The Doomsters Short Guide

The Doomsters by Ross Macdonald

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Contents

The Doomsters Short Guide....1

Contents....2

Characters....3

Social Concerns....4

Techniques....5

Themes....6

Key Questions....7

Literary Precedents....8

Copyright Information....9

Characters

The most important character in the novels of Ross Macdonald is Lew Archer. Archer, a modern private investigator, is only loosely patterned after such influential predecessors as Hammett's Sam Spade or Chandler's Philip Marlowe. Directly working against the tradition created by Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, Lew Archer is more of an acute observer and less of a participant in the Macdonald novels.

Archer is not the central character who makes things work out; rather, he is the author's narrative persona, the one who filters the story to the reader. As a result, Macdonald's books, while containing an action plot, are not of the slam-bang style, like a Mike Hammer story. The novels are more reflective, geared for social observation rather than pure action.

Within the fictional world Archer probes and questions, laying open the stories of the various other characters in the novel. His job, as with all detectives is to expose the truth, or what passes for the truth, and to get below the surface of the world in search of motives and explanations. It is the pursuit of the psychological truth which distinguishes Ross Macdonald's detective from the others.

Readers never really know much about Lew Archer's private life: He was once married, served on a police force before turning private, and lives alone, apparently preferring it that way. Readers do, however, get to examine the intimate lives of the other characters in some depth. In The Doomsters, the focus is on the Hallman family. By the opening of the novel the senior Hallmans are dead, both under suspicious circumstances, and the plot focuses on the possible guilt of the second generation, Carl and his wife Mildred; Jerry and his wife Zinnie; the local sheriff Ostervelt; and the family doctor Grantland. As with any Macdonald story the relationships among the principle characters are complicated and interconnected.

Jerry is trying to maneuver Carl, who has been committed to an asylum for the death of their father, out of the family fortune. Mildred, Carl's wife, who married him, among other reasons, to escape the poverty and lower social caste she was born into, is fighting to save both her husband and her financial/social position. In the world of Ross Macdonald, the protection of such a position, especially if it is one acquired through marriage, will be ardently pursued. The local doctor is also implicated in the family deaths, as is the local law officer; both have their own designs on the various members of the Hallman family. Like a Greek tragedy, the characters are doomed, doomed to act out their fate and to suffer the consequences of the sins of their fathers. By the end of the novel only Carl, relatively innocent by Macdonald standards, still survives, the rest having perished in a bloodbath worthy of an Elizabethan revenge drama.

Social Concerns

The Doomsters is the seventh Lew Archer novel and the one in which Macdonald fixed the Archer character as well as the major themes which would occupy him for the rest of his writing career. Gone are the remnants of Hammett and Chandler; Macdonald had discovered his own milieu and his own voice. From The Doomsters on, the books were pure Macdonald.

California has always provided for Macdonald a litmus of American life, the place where the future of American began. Up to The Doomsters, the Archer novels had created the familiar California terrain which characterizes Macdonald's work. It is the most current of American landscapes, on the edge of the future, and yet California has attachments to the past which extend tentaclelike, both anchoring and restricting history's movement into the present. As with other Archer books, The Doomsters begins long before the novel opens and eventually traces the histories of its main figures back many generations, detailing the greed and ambition which helps to create the volatile climate of the present.

Macdonald's concern with the class system is also further developed in The Doomsters through two minor, but nonetheless important, background events. First is the fact that the Hallmans, the central family of the novel, acquired their vast land holdings by virtually stealing the land from the dispossessed Japanese-Americans who were herded into detainment camps during World War II; and second is the fact that by using illegal and inexpensive Mexican labor to work in their fields, they have maintained their wealth. The exploitation of these American minorities taints the Hallmans' money and ultimately aids in the destruction of the family. There is a third class of those exploited, the lower-class whites who rely on the Hallmans for economic support or depend on the family to help them maintain whatever little power and prestige they have acquired.

There is one additional social concern voiced in this novel which underlies all of the Archer fiction, that of the despoliation of the land for greed and profit. The California Eden is constant prey to the designs of those who would use the beauty and fertility of nature to further their own political or financial ambitions. This ecological theme became increasingly important as the Archer series continued.

Techniques

The two most important literary techniques employed by Macdonald have either enthralled or enraged his readers. One of the stylistic devices he borrowed from Dashiell Hammett was the use of poetic asides or symbolic tropes, which often begin or end chapters. With these highly literary devices he sets the tone or sums up the tone of the intervening scenes. Often the purpose is a moral one which the symbolic descriptions, usually of nature, extend or expand into the natural world. Like a good Elizabethan, Ross Macdonald includes the natural in the corruption of his human world.

Second, Macdonald's use of ambiguity and irony deprive his books of any sense of salvation or catharsis. Micky Spillane's world remains dark, but Mike Hammer triumphs or at least exorcises his anger, and presumably the reader's, through the violence he directs towards the evil ones in the fiction. The world of Ross Macdonald does not contain such patently easy solutions. Like the real world, Macdonald's is not as neatly defined or explained. It is one of the achievements of his prose that he can maintain such a perspective.

Themes

The Doomsters contains the first extensive use of the exploration of the family saga as a plot device. All of Macdonald's novels deal with the importance of the family in one way or another, but with The Doomsters the history of the family integrates with the psychological makeup of the individual characters and the fledgling society of California to create the interconnected world of the Archer series.

The dissection of the family begins with the search for a runaway member of the clan, usually one of the children, and ends with the disclosure of the family's history, normally with disastrous results for individual family members.

The twin themes of love and hate, the lack of the former and superabundance of the latter, also surface as Archer delves into the case and uncovers secret affairs, unwanted and hidden pregnancies, strained marriages, characters coupled and bound by lust for sex, for money, for power and prestige, and for revenge. Such individuals' motivations and psychological states receive support from the neurotic society which surrounds them, which means that the characters are not isolated, abnormal cases, but rather are a part of, a product of, the society they inhabit. It is a neurotic world that produces neurotic people.

Macdonald also explores in depth in this novel, for the first time, the transmitted sins which each generation passes on to the next. One of the figures recites the Biblical quote: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are on edge," which could well be the epigraph for the book. There is also an old testament quality to the guilt and violence that is passed on from generation to generation, and which provides the motivation for the tragedy that unfolds within the novel. By trying to create his own idyllic world, selfish and oversimplified, the patriarch of the Hallman family doomed his offspring to a life of waste and destruction.

Key Questions

1. What do you make of the title of the book? Is it unnecessarily gloomy or pessimistic?

2. This novel was published in the late 1950s, a time we now look back on with some nostalgia as a simpler or more settled period of American history. If this is so, how do you account for the subject matter of the book?

3. Like many of the other Archer tales, The Doomsters takes place in a seemingly quiet, normal small town.

But underneath the quietude lies a seething corruption. How does this plot undermine our typical notions of small-town America?

4. The novel opens with Archer dreaming of a hairless ape who lived in a cage. In what ways does this "dream" quality infuse the whole novel?

5. Macdonald underwent psychotherapy immediately before publishing this novel. Can you detect elements of his recent experience in the novel?

6. By the late 1950s Macdonald had firmly established the character of Lew Archer both in his own mind and in the public's. Describe those characteristics and relate them to how the novel unfolds.

7. Compare Lew Archer with his most important immediate predecessors in the mystery field, Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. How does he differ? How is he the same?

8. Macdonald's Archer novels almost invariably involve a resurrecting of the past, an uncovering of the sins of the fathers (and mothers) which has an impact on the present. What does such a plot device allow Macdonald to do as a writer?

9. How does death operate in this novel — that is, beyond just getting the plot started?

10. What is it with fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, siblings of all sorts in Macdonald's novels? The family seems to be a hotbed of intrigue and potential murder.

Literary Precedents

Although there are no direct literary precedents for Macdonald's later fiction, he owes a good deal to both Hammett and Chandler, of course, but he has brought his own set of interests to bear on his books which has altered them considerably from previous crime fiction. His academic background provides an almost unnoticed richness, not of quotation and reference, but of human understanding. His observation through Archer is keen and unequaled in detective fiction of the period. Ross Macdonald came as close as any writer to genuinely using the genre for serious literary purposes.

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