Cotton Comes to Harlem Short Guide

Cotton Comes to Harlem by Chester Himes

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Characters

The personality of the detective hero has always been central to the success of detective fiction, and in Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, Himes has created two of the most complex detectives in the genre. (In fact, French critics refer to Himes as "the Balzac of Harlem" because of his ability to create vivid and memorable characters.) As even their names indicate, the two detectives are harbingers of death. Dressed in black suits, black shirts, and carrying black handkerchiefs, they drive their black sedan through the mean streets of Harlem.

Inevitably, they work the night shift, and bitter experience has convinced them that anything that moves in darkness must be dangerous. They are often too quick to respond to any perceived threat, beating bystanders and criminals alike in an insane fury. People in Harlem believe that the detectives would shoot a person dead for crossing an imaginary line. Even those who do not believe, do not try.

Yet in their quieter moments, the detectives reveal themselves to be basically decent men whom intolerable pressures have made violent. They are the sole dispensers of justice in an utterly chaotic world and presented with enormous temptation, they remain incorruptibly honest. Perhaps their most admirable quality is their total loyalty to each other. They never quarrel or even disagree, but together, thread their way through the violent maze of Harlem, each secure in his confidence in the other. They can be compassionate as well as savage: They are after the Rev. O'Malley not so much to bring him to justice, but to recover the eighty-seven thousand dollars for his poor victims.

Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are surrounded by an incredible variety of secondary characters, from the naively innocent to the totally corrupt. At one extreme is their white boss, Lieutenant Anderson. Like the reader, he is shocked to learn in a police report that a man has killed his wife with an axe for burning his breakfast pork chop. Anderson's opposite is the Rev. O'Malley, a Judas-figure who uses his good looks and golden voice to betray his own people. These characters are accompanied by a vast array of victims and predators, "squares" and "sharpies."

Social Concerns

The social concerns revealed by Himes's writing are suggested by the titles of his two volumes of autobiography: The Quality of Hurt (1972) and My Life of Absurdity (1976). Himes, who once observed two black convicts knife each other to death during an argument as to whether Paris was in France or France in Paris, believes that the life of American blacks is characterized by violence, resulting in an absurd, or meaningless, existence. Moreover, he realized that the fantasy world of hardboiled detective fiction, which portrays human life as violent and irrational and human society as malevolent and corrupt, is actually very similar to the real life of urban blacks in America, at least, as he himself had experienced it.

Thus, Himes used his detective novels not only to entertain, but also to reveal the quality of life in the huge black ghetto of Harlem, where sordid violence and degrading poverty have warped the lives of the inhabitants.

The Harlem of Cotton Comes to Harlem is a dangerous city of the exploited and the homeless. As the narrator explains, Harlemites originally left the American South because they could never consider it their home, only to discover that lurid and violent Harlem could not be their true home either. In the novel, therefore, they are easily deceived by the Rev. Deke O'Malley's Back-to-Africa swindle, and eightyseven families each turn over one thousand dollars in a desperate gamble to improve their lives. O'Malley, the direct cause of the suffering and violence resulting from his scheme, is black.

Indeed, as occurs throughout Himes's writing, black people are victimized as much by their own greed and gullibility, as they are by white bigotry. Many are victims of violence, yet instead of helping others, they commit horribly violent acts themselves. The novel implies that only when blacks learn to stop victimizing each other and to direct their anger at the white power structure keeping them caged in Harlem, will they make any lasting progress toward social equality.

Techniques

Most critics agree that Himes is not a deep thinker and that the success of his novels results not from their ideas, but from the intensity of their expression. Like Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Chandler, Himes has a terse, laconic style well suited to the description of violent action. Like his characters, obsessed with either committing crimes or catching criminals, Himes also seems obsessed, so that, as his French editor remarks in the preface to Blind Man with a Pistol (1969), the detective novels appear to have been written under intolerable pressure.

Himes relates the adventures of Grave Digger and Coffin Ed through a third-person, omniscient narrator who leaps about in time and space at breathtaking speed, increasing the sense of a world in chaos. He relies mainly on dialogue to advance the plot and keeps his descriptions and commentary to a bare minimum. His descriptions of characters are usually limited to how they look and what they do. Rarely does he pause long enough to reveal a character's inner psychology, yet his descriptions are so vivid that his characters linger in the memory. For example, the two detectives frequent a restaurant owned by Mammie Louise. She is shaped like a weather balloon on two feet, with a pilot balloon for a head, and smells like stewed goat.

Himes places his characters in a physical setting described economically, but with enough detail to convey the texture of daily life in Harlem. He is a wonderful observer and recreates the sights and sounds and even the smells and tastes of a place that is at once a real city and a landscape of the mind. His slums are squalid and dirty, teeming with so many people that the walls seem bursting with human flesh.

In streets littered with broken glass, garbage, and animal offal, children play, running, ducking, and dodging.

All the while, life goes on relentlessly, with people not only lying, stealing, cheating, and murdering, but also praying, singing, laughing, and loving.

The characteristic tone is of acerbic humor bordering on the macabre, reinforcing the author's view that the often bizarre and violent behavior of his characters is only to be expected, given their absurd circumstances.

Themes

The novel's main theme is expressed indirectly by the frequent scenes of horribly intense violence and directly by the remarks of one of Himes's two black detective heroes, when Grave Digger Jones explains that only three things can be done about Harlem's high crime rate. Either the criminals must be made to pay for their crimes or the people must be paid enough to live decently. The other choice is to let the people devour each other. As the criminally corrupt white power structure (represented by Colonel Robert L. Calhoun and his cronies) is unwilling to undertake either of the first two alternatives, Harlemites are left to fend for themselves in a grim struggle for survival. The only people willing and able to maintain even a semblance of order are the two black detectives.

However, the troubling brutality the detectives must use to carry out their duties compromises their moral position. The criminals of Harlem respect no law but that of the gun and the fist, and the detectives are savagely efficient with both. Ironically, the only way they can save their people from themselves is to be experts in the same kind of violence that has brutalized their community. Furthermore, they are grimly aware that as policemen, they are defending the values of the same exploitive social system that has placed Harlemites in their appalling circumstances in the first place. An undercurrent of futility runs throughout Himes's detective fiction, reinforcing the general sense of life's absurdity.

Adaptations

Cotton Comes to Harlem was released as a motion picture in 1970 (produced by Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., directed by Ossie Davis, distributed by United Artists). Although it was intended as the first of a series, it had just one sequel, based on The Heat's On and released in 1974: Come Back Charleston Blue (produced by Goldwyn, directed by Davis, distributed by Warner Brothers).

Although these films were reasonably popular, they were thoroughly disliked by Himes, who felt that the screenplays made his two detectives of no consequence. While the screenplays do not do justice to the frantic violence and grim humor of the novels, more fundamental problems are the thoroughly routine direction and the miscasting of Godfrey Cambridge and Raymond St. Jacques as the two detectives. St. Jacques is adequate as Coffin Ed, but Cambridge, with his big moon face, rolling eyes, and enormous belly, is more amiable than frightening. Neither actor is able to convey the sense of deadly menace essential to Himes's original conception. The two films are not great cinema; however, they did help to make Himes better known in America and no doubt prompted many people to seek out his novels.

Literary Precedents

Before Himes began writing his detective novels, his French editor suggested that he read those of Dashiell Hammett, the author who along with Raymond Chandler more or less established the conventions of the hard-boiled detective genre. After reading Hammett, Himes recognized that the detective novel, with its emphasis on violence, suspicion, and paranoia, would be an effective vehicle for expressing his own vision of life in black America. In his own novels, he retained Hammett's stress on action rather than plausible motive, as well as Hammett's fast-moving narratives, realistic settings, and use of dialogue to advance the plot. Himes's detectives are also in the Hammett tradition, insofar as they are brave men of vio lent action, with a sure knowledge of the street and the intelligence to see through murky layers of deception.

However, all critics agree that Himes's detective series as a whole works towards the negation of the traditional hard-boiled detective novel, in which the detective usually must solve a single crime, and in doing so, restore society to its original state of order. Because the outcome is certain, the detective's successful solution of the crime implies that although the world may be violent and confusing, man is nevertheless in control of his destiny. The first five novels in Himes's series satisfy these conventions, with the difference that in the process of solving the original crime, the often brutal Grave Digger and Coffin Ed commit many more crimes of their own. In contrast, the last three novels conclude with absurd endings, with the final novel emphasizing complete futility.

Cotton Comes to Harlem ends on a note of similar, but less extreme, absurdity. After the Rev. O'Malley swindles eighty-seven thousand dollars from the poor people of Harlem, the even more vicious Col. Robert L. Calhoun steals the money from him, concealing it in a bale of cotton. Calhoun loses the cotton, which is found by an old garbagepicker, Uncle Bud, who discovers the money. True, after much beating and shooting, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed do catch up with O'Malley. However, they never recover the original money.

Calhoun goes on a murderous rampage and then flees to Alabama, which refuses to extradite him back to Harlem, on the grounds that killing a black person is not a crime under Alabama law. Uncle Bud is last heard from in Africa, where his purchases include five hundred cattle, one hundred wives, and one witch doctor. The novel ends not with the satisfaction that order has been restored to a secure world, but with the uneasy feeling that it has been a wild shaggy dog story.

Related Titles

As a chronological unit, Himes's eight detective novels trace the development of Himes as an artist and offer an imaginative social history of black America during a twelve-year period of racial upheaval. The series begins with For Love of Imabelle (1957), set in a relatively "normal" world and then increasingly emphasizes meaningless and absurd elements until in Blind Man with a Pistol (1969), Himes carries the detective novel to its outer limits by concluding on an apocalyptic note of complete social collapse. Within the series Grave Digger and Coffin Ed undergo a related transformation. They begin as decent men forced to become brutal, then turn into coldly efficient killers, and finally end up as completely inefficient spectators.

The first novel in the series is not so much a "detective" novel as it is a naturalistic study of the Harlem underworld. The two detectives are secondary characters, far from being the main focus of attention. In the next four novels, however, they assume center stage and become the medium for the author's oblique social commentary on the experience of being black in America. These novels are what critics call "mayhem novels." They progress not through the detectives' logical steps in solving the crime, but through a wild, disjointed trail of violence, grotesque surprises, and murder galore. In All Shot Up (1960), for example, a thief fleeing on a motorcycle from the detectives is decapitated as he swerves past a truck carrying overhanging sheet metal. The motorcycle's momentum carries the headless body forwards until it crashes into a jewelry store sign that reads, "We Will Give Credit to the Dead."

Grotesque events like these foreshadow the absurd conclusion ofCotton Comes to Harlem and the even more irrational Blind Man with a Pistol.

Himes's final detective novel has been called an "anti-novel," or a plotless, shapeless novel negating the assumptions of its genre. Published in 1969, the year following Martin Luther King's assassination, this novel plunks the detectives down into a chaos of social forces that include Black Power and Black Jesus movements and then allows them to do no more than escape with their lives. (They lose their pants when they are attacked by an angry mob.) In the unforgettable last scene, a blind man fires a pistol, setting off a race riot. In the background, the two detectives, now reduced to impotent spectators, shoot rats fleeing from a collapsing building. The symbolism is hardly subtle, yet the scene does provide a compelling image of a world gone mad from racial pressures.

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