Dark Laughter Short Guide

Dark Laughter by Sherwood Anderson

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Characters

Sherwood Anderson's characters are generally "unpretentious people" whose apparently simple lives stand in contrast to the philosophical complexity of their existence. Aline and Dudley are dreamers who each are disappointed with their attempts to break out of the ordinary. Dudley's reporting career seemed like a dead-end job, and he was willing to abandon the possibility of excitement in Chicago to return to the routine existence in Old Harbor.

Aline is restless, and compared to her husband, Dudley seems like an experienced man. Aline's husband, Fred Grey, is the symbolic end to what life in Old Harbor must become if people do not regenerate themselves. He is an impotent husband and ineffectual boss who cannot even control his employee Sponge.

The characters' names reflect their roles in life: Dudley is a "dud," a failure; Aline (perhaps, "align", or a-line) takes the most self-serving path; Fred Grey is without color, either black or white, and is in the twilight (grey) of his life; Sponge lives off the prosperity of others, having given up his artistic potential. When Aline takes Dudley as her lover, it is to break the monotony of married life and means no more than any casual affair, but when she decides to abandon her marriage and run away with Dudley, the novel takes a bleak turn. Rather than fusing their energy to begin life over, they are simply assuming another set of hopeless circumstances, and they will eventually feel as trapped together as they did in their previous arrangements.

Unlike the gardener/lover in D. H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterly's Lover (which Anderson admired), Dudley and Aline are not enough in touch with their inner spirits to know what their illicit love means.

Social Concerns/Themes

Winesburg, Ohio (1919), which Anderson subtitled, "A Group of Tales of Ohio Small-Town Life," sketches the story of a large cast of characters; Dark Laughter, in contrast, probes the reflections of three people: Bruce Dudley, his boss Fred Grey, and Fred's wife Aline Grey.

Dudley, a dreamer and a journalist with ambitions to write something serious, feels he is going nowhere with his newspaper job in Chicago. His wife is wrapped up in her own career as a writer. One day he simply decides to reject the present and walks out of his job and marriage to return to the simple, small-town life in Old Harbor, on the Ohio River, where he had lived as a boy. He lands a job in a wheel factory owned by Fred Grey. Here he works with a seasoned hand at wheel painting named Sponge Martin. Sponge was once a master carriage painter and still likes to recall the glory of the past.

The developing relationship between Dudley and Aline forms the core of the story. While waiting in a car for her husband, Aline notices Dudley coming out of the plant and is attracted to him.

She manages to persuade Dudley to come to work for her as a gardener, which leads to an affair she encourages, and finally to Aline leaving her impotent husband and going away with Dudley. What change for the good this can possibly harbor for Aline beyond the sexual is not clear, but Anderson's low-key tale makes her choice appear wholly plausible.

Techniques

Anderson's techniques embroiled the literary world in controversy ever since his first book was published, and Dark Laughter was no exception. Critical response ranged from "astonishingly bad" (Kim Townsend) to "one of the most profound novels of our time" (H.

L. Mencken). Simplicity was Anderson's hallmark, and perhaps the reason so many critics distrusted his literary achievement. In some instances in Dark Laughter, the conversations are so ordinary that the reader has to re-read the sentence to be sure he read it correctly.

In attempting to understand Anderson's craft and why he was both loved and detested by critics, it is useful to place him in the context of the literary movements of the time. The era of the epic novel had passed. Readers, disenchanted with the social orders portrayed by the likes of Henry James and Leo Tolstoy, were turning to experimental writers. British writers Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, and James Joyce spearheaded complex psychological portraits based on the riveting theories expounded by Sigmund Freud.

American writers embraced sparse language and terse stories. Ernest Hemingway's fiction swept over the literary world, and Sherwood Anderson accompanied him. Both men had been journalists before turning to fiction, both were disillusioned by their experiences in war, and both valued the importance of a single, factual detail in discovering the essence of a situation. For Anderson and Hemingway, two conflicting facts could tell more of the story, and establish its irony more certainly, than any amount of discourse, plot, or character development. If nineteenth-century readers admired the lushly written novels of Charles Dickens, many twentieth-century readers yearned for the sparse prose of Anderson and Hemingway.

What was left out of the story was as important as what was included. That was not only a way of writing, it was a view of life.

Adaptations

Dark Laughter has been dramatized twice—in an NBC theatrical adaptation and in a sound recording by Metacom (1983). Anderson always wanted to make Dark Laughter into a play to parallel the success of an adaptation of The Triumph of the Egg (1921, which was performed as a play twenty-two times as a curtain-raiser for a revival of Eugene O'Neill's Different by the Provinc etown Playhouse in New York), but nothing came of his efforts.

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