From Here to Eternity Short Guide

From Here to Eternity by James Jones

BOOKRAGS

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Characters

The chief sufferer — the term "hero" does not suit any of Jones's protagonists — of From Here to Eternity is Robert E. Lee Prewitt, as good at boxing as he is at bugling, and he has to renounce both the civilized, beautiful thing he loves and the primitive destructive urge he comes to hate.

Prewitt also loves the Army, and his love kills him because he cannot reconcile his own integrity with the authority that insists he give it up.

Throughout From Here to Eternity Prewitt must make sacrifice after sacrifice to his principles. He transfers out of the Bugle Corps because the Chief Bugler passes him over; he goes to the stockade for refusing to box after blinding a friend; he goes AWOL and dies realizing the agonizing truth: "All things killed the men who loved them.

Which, after all, was as it should be."

In Prewitt and his later incarnations in The Thin Red Line (1962) and Whistle (1978), Jones stubbornly insists on a man's right to choose his fate, regardless of consequences.

Preem, the inept mess sergeant, sums up the bitter attitude of the company of life's losers at Schofield Barracks who have to give Prewitt "the business" after he refuses to box. "If you love the kitchen like I loved the kitchen, then you ought to get out of it, and do straight duty . . . That way you're safe . . . because you won't have no weak spot where they can hurt you." Jones later said he made these men "more intelligent and more sensitive" than they were in real life. Maggio, the Italian boy from Gimbel's, knows, "If you're smart you'll learn to jockstrap ... if you want to be a successful sojer," but he cannot follow his own advice and perishes. Sergeant Warden, with the unappealing job of welding his corrupt company into a semblance of military effectiveness, stands uncomfortably between the two classes of Jones's restricted world: the ones "who could not talk, they build the world out of their very tonguelessness," and "the clerks, the kings, the thinkers" whose "talking ran the world." For them Jones has nothing but censure.

The women of From Here to Eternity generally appear as one-sided as Vargas pinups; Pearl Bell describes them as "either neurotic wives who don't know what they are missing or jolly hookers who love their line of work so much, they will even do it for nothing." Jones does use some of his bordello scenes to satirize supposedly respectable American hostesses in madam Kipfer and American production-line efficiency in the payday rush, but basically Karen Holmes, Warden's lover and the wife of his captain and and Alma, Prewitt's prostitute-withheart-of-gold-plate, function primarily as receptacles of the male necessity to dominate, which Jones feels is integral to his soldiers' lives.

Social Concerns

According to Wilfrid Sheed, Jones wrote "a first-rate book about World War II which was not even about World War II." From Here to Eternity treats the peacetime "pineapple army" based at Hawaii's Schofield Barracks on the brink of the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, and Sheed claims it says "more about the war than all the painstaking combat novels put together." For Jones, war is the ultimate social and ideological conflict which must be reduced to personal relevance. His overwhelming issue is American masculinity seen in the context of war, and he focuses best on the doomed Depression-era Army whose ranks absorbed drifters and misfits led by officers willing to purchase promotion at any moral cost. In this harsh crucible long before the democratization of the U.S. Army, Jones tests the qualities for which a U.S. soldier was asked to live and die.

Each of Jones's lonely enlisted men had to find a way to answer his nation's demands, finding individual isolation — for good or ill — in his allegiance to his company. The pressures of barracks life forged a few meaningful bonds between men and burnt a multitude of bridges for Jones's lonesome soldiers.

Techniques

Thomas Edwards feels that Jones "may have been the last prominent American novelist to suppose that fiction should be a virtually unmediated presentation of life." Jones tended to rely on explanatory narrative which conveys trains of thought without attempting to reproduce them exactly.

Often, both Jones and his characters seem to share a difficulty in expressing themselves, and the narrative becomes muddled in syntactic horrors and illogical confusion. Jones's strength in From Here to Eternity, his sharply-noted dialogue, liberated the American novel from the disruptive asterisk and recorded an idiom that, whatever its inelegance, is incontrovertibly honest.

Jones thought it "perfectly legitimate" to use four-letter words to describe people "who did, or would, use fourletter words," because he considered it "a process of educating us to what we really are rather than what we would like to say we are." In practice, his artistic integrity in reproducing military vocabulary often yields an effect so repetitive that it loses its original impact.

Themes

Jones built one characteristically pungent theme into all of his writing: "Even the worst SOB in the world has suffered." Jones dedicated From Here to Eternity to the United States Army, and by that he meant the enlisted men of his time, caught up in the difficult transition from the professional Regular Army of thirty-year-men to the permanent civilian army of a major world power. Most of the pain Jones chronicles so remorselessly arises from the strictures the Army subculture imposes on the people trapped within it, usually by their own desire, demanding either their surrender or their death in resistance. The most poignant of Jones's "suffering SOB's" are those who love what kills them, a paradox that has laid Jones open to charges like Edmund Fuller's of sentimentality toward antisocial and criminal types and vindictiveness toward the socially adjusted or constructive. The often noted violence of Jones's brutal male world tends to restrict his theme to men and the nature of virility, although Jones maintained that he tended to have mixed feelings and even a touch of contempt for the man who is merely brave.

Adaptations

From Here to Eternity was dramatized by Mark J. Appleman in 1952 as Stockade, a play of limited exposure and appeal. The novel was first filmed in 1953 (produced by Buddy Adler, directed by Fred Zinnemann, released by Columbia in 1953). It received six Academy Awards for production, direction, cinematography, editing, sound, and its screenplay by Daniel Taradash, as well as Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actor and Actress, Frank Sinatra (Maggio) and Donna Reed (Alma/Lorene).

Although the screenplay had to be toned down from Jones's earthy original, and the figure of Prewitt, played by Montgomery Clift, was stressed, the film is considered a landmark in screen performance, which Zinnemann called "behaving rather than acting." The motion picture won an Academy Award for Best Picture; The New York Film Critics gave it awards for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor (Burt Lancaster as Sgt. Warden); and Montgomery Clift was nominated for the Best Actor Academy Award for his sensitive and ardent portrayal of Robert E. Lee Prewitt. In 1979 a remake of the original movie From Here to Eternity was broadcast on national television.

The Thin Red Line was produced in 1964 by Allied Artists with a screenplay by Bernard Gordon. It starred Jack Warden and Keir Dullea, but like the film version of Some Came Running, produced by MGM in 1958, with screenplay by John Patrick and Arthur Sheekman, the film version of The Thin Red Line was generally dismissed as tedious and anachronistic.

Literary Precedents

When From Here to Eternity appeared in 1951, observers immediately placed Jones among what Philip Rahv called the "redskins" of American literature, like Twain, Dreiser, Hemingway, and Steinbeck, self-made writers who "draw their metaphors from biology rather than literature." Working in the grim naturalistic tradition that grew out of American realism, the "redskins" saw man as a victim trodden down by inexorable natural and social forces, which for Jones seemed limited to the context of the Army. Like Dreiser, Jones tended to pile detail upon sordid detail, limited to some extent in From Here to Eternity by the standards of the 1950s. Like Dreiser, too, Jones seemed unable to focus his scenes tightly or to penetrate beyond surface realities. Like Crane and Hemingway, two other American authors of the battlefield, Jones set his fictional existences into a code formed of traditionally male values, the endurance of pain and the nature of courage. Even Prewitt's single heart-stopping performance of "Taps" is an intimation of that fleeting excellence in the face of mortal danger that Hemingway celebrated as duende in his bullfighting book Death in the Afternoon (1932). An even older tradition in American fiction also appears in From Here to Eternity, the affinity of Jones's Prewitt with the "doomed natural aristocrat," a master of his original environment like Cooper's Natty Bumppo, who is fated to fall beneath the juggernaut of American know-how and supposed social progress.

Related Titles

After considerable critical denigration of Some Came Running (1957), which he had inadvisedly announced as "the greatest novel we've had in America," Jones wrote the second novel in his World War II trilogy, The Thin Red Line, the story of the Battle of Guadalcanal from the collective point of view of C-for-Charlie Company, formerly of Schofield Barracks in Hawaii. Jones claims that he "tried to write the same people more like they really were in life than they were in literature, in Eternity" when he created The Thin Red Line. In this de-romanticizing process, his collective protagonist is C-for-Charlie itself, "louts," he said, "concerned with their own dignity." He was attempting to explore what he called "the fact that a man, in order to preserve his dignity, is willing to take away almost anybody else's."

By sketching nearly every possible reaction to some of the most horrifying combat American soldiers have ever faced, Jones both explicitly and implicitly holds as positive values such oldfashioned virtues as bravery under fire and the warm bonds that tie a soldier to his comrades; ideals which in the 1960s were already meeting an active hostility engendered at least in part by such novels as Joseph Heller's Catch-22 (1961). In comparing The Thin Red Line with Crane's Red Badge of Courage (1895), Norman Mailer finds Jones's knowledge of life superior to Crane's, yet perhaps because of Jones's insistence on technical accuracy which dominates The Thin Red Line, Mailer says: "One doesn't remember The Thin Red Line with . . . that same sense of a fire on the horizon which comes back always from The Red Badge of Courage."

At his death in 1977 from congestive heart failure, Jones left Whistle, the last novel of the trilogy, incomplete. His friend and literary executor Willie Morris gave it "a bathetic ending," noted Thomas Edwards, too often inviting readers "to feel more for these [wounded] soldiers than they would want to feel for themselves." Jones dedicated Whistle "to every man who served in the US Armed Forces in World War II" — his omission of women in uniform is significant — and he again used a collective protagonist, men from various backgrounds with various talents fused together in a kind of group insanity, striving to "stay in" rather than return to a world which does not need them any longer. The values Jones presents in Whistle are only significant because they do not matter to anyone in the end, the inevitable result, perhaps, of the destruction of the individual soldier begun in From Here to Eternity and continued in The Thin Red Line. Despite Jones's "obsession with fornication" in Whistle, Pearl Bell notes that Jones treated "the atavistic force of male bonding" in Whistle, an achievement virtually unique in American fiction. "What he had learned from experience," Bell says, "was the only truth he knew."

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