Confederate General from Big Sur Short Guide

Confederate General from Big Sur by Richard Brautigan

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Contents

Characters

Unlike Trout Fishing in America (1967), Confederate General from Big Sur has no traditional characters. The novel is narrated by Jesse, a mild-mannered theological student, a minister without a church. In the absence of a calling, Jesse retreats into a passive and fatalistic acceptance of the world around him. He becomes an observer who refuses to judge or analyze.

The focus of the novel is Lee Mellon, a self-proclaimed Confederate general.

Mellon, the unreflective, and sometimes cruel, man of war, is Jesse's opposite, but both he and Jesse are examples of the American literary character — Huck Finn, Ishmael, Jay Gatsby — who creates a reality that matches what he envisions and needs. Mellon is a man without ideology, without worldly ambitions. He is alienated from the political and social concerns of his society. As his link with the Confederacy implies, Lee Mellon is a loser in the eyes of the world. In the end, Mellon is an unconsciously existential rebel for whom rebellion is its own end, a "rebel without a cause." His only victory is survival and, more importantly, the survival of self.

The other characters exhibit similar states of alienation. Johnston Wade is a businessman who has been driven mad by the pressures of his middle-class life. Elaine and Susan are bored products of the bourgeoisie who amuse themselves with their sexual adventures at Big Sur. Elizabeth is an idealized woman who supports her four children and her gentle life at Big Sur by prostituting herself in San Francisco.

Social Concerns

Popularized after its reissue in 1968, Confederate General from Big Sur's portrait of nonconformist life in California was often read as a description of protohippies, a companion piece to Tom Wolfe's Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test (1968). But the novel had originally been published in 1964, and its characters and message are antithetical to several concerns of the hippie movement.

Unlike the hippie counterculture that embraced pacifism and based its politics in opposition to the Vietnam War, Confederate General from Big Sur's protagonist Lee Mellon is a brutal and insensitive iconoclast who is unconcerned with the political reality of America. His rebellion is not a conscious reaction against his society as much as it is a simple determination to do what he wants.

Similarly, although the novel portrays a group of young people living together in elective poverty, it is no encomium to communal life. Instead, Brautigan's characters exist in worlds of private fantasy: Lee Mellon believing that he is descended from a Confederate General, the narrator Jesse rereading the punctuation in Ecclesiastes, and gentle Elizabeth playing the role of loving mother when she is not off in San Francisco working as a highly paid prostitute.

Even the novel's hedonism — casual sex, drugs, and alcohol — are a misleading parallel with the hippie counterculture and another indication of Brautigan's basic distrust of any collective enterprise. In Confederate General from Big Sur the characters use alcohol and drugs to escape into the private fantasies they inhabit. The novel ends with Jesse too "distracted" to make love, but his impotence is just one of several instances in the novel in which sex, which threatens commitment, is approached with reluctance.

Although misread at the time as a celebration of hippie conformity, Confederate General from Big Sur is actually a book without social concerns. Perched on the western edge of America, its characters turn their backs on America and its problems as they pursue their private dreams.

Techniques

Although written before Trout Fishing in America, Confederate General from Big Sur is stylistically a much more conventional novel. The narrator Jesse, who says he likes to watch triple features at cheap theaters, fashions a montage of narrative images, but his loosely related series of anecdotes effectively define the character of Lee Mellon and advance a cohesive plot that largely adheres to chronological linearity.

As in Trout Fishing in America, the prose is sparse, composed of unemotionally observed details. This direct, matter-of-fact style emphasizes the novel's philosophical refusal to make value judgments in a world in which good and evil are simply part of a never-ending pattern beyond man's comprehension. There is no attempt to explain contradictions, for in Confederate General from Big Sur, unlike the conforming world which the novel rejects, consistency has no particular value.

Themes

Brautigan believes that each self should ideally be judged outside of history, and he recognizes that people, like Lee Mellon with his dreams of the Confederacy, can be inappropriate to their historical situation. Confederate General from Big Sur explores the possibility of transcending history, but the novel shows that even if one can transcend history, one cannot escape moral ambiguity. This version of the American theme of freedom derives from eastern thought with its emphasis on inevitability. At the end of the novel, as the characters search for Johnston Wade's pomegranate, the narrator sighs, "There was nothing else to do, for after all this was the destiny of our lives. A long time ago this was our future, looking for a lost pomegranate at Big Sur."

The book, therefore, is also absurdist. The narrator reads and rereads Ecclesiastes until he is only reading the punctuation. In Ecclesiastes there is a time for all things, but there is no pattern discernible by man. The multiple endings of Confederate General from Big Sur refute rational causality and suggest a world in which progress is an illusion and life is an endless repetition of the past.

Literary Precedents

In Confederate General from Big Sur, as in much of his work, Brautigan frequently alludes to classics of American literature. When Lee Mellon taps the gas lines of Pacific Gas and Electric, he is paralleling the actions of Ralph Ellison's unnamed protagonist in Invisible Man (1952). Mellon's impoverished encampment at Big Sur is in many ways a parodic revision of Thoreau at Walden Pond. References to earlier American literary rebels are spelled out in the novel: Mellon was raised in Ashville, North Carolina, the birthplace of Thomas Wolfe, and at one point in the novel Henry Miller is observed waiting outside his Big Sur home for the mail delivery.

But perhaps equally important precedents are the rebellious characters played by James Dean and Marlon Brando in 1950s films such as The Wild One (1954) and Rebel Without a Cause (1955), for like the protagonists of these films, Lee Mellon is an apolitical figure who only wants to be left alone.

It is the conforming world's intrusion into his world that leads him to violence.

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