

The Dragon of Og Short Guide

The Dragon of Og by Rumer Godden

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Overview

The Dragon of Og is a new and whimsical telling of an old legend. The story takes place long ago during the time of knights, castles, and dragons. Readers are introduced to a family of dragons and learn dragon lore. Godden provides realistic details about everyday life in medieval Scotland as well as fanciful tales, such as an explanation of how toothbrushes were invented.

The story's characters and the conflicts between them are universal. The kindhearted dragon is misunderstood and lonely because he is different.

Angus Og, the Lord of Tundergarth, is ambitious, domineering, and stubborn.

The often humorous confrontations between them and the manner in which Angus's wife, Matilda, helps resolve them show the need for tolerance in a peaceful community.

About the Author

Margaret Rumer Godden, one of four daughters of Arthur Leigh and Katherine Godden, was born December 10, 1907, in Sussex, England. When she was nine months old, the family moved to Bengal, India, where her father was employed as the local agent for a steamship line. Godden remembers her childhood as a happy one. She and her sisters were cared for by Indian servants, played with their numerous pets (including a mongoose and a talking mynah bird), lived an active life and wrote stories. *Two Under the Indian Sun* (1966), a novel by Godden and her sister Jon, is based on their teenage years in India. Godden returned to England and attended school in London and at Moira House Eastbourne. She was unhappy in England and felt like an outsider.

After finishing school, Godden moved between England and India, pursuing her interests in writing and dance. She had studied dance privately, and during the 1930s founded a children's dance school in Calcutta, India. In 1934 she married Laurence S. Foster, with whom she had two daughters. In 1949 she married James Haynes Dixon, who died in 1973.

Godden began to publish novels for adults in 1936. Since then she has written a score of adult novels, as many young adult novels, a two-volume autobiography, and numerous short stories, essays and poems.

She lives in Dumfriesshire, Scotland, and continues to write. *A Time to Dance, No Time to Weep: A Memoir*, the first volume of her autobiography was published in 1987; *A House With Four Rooms*, the second volume, was published in 1989.

Setting

The story "happened long ago in the lowlands of Scotland." The location is real; in fact, the book is dedicated to "Anthony, who now owns the Dragon's Pool." Life in the Tundergarth castle is more earthy than is usual in a medieval romance.

The wooden castle is smoky and dirty.

During winter and when there is a war, farm animals are kept inside and there is a layer of manure on the floor. The dishes are washed only occasionally and the dogs sit by the table waiting for someone to throw them food. The children are unwashed and underfed, but the more well-to-do are not much better off. In spite of these conditions, the overall picture is not dismal, nor does the reader get a sense of suffering; instead, the setting shows an often humorous way of life which contrasts with the modern world.



Social Sensitivity

The most admirable person in the book is a woman—Matilda. She is smarter and more knowledgeable than either Angus or Donald, and she is responsible for improving the castle. She is also wiser, guiding Angus to a more peaceful way of life. One puzzling aspect of Matilda's character is her reaction to Angus's plan to kill the dragon. She is more upset by his failure to pay the dragonslayer than for ordering the deed itself.

No one in the story expresses much concern for the poor children who are always hungry and cold. Even when the dragon is being fed to keep him from eating any bullocks, the children go hungry. Matilda does help some, but, like everyone else in the story, she seems resigned to the fact that poverty will be their lot in life—probably a realistic attitude for that historical time.

The Dragon of Og is a mild fairy tale, and the violence which occurs is not frightening. When the knight slays the dragon, he does it as quickly and painlessly as possible, and the dragon hardly knows what has happened. Although the dragon dines on live bullocks, they do not suffer. Very young readers or listeners might be dismayed by the descriptions of the mating practices of dragons: the males fight to the death for the privilege of mating with a female and then often kill the female in the process of mating. However this bit of dragon lore is told in terms that are neither graphic nor scary.

Literary Qualities

Godden tells her story from multiple perspectives. The reader sees the thoughts and actions of all the characters. Readers can sympathize with Angus at the loss of his livestock, with Donald at the demands made of him by his employer, and even with the bullocks who would rather be snatched by the dragon (it was "rather like going to heaven") than butchered and eaten by Angus Og and his men. Godden makes good use of specific details to create the setting. For example, when Matilda insists on getting rid of the dungheap in the castle, Godden explains that livestock were kept inside during times of danger and that their manure mixed with the straw on the floor was left to help warm the building. The use of Scottish words and phrases also helps create a sense of place. Donald, the steward, uses some particularly colorful phrases; at one point he loses his temper and calls Angus a "perfidious slidderie feartie."



Themes and Characters

The interaction of the characters (including the dragon) forms the basis for the conflict in *The Dragon of Og*. It is not a struggle between good and evil; problems arise when one individual insists on selfishly pursuing his own interests without regard for the effect on others.

The dragon in the story bears little resemblance to the traditional fierce, ugly, and evil dragons of most myth and literature. He is a beautiful creature, far more appealing than the rough and crude people, and he is generally not aggressive. When still a young dragon, he follows his mother's advice not to offend people. But when he is almost grown, his uncle advises him to eat only young girls, as dragons have always done. The naive dragon then asks his mother if it would offend the villagers if he ate just one, now and then. She tells him that it would and so he satisfies his appetite by rising from the pool every two or three weeks and pouncing on a bullock. He never feeds more often because "he was not a greedy dragon."

The people of Tundergarth, relieved that he never eats people or destroys anything else, are willing to let the dragon have his periodic bullock. In fact, they become quite attached to "their" dragon: "He keeps our enemies away. He makes our crops grow. He is our luck."

Problems arise when Angus Og becomes Lord of Tundergarth. Angus is a big man with red hair and beard and a fierce temper. In many ways, he has more dragon-like characteristics than the dragon: he is belligerent and greedy.

Accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed, the only one to have any influence on him is his wife, Matilda.

Angus gives in to her on matters in the castle—he learns to eat with a knife and fork, wears slippers rather than boots, and stops feeding his dogs at the table.

Angus pays no attention to stories about the dragon until he realizes it is affecting his property. Then he gets upset: "I'll keep what is mine. . . . That's how to build a realm. I shall be a greater noble than King David." His steward, Donald, tells him he cannot become a great noble by being parsimonious, but stubbornness and greed are his worst vices.

Matilda has loyalties to both her husband and the dragon. She discovers the dragon before Angus does, and they have much in common. Both are beautiful and lonely. Matilda can talk to the dragon in dragon language and she becomes his first and only friend. However she clearly loves Angus also, despite his rough ways; she looks out for his comfort and muses about her future children. Matilda objects to Angus's plans to kill the dragon, but seems to feel that it is inevitable. Although she protests, she offers Angus advice on who should kill the dragon and the quickest way to do it. She finally



rejects Angus because he has failed to pay Robert le Douce, the Norman knight who has done the job.

Interestingly, she seems to value honor more than the life of her friend.

But the dragon does not stay dead.

When his severed head rejoins his body the dragon regains life and Matilda takes a stronger position. She tells Angus, "Any more killing and I'm going back to my mother." But the conflict between Angus and the dragon continues.

Though Angus abandons his plan to slay the dragon, he stubbornly refuses to let it eat any of his bullocks. Unfortunately, the dragon proceeds to eat just about everything else stored in the castle, much to the dismay of Donald and the people of Tundergarth. Finally, when Donald and the rest threaten to leave, Angus relents and makes peace with the dragon. The conflict is resolved by pragmatic concerns rather than an appeal to some higher moral standard.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why do the villagers, including Donald, the steward, come to regard the dragon as "our dragon" and say that he is their luck?
2. The dragon realizes that Angus and Donald were trying to harm him with the sticky cake, and refers to them as "traitors." What sense of loyalty does the dragon have toward people that would make him think of them as traitors?
3. Why wasn't Matilda afraid of the dragon, when even Angus was disconcerted when he saw it eat the bullock?
4. Did Matilda cause the dragon's problems by having it become less shy?
5. Why does Angus persist in having the dragon killed even though he yields to Matilda on other matters?
6. Why does Matilda offer advice on how to kill the dragon?
7. Why is Matilda more upset with Angus for not paying Robert le Douce than she is for his having the dragon killed?
8. Why does Matilda ask Angus if he is going to fire Donald?
9. Was Robert le Douce justified in killing the dragon for hire? Was he justified in putting the head back near the body so that it could join up and the dragon would live again?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The dragon's mother tries to find a safe place for him to live, a place where the people won't harry him. "It's all those stories and legends," she says. Investigate some of the dragon stories and legends in European literature. Compare these with some from Oriental literature.

2. Analyze Matilda's moral code. On what does she place the most value?

What does she consider to be wrong?

How does this compare with other characters in the book?

3. The author describes Angus Og as "a big man—though perhaps not quite as big as he believed." What is Angus' concept of a "big man"? How well did he live up to that idea?

For Further Reference

Godden, Rumer. "Autobiographical Sketch of Rumer Godden." In *More Junior Authors*, edited by Muriel Fuller. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1963.

Godden describes her early life and interests in this brief article.

A Time to Dance, No Time to Weep: A Memoir and A House With Four Rooms. New York: Morrow, 1987, 1989. Godden's two-volume autobiography.

"Rumer Godden." In *Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series, vol. 4.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1981. This brief sketch includes basic biographical and bibliographical information about the author.

Perry, Eleanor. "Growing Up Was All the Raj." *Life* August 5, 1966. This review of *Two Under the Indian Sun*, an autobiographical novel in which Godden collaborated with her sister, Jon, includes a great deal of biographical material.

Related Titles

In 1947 Godden published her first children's book, *The Doll's House*. The protagonists of that book are dolls who converse with each other, worry about their circumstances, and, most of all, wish for a child to do something for them. The children who care for the dolls become better people for having done so.

Later books like *The Kitchen Madonna* (1967), *Mr. McFadden's Hallow'en* (1975), and *The Diddakoi* (1972) focus on the theme of the acceptance of an outsider, which is the principle theme in *The Dragon of Og*.

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