not deadly; she does not have a ruthless desire to attain great wealth at the expense of any who might stand in her way. Instead, she has modest goals. Still, Norris presents ambition as a subtle longing that works on Jeannette's emotional state almost without her knowledge. When she is married to Martin, her ambition goes to sleep for a short time. When Martin takes her to parties at a second-rate yacht club, however, Jeannette's nascent desire for something better emerges and provokes her to consider returning to work to elevate herself to the next rung in the social ladder. Martin's profligate spending places a strain on the marriage, but it is ultimately Jeannette's ambition that drives the final wedge between herself and her husband.

Unfortunately, this break leaves Jeannette alone. She does not realize this fact for years after her separation, however. The slow process by which Jeannette comes to recognize her own loneliness calls attention to a thematic statement Norris makes. Essentially, Norris seems to assert that the pangs of love are wasted on the young. Jeannette falls for Martin when she is still a young woman and falls just as quickly out of love.

In the dewy glow of her youth, she takes a somewhat cavalier attitude toward marriage because she never considers the pain of loneliness she might experience as an old woman. She recognizes a similar tendency in her niece, Etta, and, having squandered her own chance at a happy domestic life, warns her to think about the long-term when settling on a partner.

Key Questions

Norris's novel, now nearly eighty-yearsold, presents social concerns involving the inequitable treatment of women in the workplace that still trouble us today. Ultimately, the book's message appears somewhat ambiguous. By today's standards Norris is certainly not a feminist; nor, however, is he unsympathetic to the struggles women endure in a world dominated by men. Jeannette is a likeable character; readers empathize with her desire to work and become selfsufficient. Furthermore, one should feel a pang in the final pages when Jeannette realizes that her life of breadwinning has left her alone and terribly lonely. Norris carefully constructs the plot of Bread to make Jeannette more a victim of social forces and mores than any flaw in her own character. This technique, characteristic of naturalists such as the Americans Stephen Crane and Frank Norris as well as the French author Emile Zola, ties Bread to a tradition that peaked about a generation before its publication.

In addition to its poignant story and social insight, Bread, because of Norris's close attention to detail, functions as a useful historical document that brings New York in the period between about 1880 and 1930 to life. Jeannette watches the construction of America's first subways and expresses the nervousness about their use that was typical of her generation. Additionally, Jeannette's work in the publishing industry gives students of cultural history or the history of the book valuable information about the state of the industry around the turn-of-the-century.

1. Do you feel sympathy for Jeannette in Bread's final pages? As she reaches middle age she has obviously found herself to be a rather lonely woman. Could she or should she have conducted her life differently in order to avoid this fate?

2. What do you think of Jeannette's husband, Martin Devlin? With whom would you place the majority of the blame for the failure in their marriage?

3. What does Bread teach us about the state of the publishing industry around 1900? Why might such information be useful or interesting to students today?

4. F. Scott Fitzgerald thought highly of Charles Norris. Read The Great Gatsby and consider parallels that might exist between Fitzgerald's novel about a man's ambition and Norris's book about a woman's attempt to secure her own future.

5. What do you think of the other members of Jeannette's family? Are they weak characters? Do you respect their tendency to self-sacrifice or do you believe they should have greater respect for themselves?

6. How far do you believe women have come in their search for equality since Charles Norris wrote Bread?

Literary Precedents

Some of Bread's most obvious literary precedents came from the pen of Norris's brother, Frank Norris. Similar to Bread in both the naturalistic style and political import, novels by Frank Norris such as The Octopus (1901) and McTeague (1899) describe the lives of characters trapped either by their own ambition or by impossibly strong social forces. Just as Charles Norris uses one woman's story to point to American society's callousness regarding the desperate poverty single women must endure, Frank Norris critiques the heartlessness of the railroad and wheat industries through a few characters in The Octopus. In McTeague, he shows how ambition simultaneously drives an individual to extremes and lays a trap that forces him or her to endure the consequences of desire. Though Jeannette's ambition in Bread is not as severe as that which drives the title character of McTeague to murder, it does leave her lonely in the final pages. The brothers, then, seem to adapt similar methods to consider similar themes and social concerns.

More distant predecessors include the French novelist Emile Zola and the American novelist Stephen Crane. Both authors worked in a tradition we now call Naturalism. The basic tenant of this literary school (though few of the authors who wrote in this style would have called it a unified school at the time) is that individual characters are like corks bobbing on ocean waves: they cannot resist the variety of forces— society, nature, fate—that push and pull them through their lives. More explicit and accessible than Zola's novels, though highly influenced by them, Crane's "The Open Boat" (1898) may be the best example of a Naturalist piece. Based on Crane's own experience, the story takes place inside a small boat occupied by four shipwrecked men. They spend about two days before finding shore and attempting to row to safety. Three of the four survive, but the one who dies is the most physically fit of the lot. In this narrative point, and in the description used throughout the story, Crane espouses a philosophy of human helplessness in the face of larger and more powerful forces.

Another important precedent for Norris's novel is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's nonfiction treatise, Women and Economics. While today's students are more familiar with "The Yellow Wallpaper" than any of Gilman's other writings, Women and Economics attempts to explain how the imbalance of power between men and women has created a situation whereby male desire not only subjugates women but throws the fate of the human species into peril. Relying on Darwinian theories of evolution, Gilman explains how social taboos that discourage excessive (or sometimes any) procreation in the upper-classes makes inferior people the majority of the human gene pool. The fundamental flaw of human relations, she asserts, lies in the fact that "excessive sexindulgence is the distinctive feature of humanity" vis-a-vis the rest of the animal kingdom. Thus, instead of progressing on a teleological track towards a more perfect humanity, the species, slave to the excesses of the male sex drive, is degenerating. In spite of this outdated reliance on eugenics, Women and Economics is an excellent companion to Bread because it catalogues many of the restrictions placed on women that Norris puts his heroine up against. For example, Gilman notes that "so utterly has the status of woman been accepted as a sexual one that it has remained for the

woman's movement of the nineteenth century to devote much contention to the claim that women are persons!" Jeannette, in attempting to secure work, must repeatedly convince her superiors that she is a person, the equal of the men whose jobs she does equally well.

Related Titles

Norris was neither as prolific nor as successful a writer as his brother Frank. While Frank Norris's novels remain popular in college classrooms, Bread is only beginning to enjoy a rediscovery. Though they have not yet gained critical attention, Norris's other novels are also interested in the effects of social forces on the individual. In Salt, Norris narrates the education of his protagonist, Griffith Adams. Unfortunately, school and college does little to prepare Adams for the real education forced upon him in the real world. Like Jeannette, Adams must struggle to make sense of a business world that seems reluctant to slow its motors to let an individual catch up. Now more or less ignored by scholars and casual readers, Salt was extremely popular in its day. F. Scott Fitzgerald regarded it extremely highly, predicting with characteristic bombast that it and his own The Great Gatsby would remain the most enduring works of his generation.

Jeannette's brief marriage to Martin Devlin gives Norris a space to muse on the institution and how people function within it. He dedicates all of his novel Brass to this subject. This provocative novel presents questions about whether marriage ultimately helps or harms those who enter into it.

Perhaps, he suggests, the industrialized world, by placing business above procreation, has made marriage an anachronism.

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