

Freckles Short Guide

Freckles by Gene Stratton Porter

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Characters

Freckles essentially conforms to the JT pattern of protagonists in romantic novels. He demonstrates innate gentility that wins the respect of common people like the Duncans, gentlemen like McLean and the Man of Affairs, and even villains like Black Jack. His courage and sense of honor win McLean's affection, and his aesthetic sense wins him the admiration of the Swamp Angel and the Bird Woman.

While Porter always insisted that her primary role was that of wife and mother, her life as a naturalist, photographer, and writer was considered unconventional in turn-of-the-century Indiana. The Swamp Angel reflects her creator's multifaceted personality.

Initially she appears to conform to the Victorian conventions of ladylike fragility, and her function seems to be to provide an apparently unattainable object for Freckles' adoration. She quickly demonstrates, however, that she is no swooning maiden. When the Bird Woman discovers Black Jack and his henchmen in the woods, the Swamp Angel is too courageous to remain hidden, and she enjoys demonstrating her expert marksmanship. To save Freckles' life, she again defies convention, declaring her love for him, traveling alone through Chicago streets for proof of his mother's love for him, and forcing her way into Lord O'More's hotel suite to establish Freckles' true identity. Once his survival is assured, however, the Swamp Angel reverts to the Victorian pattern, declaring herself disgraced by her brazenness in speaking first of love.

Even more unconventional is the Bird Woman, a character obviously intended to represent the author. Her life in town resembles Porter's; she wears elegant clothes and lives in one of the best houses, but she is not bound by the code of the Victorian lady. She wanders freely in the Limberlost Swamp, she is known to carry a pistol, and even timber thieves dare not harm her. Mud, heat, thorns, and insects cannot prevent her from photographing unusual birds or moths. Above all, she is ". . . dead down on anybody that shoots a bird or tears up a nest. Why she's half killing herself in all kinds of places and weather to teach people to love and protect the birds."

Most of the minor characters are essentially stock characters. McLean, the Boss, is the typical paternalistic employer, demanding but fair. The Duncans are uneducated people, goodhearted, honest, and loyal; they treat Freckles like a member of their family, but recognize his superior refinement.

Wessner is the typical villain, cowardly, cruel, and vengeful; of the timber thieves, he alone is willing to harm the Swamp Angel. Only Black Jack shows any complexity of character; perhaps because he was a woodsman before he became a timber thief, he is susceptible to the positive influences of Freckles and the Swamp Angel, and he regrets that he did not meet the Swamp Angel before he became evil beyond redemption.



Social Concerns

Porter's primary goals were reinforcing the era's moral code and developing her readers' appreciation of nature.

The protagonist of *Freckles*, which she dedicated to her husband, Charles Dorwin Porter, is clearly intended to be her masculine ideal.

The daughter of a minister, Porter believed strongly in traditional values — purity, honor, courage, truth, perseverance, duty, courtesy, and aesthetic sensibility. Because *Freckles* epitomizes these virtues, he wins the respect of McLean, the Bird Woman, the Swamp Angel, her father, and even the villainous Black Jack.

Love of nature helps the characters develop moral rectitude. Despite his initial fear of the Limberlost Swamp, the city-bred *Freckles* quickly appreciates its diverse life forms, and his experiences in the swamp refine his sensibilities. His curiosity about the swamp creatures causes him to study them, and his aesthetic sense leads to the creation of a beautiful natural room of wild plants. Nevertheless, although *Freckles* opposes wanton destruction, he considers losses part of the process of natural selection, and he is willing to harvest the best trees for furniture, collect specimens for the Bird Woman's books, and kill an otter to make a muff for the Swamp Angel.

Like many popular writers of the Genteel Era, Porter espoused democratic principles but demonstrated a strong sense of class distinctions. Despite his innate nobility, *Freckles* must be given an aristocratic background to make him a suitable husband for the Swamp Angel.

A lesser concern is the humane treatment of children, especially orphans.

Porter suggests that children should be praised, given overt affection, and exposed to the beneficent influences of nature. One of her chief criticisms of orphanages is that a child's personality is likely to be warped by neglect or constant criticism.

Techniques

Porter's greatest strength is her detailed and accurate description of nature. When her publishers wanted to eliminate much of the nature lore, she refused. Her audience was accustomed to the local colorists' precise delineations of unusual regional characteristics; Porter focused the same careful scrutiny upon the birds, plants, and insects of an Indiana swamp.

Because the swamp creatures function much like human characters, Porter's anthropomorphism is not surprising, although it is less pronounced than in *The Song of the Cardinal*, where the birds' story is as important as that of Abram and his wife. Nevertheless, in *Freckles* the swamp creatures are given human feelings, and the frogs speak at strategic times, providing sound advice for Freckles.

An obvious danger in anthropomorphism is sentimentality, but Porter's sentimentality arises also from her didactic purpose and her use of the standard techniques of stage melodrama. Most of her characters are stereotyped, and their function is to express the author's conventional moral themes. The sympathetic characters are so virtuous and the antagonists so evil that both tend to lack credibility for the sophisticated reader. Likewise the excessive use of coincidence to work out the exigencies of plot may be unacceptable to many modern readers.

Among Porter's strengths is the narrative flow of her novels. Although the didacticism is sometimes intrusive, her plots are complex and interesting.

For that reason the novels remain satisfactory as light, romantic reading.

Themes

Porter's love of nature is evident; contact with nature brings out the best in her characters. McLean has recognized the swamp's superiority to the city and renounced his family's mercantile business to become a lumberman. Their studies in the swamp make the Bird Woman and the Swamp Angel compassionate and relatively uninhibited by artificial social conventions. For Freckles, the Limberlost provides both an education and a test of character.

Even Black Jack is more courageous and less evil than his fellow outlaws as a result of his lifetime in the swamp.

Because of its positive influence, Porter suggests that the Limberlost should be cherished and preserved.

Freckles is a novel in the Horatio Alger tradition. A boy of unknown parentage demonstrates superlative virtue, winning influential friends through whose concern his family background is investigated and he is identified as the long-lost nephew of an Irish nobleman. Thus Freckles combines the Alger themes of advancement through individual merit and the innate nobility which frequently results from aristocratic lineage. In fact, while the swamp environment refines Freckles' character, his virtues are largely attributable to heredity.

Not surprisingly, this conventional Genteel Era novel emphasizes the code of noblesse oblige. Because Freckles is by nature a gentleman, he recognizes the goodness in humble people like the Duncans, treating Mrs. Duncan with as much courtesy as the Bird Woman.

Likewise, the Swamp Angel's lack of condescension toward the lumber crew wins their friendship, and her influence improves their manners. In fact, Porter never neglects an opportunity to remind her readers of a good woman's positive effect upon others, especially men.

Literary Precedents

Freckles is indebted to the Horatio Alger novels. In characters and techniques, it is also akin to popular stage melodramas of the day; and the themes of parental responsibility and proper education of children occur in contemporary domestic dramas and problem plays. Another influence were the local colorists, who directed the attention of writers and readers toward distinctive local settings and characters. Among their successors, James Whitcomb Riley made rural Indiana life a popular subject, and Booth Tarkington added the narrative of childhood experiences.



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