Destry Rides Again Short Guide

Destry Rides Again by Max Brand

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Destry, the hero who turns from honest and guileless roughneck to a cunning schemer, is one of Faust's (Max Brand is one of the several pen names for Frederick Faust) more memorable rogues, or perhaps antiheroes.

His best charade, probably, is displayed in the first days of his return from six years' incarceration pretending to be broken in spirit. But in his clever management of intrigue, and in his capacity to inspire affection in a boy, he also is typical of the best of Faust's heroes. Destry, however, is blinded both by trust and by a certain unthinking hubris, as he himself realizes at the end.

Nearly all the other characters are secondary figures, but as with Faust's best work, they are generally believable. Charlie Dangerfield, a tomboy who grows into a beauty but remains loyal to Destry (except for one moment of doubt) is one of Faust's more appealing heroines. Willie Thornton, the streetwise lad who worships Destry, is a finely developed portrait, one of many boy characters who are used effectively in the Max Brand westerns of 1928-1934 (like Jimmy of The Longhorn Feud, 1933). Finally, Chester Bent, Destry's supposed friend, is a skillfully drawn hypocrite and villain: except for his hidden prowess with weapons, Bent is plausible enough to be found in the law office or chamber of commerce of numerous small American towns.

Social Concerns/Themes

In its original incarnation, Destry Rides Again is a serious melodrama of a quest for revenge, relieved by some humorous and high-spirited scenes.

The hero, Harry Destry, begins as an innocent who happens to be the selfappointed champion of the town of Wham, a mythical Texas hamlet. Destry is victimized by his best friend, Chester Bent, who frames him for a robbery Bent has committed himself, and further victimized by a jury of his "peers," mainly a group of townspeople who have always resented Destry's superiority and who grasp at the chance to convict him of robbery on the flimsiest evidence. In this version of the story, Faust uses the conventional formulas of the western to paint a caustic picture of small town virtue and the stereotypes of conventional honesty associated with frontier citizens.

After a lengthy stint in prison, Destry's return to Wham employs elements of sardonic farce, as Destry, transformed into a master of guile by his years behind bars, begins to seek a revenge within the law by taking advantage of the weaknesses of his former jurors. In pursuing this calculated vengeance, however, Destry manages to preserve his innocence through remaining worthy of the love of his former childhood sweetheart, Charlotte ("Charlie") Dangerfield, and through staying faithful to the heroic image he holds in the eye of a boy, Willie Thornton, who reminds him of his younger self. Yet at the end of the novel, Destry learns that his real enemy has been his own arrogance, for he discovers that his supposed best friend, Bent, has been his secret adversary, and that Bent, who pretends to be a scholarly and civic-minded businessman, is in reality a better shot and a better boxer than he is.

This witty western novel spoofs some of the conventions of the genre while ironically reaffirming them in the end. In the process, Faust creates both a community and a hero who are seriously flawed, but perhaps more forgivable for being human. However, it is a regrettable irony that the clever irony Faust employs in this novel is largely unknown to those who have not read the book, for the 1939 film version, which has been widely celebrated, alters the story a great deal, portraying Destry as a naive hero who tries to clean up a town without using guns.

Techniques

Aside from other books in the western genre, Faust drew on his own earlier work for the convention of the virtuous outlaw in his characterization of Destry. Destry is also another of Faust's archetypal rebels, in a line stretching back to Dan Barry of The Untamed (1919). Of course, the theme of an innocent but wronged hero getting his revenge may have been suggested by The Count of Monte Cristo (Alexandre Dumas the elder, 1844). Curiously enough, Destry may be a western incarnation of the Greek god Dionysus who is the hero of the verse epic Faust was composing in the late 1920s. Several Faust heroes of this time have names beginning with "d" (Destry, Dunstan, Dunmore, Dunlin, for instance), and they exhibit Dionysian qualities of energy and lack of inhibitions.

The name "Bent" for the villain of Destry Rides Again is obviously an apt name for a hypocritical schemer and criminal. In addition, it is one of many instances of a variation on the name of Benjamin Ide Wheeler used by Faust for the name of a villain in his fiction.

Wheeler, it will be recalled, was the pillar of society and president of the University of California at Berkeley who made an example of Faust by refusing to allow him to allow him to graduate.

Adaptations

Destry Rides Again has inspired several films of some distinction and even a successful Broadway musical. As a result, the name of Destry is more widely known than that of any other created by Faust, with the exception of Dr. Kildare. However, none of the film versions is wholly satisfactory, and only the first showed much fidelity to the story Faust actually published.

The 1932 film version starred Tom Mix in his last feature film. Mix had risen to fame in a silent version of The Untamed (1920) and, with his use of trick riding and shooting skills, he had often seemed the ideal incarnation of the Max Brand hero on the silent screen. Regrettably, Mix was aging and clearly past the prime of his film career in the 1932 sound film, and his voice was revealed to be somewhat highpitched and squeaky. Because of the inadequacy of Mix in this sound role, it is difficult to judge whether the irony of the Destry story could have been translated effectively to the screen in such a conventional format.

Far more famous is the 1939 Universal production with James Stewart and Marlene Dietrich. In this adaptation, the script departs from Faust's actual story to tell the serio-comic story of a naive young deputy who tries to clean up a tough town without using guns.

The source of this idea is clearly the middle of Destry Rides Again where the hero plays the role of a lion turned lamb after his time in prison; but the script merely uses that idea as a springboard for its own spoof of the conventional western, with Stewart playing the role of a naive innocent. (A more appropriate title might be Mr. Smith Goes Out West, since the film is in some ways a sequel in spirit to Mr. Smith Goes to Washington). Stewart's performance is excellent, and Marlene Dietrich projects her usual aura of sophisticated sex, yet the film is chiefly remembered for the saloon fight between Dietrich and Una Merkel. Although the film spoofs both the western and American moral idealism, it is forced to make some concessions to realism in its ending when the hero abandons his gunless role to administer justice. Curiously enough, Faust had pioneered the idea of gunless heroes in other stories, and had spoofed the western in The Streak (1937). But Faust's world, for all its romanticism, is seldom a place where the law can be enforced without guns or some kind of force.

Despite the mythic aura of its stars, the 1939 Destry Rides Again is more a product of Hollywood than of Faust's typewriter. Moreover, the film is not rated very highly by historians of the western film. Indeed, the best comment on Stewart's character in this Destry is his role in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, John Ford's 1962 classic, where Stewart is again an idealistic lawyer who tries to civilize a western area without violence, but must be saved by a conventional western hero played by John Wayne.

A 1954 Universal remake of the 1939 film, called simply Destry, is a somewhat underrated work. This time Audie Murphy plays the naive role created by Stewart with Mari Blanchard an attractive heroine in the Dietrich role. Murphy with his boyish face

was appropriately cast for a part where he must combine innocence with extraordinary competence with fists and guns, and some fans of the western film prefer this version. At the time of the film's release, however, reviewers inevitably responded to it with numerous invidious comparisons to the 1939 classic.

Perhaps the least appreciated of the Destry adaptations was a Broadway musical version in 1959 produced by David Merrick, with a book and lyrics by Harold Rome. This was a loud and brassy show with a young Andy Griffith giving a fine comic performance as "Tom Destry." Scott Brady was a nasty villain, and Delores Gray proved to be a luscious charmer in the Dietrich role as the saloon girl who reforms. The musical took its plot entirely from the 1939 film, and translated it effectively to the fantasyland of musical comedy, where the material seems a little more believable. But despite being a modest success, the show did not last long enough to become one of the legendary Broadway hits. A major shortcoming was obvious: Rome's score, although noisy enough, lacks the songs that an audience remembers.

In these numerous adaptations, Hollywood and Broadway have succeeded in moving the character they call "Destry" a long way from the original novel. Some day an enterprising producer may decide to do a film version of the novel Faust actually wrote, and there may be enough true fans of the Max Brand western (and other discerning people) to make such a project a hit.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994