Circus in the Attic Short Guide

Circus in the Attic by Robert Penn Warren

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Characters

The major characters are Bolton and Mrs. Lovehart, who are revealed mainly through their actions. Even so, some of Bolton's inner life is revealed in the narrative, especially in his devotion to the toy circus. Mrs. Lovehart's egotism is displayed through her various subterfuges and more directly in the moment of her death, when we are given an insight into her emotions, and we see her castigating her heart for "betraying" her, as she has accused her son of doing.

Of the secondary characters, Bolton's ineffectual father is rather vaguely characterized. A Confederate veteran, he is essentially a stoic gentleman, but his reticence leads Bolton to wish, futilely, at Simon Lovehart's death, that he had known his father better.

Vividly although briefly characterized are Seth Sykes, the Union sympathizer who becomes a Confederate martyr; Dr.

Jordan, the kindly small town doctor who has doubts about Mrs. Lovehart's supposedly weak heart; Sara Darter, the daughter of Bolton's old professor, and the spirited woman who tries to free Lovehart from his mother's strangling grasp; Mrs. Parton, who eventually marries Bolton after his mother's death; Jasper Parton, her good-natured but mindless son; and Janie Murphy, the loyal young woman who marries Jasper and goes to Washington to accept Jasper's Purple Heart after Jasper's death in combat. All these characters tend to be either more perceptive than Bolton Lovehart (especially the doctor and Sara Darter), or people of stronger wills (all of them perhaps).

These people are characterized in a variety of ways, sometimes through dialog and sometimes through mere narrative event. But it is significant that each of them is shown in a moment of purpose or decision, making a choice or pursuing a course of action that provides a strong contrast to Bolton Lovehart's lack of will and direction.

Thus they serve, in part, as foils who help to define the ineffectual nature of Bolton Lovehart's efforts to free himself.

Seth Sykes, for instance, although a Union sympathizer, dies bravely but vainly protesting the seizure of his corn by the Union cavalry. Similarly, Sara Darter, although unable to break Mrs. Lovehart's hold on Bolton, does manage to escape from Bardsville and to make a clean break with her past in the town by selling all her goods and furniture at auction and by seducing Bolton on her last night there.

Social Concerns

Robert Penn Warren's novella, Circus in the Attic, describes the frustrated and ultimately sterile life of Bolton Lovehart, a man who may have had the talent and intellectual ability to become a major artist. Describing the years from the late nineteenth century to the end of World War II, Warren's story presents both the unproductive life of Lovehart and the equally empty life of Bardsville, the home town to which he is ever bound by his inability to escape the psychological domination of his mother. Lovehart's thwarted imagination is channeled into the creation of a toy circus, which for a time becomes his secret passion in the family attic, hidden not only from the townspeople of Bardsville but from his possessive mother. Thus Warren's novella offers a study of talent destroyed by the failure to break away from family heritage and the environment.

According to Warren's biographer, Joseph Blotner, Warren's imagination was stimulated by an oral narrative about the life of John Wesley Venable, Jr., of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, a man of Warren's father's generation who had been psychologically enslaved by an overbearing mother. In an effort to find an outlet for his emotions and talents, Venable had put together a toy circus in his attic, just as Bolton Lovehart does in Warren's novella. The toy circus still exists: Those who are interested in seeing artifacts which inspire fiction may find in it the special collections department of the library of Western Kentucky State University, one of the centers for Warren studies.

Aside from the bare oral outline of Venable's life, Warren relied entirely on his own imagination for the creation of Bardsville (modeled somewhat on Clarksville, Tennessee) and Bolton Lovehart.

Lovehart's early inclinations to live a vigorous life of individuality are expressed in his two abortive rebellions in childhood and youth. In childhood, he had yielded to his curiosity and attended a Baptist revival, even submitting to baptism in a creek, abandoning temporarily his family's lukewarm Episcopalian faith.

Later, as a teenager, Lovehart had run away and tried to join a visiting circus, only to be traced by a private detective and brought home by his father.

Warren's story assigns the blame for Lovehart's life of empty frustration to two sources: the banal environment and mindless culture of the Kentucky town of Bardsville, and the demanding egotism of Lovehart's mother. Mrs. Lovehart not only struggles fiercely, like a matron of an old family in a William Faulkner novel, to protect the social position of the Loveharts, but she also uses the threat of heart attacks to exert her domination over her son, thus preventing him from finding personal or intellectual independence.

However, Mrs. Lovehart, despite her "intensity of egotism," tends to act out of her sense of what is expected of her social position in Bardsville, where the Loveharts have occupied a position of social prominence on "Rusty Butt hill" (a corruption of "aristocrat hill"). Although not exactly wealthy, the Loveharts are an old family who were

established as upper class when the town's social levels had been solidified (in Warren's narrative view around 1840). Warren's implied criticism not only of Mrs. Lovehart's standards but of Bardsville's myths about its history and society is unrelenting.

In this respect, Warren's ironic description of the monument to the two slain Confederate volunteers (one of them a Union sympathizer) and the circumstances under which they died helps to show that Bardsville's conception of itself is based on illusion and myth, rather than truth. Insofar as Bardsville is representative of many American small towns, it becomes a symbol of the community's capacity for civic self-deception.

Techniques

The novella employs a third-person narrator who mixes colloquial speech and a high literary style, as Warren's firstperson narrator, Jack Burden, had done in All the King's Men (1946; see separate entry). In general, Warren follows the tradition of realistic short fiction, which had been developed to high art by Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Katherine Anne Porter. Although Warren's main focus is on the life of Bolton Lovehart, his narration employs a very novelistic approach to the description of Bardsville, blending local legend, historical anecdote, historical fact, and impersonal narration, as in its antiheroic treatment of the story of the slain Confederate "heroes," Cassius Perkins and Seth Sykes, who are commemorated in Bardsville's belated monument—erected in 1917, during the war fever at the American entrance into World War I. Not only does Warren present an ironic view of Bardsville's pretensions through his narrator's revelation that the volunteer force was mostly drunk and ran from the advancing Yankees, but he compounds the irony by describing the unexpected death of Sykes, a Union sympathizer. Sykes had invited the Union cavalry to his farm, but was nevertheless killed by an impatient trooper when Sykes had protested their seizure of his corn.

Another effective narrative device is Warren's objective treatment of his main characters: Although we are allowed to glimpse Bolton Lovehart's feelings on occasion, he is described in terms of his actions throughout most of the novella.

Even more sparing is Warren's treatment of Mrs. Lovehart's inner life: We learn indirectly of her various pretended "heart attacks" and relapses throughout the story, but it is only in the moment of her final and true attack that we are allowed to view her actual feelings of betrayal and outrage at the failing of her heart.

Warren's technique here reveals clearly (although without direct explanation) that her previous seizures and collapses were largely feigned or self-willed, as her doctor had hinted to Bolton. There is a particular sardonic irony in the manner of Mrs. Lovehart's death, since she views her heart as an organ of her body which is practicing the ultimate betrayal. Until this point, the behavior of her heart has been so obedient to her will that she has used it as a weapon to enslave her son; and she characteristically has accused all who question her actions as being betrayers.

Another major technical device is to counterpoint Bolton Lovehart's frustrated life with the banal social life of Bardsville. Aside from Bolton's boyhood rebellions and his devotion to the creation of his secret circus in the attic, Bolton's entire existence is portrayed largely against the background of the civic life and the changing events of Bardsville.

The importance of the central symbol of the story, Lovehart's circus in the attic, is made explicit by the narrator in the final sequence of the novella. Here the entire life of the town is identified with the toy circus that Bolton Lovehart created. Thus the circus

becomes the symbol, not only of Bolton's futility, but of the sterility of the town's cultural and social life as well.

Themes

Warren's most obvious theme is Bolton Lovehart's struggle against the constricting force of his mother's love, and his inability to liberate himself from his attachment to his mother and Bardsville.

This theme is developed in a number of actions which demonstrate Bolton's futile rebellion.

First, there are Lovehart's youthful attempts to break away from home and the power of Mrs. Lovehart. As a twelve year old, he forgets about belonging to the Episcopal church, wanders into a Baptist revival and is baptized in the nearby creek water. But his mother immediately rejects his action. Later as a youth of sixteen, he makes his abortive attempt to run away and join the circus, only to be betrayed by the circus manager and returned to his father. We are told that the flight to the circus, unlike the baptism, was "carefully planned, not undertaken on impulse," but as a revolt it was equally ineffectual.

Next there are Bolton's attempts as an adult to find love and to free himself from his mother's dominance. His hope of going to Sewanee University is defeated by the death of his father, an event leaving Bolton as the protector of his mother. In a scene of great pathos, we see Bolton listening to the stories about Sewanee told by Sam Jackson, his classmate at the Bardsville Academy. But an even more significant effort to escape comes in his unfulfilled romance between Bolton and Sara Darter, the daughter of Bolton's old teacher at the Bardsville Academy. After Bolton takes a job of teaching at Professor Darter's academy, it appears that he and Sara will marry.

Probably Sara has the strongest chance to liberate Bolton from Mrs. Lovehart's dominance. In order to prove to Bolton that Mrs. Lovehart's alleged heart troubles are melodramatic and self-induced collapses—as Dr. Jordan hints to Bolton—- Sara persuades Bolton to try to get a specialist for his mother. But Mrs. Lovehart reacts with accusations of betrayal and another feigned illness, and Bolton is not strong enough to defy her.

As a result, Sara, recognizing that she cannot take Bolton away from Mrs. Lovehart's power, decides to leave Bardsville and goes away to marry someone else. However, before she leaves, Sara seduces Bolton as an act of revenge on Mrs. Lovehart, knowing that after this experience, he will never be completely happy as a bachelor.

After Sara's departure, Bolton becomes an aging gentleman mainly devoted to maintaining his mother's social position, but he continues to rebel secretly, primarily through beginning to make the circus animals in his attic. This project replaces the project his mother had wanted him to work on—the history of Carruthers County, a book Bolton talks about but never writes.

Bolton's last major rebellion against his mother's continuing influence is undertaken after his mother's death at eightyseven in 1934. This final attempt to strike out on his

own results in his marriage to the widowed Mrs. Parton. Mrs. Parton, however, is a social climber from the poor end of Carruthers County and her major objective is to attain the social position into which Bolton Lovehart was born.

Nevertheless, Bolton's marriage gives him a stepson, Jasper, and something of the family life he had missed. At this point, the novella shows that Bolton, although unable to escape Bardsville, can at least become a part of its community life. Jasper's role as a soldier in World War II allows Bolton to become a public authority on the conduct of the war, and even the secretly constructed circus becomes a public artifact when it is sold at auction at a Christmas bazaar at the church, in order to raise funds for the Red Cross.

However, the new Mrs. Lovehart is almost as dominating as Bolton's mother had been, as Warren's narrative reveals, especially in her negative reaction to her son's hasty wartime marriage to the socially negligible Janie Murphy. Bolton proves to be as ineffectual as a father as he had been as a son, for he is unable to get his wife to accept Jasper's wife or to feel compassion for the young woman after she is widowed by Jasper's death in World War II. Ironically, Bolton's wife reverts to the indiscretions of her youth after Jasper's death. Her infidelity to Bolton is revealed when she is killed in a car wreck with the fiftyish Captain Cartwright, an officer stationed in a nearby army training camp.

Thus the various events of Bolton Lovehart's life reinforce the theme of his thwarted rebellion against Mrs. Lovehart and the shallow culture of Bardsville. A secondary theme of the story, the banality and emptiness of Bardsville's social life and culture is presented as a counterpoint to the story of Bolton Lovehart's failure.

Key Questions

Since Warren based the novella on what he heard of Jon Wesley Venable, Jr.'s life in Hopkinsville, one possible approach might be for someone to research Warren's use of his sources as it is discussed in Joseph Blotner's biography, Robert Penn Warren (1997). Another fruitful approach would be to do some research on fiction by other authors who were Warren's contemporaries, such as Sherwood Anderson, Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor, and William Faulkner, and who also wrote about characters attempting to escape from stultifying small town environments.

Another useful approach to the story's setting might be to look at the ways Warren deliberately undercuts and treats ironically the founding and growth of Bardsville. Some information is given in the novella about the impulses of the pioneers who eventually settled Bardsville, and the quasi-satirical treatment of the unimpressive battle memorialized in the monument to Cassius Perkins and Seth Sykes suggests that Warren intends to deflate the Civil War mythology preserved by many Southern towns.

1. What is the major failure in Bolton Lovehart's life? What decisions does he make, or fail to make, that change the course of his life and ensure the frustration of his talent?

2. Of what value is it for the reader to know about the historical figure whose circus inspired Warren's story? Does knowledge of the historical background of this story improve one's understanding of it? Why or why not?

3. Joseph Blotner's biography of Warren points to parallels between Warren's early life and that of Bolton Lovehart: both were from rural Kentucky towns, both had ineffectual fathers and domineering mothers, and both had literary ambitions. But Blotner draws these parallels only to point to the contrasts between Warren and Bolton. What does such a contrast suggest about the need to break away from constricting family and environmental influences?

4. How important is it to introduce Bolton Lovehart's forebear, Lemuel Lovehart, one of the original settlers of Bardsville? What contrast is set up between Bolton and his energetic forebear?

5. Discuss the ironic aspects of the Civil War skirmish, which the town has chosen to memorialize in its monument to Cassius Perkins and Seth Sykes. What is ironic about the era and motives when the town chooses to have the monument erected?

6. Discuss Bolton Lovehart's many efforts to escape from his mother's domination. Why does each fail?

7. What chance did Sara Darter have to free Bolton Lovehart from his mother and from Bardsville? Are their any circumstances under which Sara's efforts might have been successful?

8. What role does Dr. Jordan play in the story of Bolton's enslavement to his mother? Should Dr. Jordan have taken a stronger stand? Why or why not?

9. What is the narrator's point of view toward Mrs. Parton? What is our point of view after we have studied Mrs. Parton's actions before and during her marriage to Bolton? Is the marriage to Mrs. Parton liberating for Bolton, or is it merely more form of enslavement?

10. Discuss the role play in the story by Janie Murphy? Do we tend to sympathize with her? Why or why not?

Literary Precedents

The Circus in the Attic follows in the path of a time-honored American literary tradition of fictional realism, which was in turn influenced by French and English realism (Gustav Flaubert's Madame Bovary, 1857; Emile Zola's novels; Arnold Bennett's The Old Wives Tale, 1908). Numerous stories in the American realistic tradition explore the theme of a "revolt from the village," beginning with Mark Twain and Hamlin Garland's fiction, and continuing through Sherwood Anderson's Wimsburg, Ohio (1919; see separate entry) and Sinclair Lewis's Main Street (1923; see separate entry). Needless to say, many of these fictional revolts are feeble, abortive, or thwarted, as is Bolton Lovehart's in Warren's novella. Ernest Hemingway in his Nick Adams stories, especially some in In Our Time (1924; see separate entry) and William Faulkner in many stories with Southern settings (e.g. "A Rose for Emily") also provided ample precedents for Warren's fine novella.

Other significant precedents may have been provided by modernist literature from England and Ireland. Several short stories by D. H. Lawrence deal with a mother dominated protagonist and his efforts to escape from a constricting emotional environment. Even more notable than the short stories is Lawrence's first major novel, Sons and Lovers (1913; see separate entry), where Paul's conflicting feelings about Mrs. Morel and his first youthful love, Miriam, appear to be a large scale version of the battle for Bolton's allegiance between Mrs. Lovehart and Sara Darter. James Joyce's Dubliners (1914) also depicts a number of protagonists who are intellectually and emotionally strangled by their oppressive Irish environment. The most notable example in that collection is Gabriel Conroy, the failed intellectual who provides the point of view in "The Dead."

Warren's novella also had some interesting parallels and echoes. Tennessee Williams' play, The Glass Menagerie (1946) has similar concerns, and even a similar use of symbolism, since Laura's menagerie in the play has a similar role to Lovehart's circus. But the two works are nearly contemporaneous, not only in publication but in periods of composition. At any rate, there is little likelihood of Warren having been influenced by Williams.

Related Titles

In Warren's work, there are interesting parallels and contrasts. Warren's other short fiction shows some parallels, most notably the boy narrator in "Blackberry Winter," (1946; see separate entry) who is trying to express his individuality in actions of mild revolt, much like Bolton's early rebellions. However, Warren protagonists are not generally hamstrung by such a powerful and dominant mother as Mrs. Lovehart, or by such a constricting environment.

Two interesting parallels are Sue Murdock in At Heaven's Gate (1942; see separate entry), who struggles, more dramatically, but not more effectively, to escape the domination of her wealthy father; and Jack Burden, in All the King's Men, who grows up under the influence of a powerful mother, while feeling dismay about his ineffectual father, Ellis Burden. Both characters, however, manage to go further in their rebellions against their environments. Despite her energy, Sue Murdock's rebellion is tragic, however: She goes through a number of different men, hoping to escape the dominance of Bogan Murdock, but is murdered by one of her rejected lovers.

Although more passive than Sue at first, Jack Burden breaks away from his past in ways that Bolton Lovehart can never do: He deserts his mother and the tattered aristocracy of Burden's Landing to work for the crass and pragmatic Willie Stark; and as a result of his research on Judge Irwin's past for Boss Willie, Jack learns the truth about the social pillars of Burden's Landing; and he finally discovers that his true father was the masterful—but not so upright—Judge Irwin.

Finally, Jack's understanding of his past liberates him from the influence of his mother and his environment in ways that are far beyond Bolton Lovehart's reach.

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