

# God's Little Acre Short Guide

## God's Little Acre by Erskine Caldwell

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# Characters

God's Little Acre contains some of the best-known and most misunderstood characters in American literature. Ty Ty Walden is often represented as the embodiment of shiftless poor white trash (a characterization that better applies to Jeeter Lester in *Tobacco Road*, although even there it would be a simplification). Ty Ty is, however, a landowner and, in his own way, a respectable, God-loving (as opposed to God-fearing) man. He loves his family and attempts to keep harmony among its members. He is, of course, also a comic figure. He claims to be "scientific" in his quest for the gold, but he is quick to use an albino to find it when Pluto Swint, a local candidate for sheriff and Darling Jill's suitor, tells him that albinos have a magical ability to discover such treasures. Ty Ty's error, one which Caldwell deplores, is his failure of responsibility toward the land. Ty Ty is punished for his failure, his lack of proper stewardship, by the end of the book when his son Buck (Griselda's husband) kills another of his sons, Jim Leslie, and then commits suicide. Blood has been shed on the land; the family has been torn apart. When Ty Ty returns to his digging after these events, his delusion has become pathetic rather than comic, a kind of madness to shield him from the waste of his life.

Will Thompson is also a more heroic figure than is generally recognized.

When the reader first meets him, he is, to be sure, a drunken, unfaithful husband to Rosamond, and the fact that he quickly beds down her sister Darling Jill does little to raise him in the reader's esteem. When Rosamond catches them together in bed, beats them with a hairbrush, and then sends Will flying naked out the window and down the street, he becomes a truly ridiculous character. Will, however, grows in the course of the book. His actions are the result of his despair over the closing of the mill. His natural vitality and strength are misdirected in a purposeful self-abasement: he desires his own humiliation. It is only when he takes action and leads his followers to the mill, when he is willing to sacrifice himself in order to turn on the power, that he takes on God-like qualities. His death, although meaningless in the short run (the mill is not reopened), makes him a martyr in the minds of the other mill workers, a leader in death as well as life.

Of the women in the novel, Darling Jill comes the closest to the caricature of the promiscuous, alluring, teasing country girl. But Darling Jill is self-assured in her actions, and, like her father, she celebrates her physical nature.

Rosamond and Griselda come less close to stereotype. Both are given a strength and dignity which make them admirable figures. They are, to be sure, ultimately submissive to the masculine forces in the novel, but Caldwell suggests that they have a wisdom absent in the men.

Other characters in the novel are basically comic or one-dimensional, among them Pluto Swint, Ty Ty's sons, the albino, and the black workers on the Walden farm. But there is a complexity, a mixture of the comic and tragic, in Caldwell's people that is much too often ignored.

## Social Concerns

God's Little Acre and Tobacco Road (1932) are the works for which Caldwell is most often remembered. Both books deal with man's struggle with nature and the difficulty of maintaining even the semblance of humanity in the grip of unrelieved poverty, but of the two novels, God's Little Acre is probably the more successful overall.

During his childhood in Wrens, Georgia, Caldwell had observed the wretched state of the sharecroppers and small farmers in the region. Often terribly undernourished, unlearned, and diseased, they fought for their continued existence. In 1931, during a return trip to the region, he was again reminded of these conditions, which had grown, if possible, even worse during his absence. Thus, both Tobacco Road and God's Little Acre were written in direct response to his feelings of outrage and his desire to call these circumstances to the attention of the general public. At the heart of these novels was a call for reform. Caldwell intended to shock and infuriate in the hope that action would be taken. "These were the pathetic people," Caldwell later remembered, "who existed in timeless agony without hope on earth . . . Their tragic lot was to have come into the world before the conscience of their fellow men rose to provide assistance and welfare for the unfortunate."

Caldwell, however, had no intention of romanticizing the plight of these people. He had seen too much truth in his travels to pretend that poverty could in any way be an ennobling experience, and he was committed to "put down on paper a satisfactory realistic image and interpretation of degradation as I had observed it." He had genuine compassion for the poor, but he refused to misrepresent in order to gain false sympathy for their plight.

He would, in fact, risk alienating his audience through his insistence on the dehumanization possible in the worst of circumstances. This approach sometimes resulted in his characters seeming freakish or even comical in a horrible way, but, for Caldwell, that in no manner made them less worthy of his readers' concern.

# Techniques

Caldwell was never particularly interested in the carefully plotted, highly structured tale, and his novels especially are often rambling, repetitive, and even open-ended. He is much more interested in the anecdote and the revealing moment than in the orderly development of the narrative. *God's Little Acre* is somewhat unusual in that it does contain the parallel, thematically-related stories of Ty Ty and Will, which are integrated in an admirably sophisticated manner. Nevertheless, Caldwell does tend to present the story in an episodic fashion, moving at times awkwardly to its conclusion.

Caldwell's strength is found in his dialogue. His practice is to give his major characters a "tag" line, an oath or expression which identifies them throughout the book. Ty Ty regularly swears to "pluperfect hell"; Pluto Swint insists, "And that's the truth"; Will Thompson is determined to "turn on the power." Caldwell recognizes that repetition can have a cumulative effect, can create a reality of its own.

Moreover, Caldwell has an acute ear for dialect in his best works which enriches the telling.

Perhaps most notable of his narrative techniques, however, is Caldwell's use of the objective point of view. Influenced, no doubt, by his early training in reporting, Caldwell rarely intrudes into the story he tells. Neither does he attempt to direct overtly the reader's emotions. He prefers to relate the incidents dispassionately and allow the reader to draw his own conclusions.

This is a risky approach, and it has led critics to charge Caldwell with lack of sympathy for his characters or understanding for their situation. Such charges are unfair, however, as Caldwell has amply demonstrated in interviews, his nonfiction, and (if one reads carefully) in the stories themselves. To assume that Caldwell approves of his characters' actions or finds them merely figures of fun or horror is to mistake the ultimate purpose of his writing.

# Themes

There are two major story lines in *God's Little Acre*. One is focused on Ty Ty Walden's search for gold buried, he thinks, somewhere on his land. The other concerns his son-in-law Will Thompson's efforts to reopen the cotton mill, which has been shut down by the owners due to a workers' strike.

Both men are obsessed by their goals and are willing to risk all, their families and even their lives, to achieve these ends. Ty Ty's efforts seem the most foolish. He is not a wealthy man, but he does own his own land, land which could be used for planting and growing. Instead, he has let his acreage lie untended while he and two of his sons waste their time digging huge holes in the fields, turning his farm into a place of devastation. Ty Ty represents, in exaggerated form, the Southern farmer who has failed to use his land wisely and who has, through delusion and pride, allowed himself to lose what little fortune he has had in life. Will Thompson is, on this score, a more heroic figure. A leader of the strike that has closed down the mills in nearby Scottsville, Will acts out of more than selfish pride. He feels a responsibility to his fellow workers, who wait for him to respond to the brutal and high-handed actions of the powerful mill owners. In Will's story, Caldwell extends his theme of social consciousness from the countryside to the town, from farmer to worker.

There is also a strong sexual theme running throughout the book. Both Ty Ty and Will are controlled by their physical desires. Ty Ty is philosophical concerning his sexual appetite and, in his maturity, takes genuine pleasure in simply looking at women, especially his daughter-in-law Griselda. He feels that God has played a "mean trick" by giving man a sense of right and wrong along with strong animal needs. "A man can't live, feeling himself from the inside, and listening to what the preachers say . . . He can live like we are made to live, and feel himself on the inside, or he can live like the preachers say, and be dead on the inside," Ty Ty says. The "natural" way to live is to acknowledge and celebrate the sexual part of nature, he feels, and so, when he discovers that his daughter Darling Jill is sexually active, he rejoices in her growing up. Will Thompson is almost messianic in his sexuality. Indeed, on the night before he leads the strikers to the mill to "turn the power on," an action that will result in his death, Will is ministered to by three women: his wife Rosamond, her sister Darling Jill, and their sister-in-law Griselda. Because Griselda is the most physically and sexually powerful of the three women, it is accepted that she and Will will make love on the eve of his coming death. The action is passionate, even Dionysian, but there is also a sense of ritual about it which Caldwell brilliantly renders. For Caldwell, as for the characters in his book, the act of sex is a confirmation of life.

It can be misused, but it also brings man close to his inherent godliness: the god of creation and vitality.

# Adaptations

The most significant adaptation of a Caldwell work is Jack Kirkland's dramatization of *Tobacco Road* in 1933.

Although more comic than Caldwell liked, the play has become one of the best known in modern theater and is still performed. The dramatic adaptations of *Journeyman* in 1938 and *Georgia Boy* in 1945 were both failures. Several of Caldwell's novels have been made into films. In 1941, *Tobacco Road*, based more on the play than the novel, was directed by John Ford. Caldwell did not approve of the many changes in plot and tone, and most viewers were disappointed by the film. More successful was Anthony Mann's version of *God's Little Acre* in 1958. This time Caldwell was a partner in the venture (although the screenplay was written by Phillip Yordan) and was pleased with the film, which was listed as one of year's ten best by *Time* magazine.

*Claudelle* English appeared as a modestly successful film in 1961.

## Literary Precedents

Caldwell claims to have studiously avoided modeling himself on any other writer. In his autobiography *With All My Might*, he explained that for this reason he deliberately limited himself in his reading. "Since I had so much writing of my own to try to accomplish, I could not bring myself to devote valuable time to reading the heralded masters of the past. Instead, I decided to select one book by a contemporary author as being representative of his work." Thus Caldwell denies having read such probable influences as Mark Twain or Jack London.

He did, however, acknowledge in interviews his early indebtedness to Sherwood Anderson, with whom he shares numerous similarities. He also expressed his admiration for Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1925), and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), all of which he read near the beginning of his own career. And if he did not actually read Mark Twain, he nonetheless came out of the same Southern and Southwestern humor tradition which gave birth to that writer.

Certainly it is difficult to place Caldwell in one specific literary tradition.

He shares characteristics with Southern humorists, naturalists, and writers of social concern. His books contain strong sexual material but are rarely erotic. His stories can be extremely violent and grotesque, but the nightmares he creates come more often from the modern world of the absurd rather than from Gothic horror. For all of the Southern trappings of most of his work, his protagonists are finally extreme representations of all men — lonely, isolated, bewildered, yet also strangely courageous and durable. It is probably best to regard Caldwell as an original, just as he had hoped to be.





## Related Titles

In addition to *God's Little Acre*, the book for which Caldwell is best known is *Tobacco Road* (1932). A cruder, more brutal novel, *Tobacco Road* is nevertheless a highly effective portrayal of the degradation caused by poverty. The Jeeter Lesters have been reduced to animal behavior by their surroundings and circumstances. Foremost in their minds is their constant hunger, which rules their daily existence. Caldwell shows that the Lesters are also emotionally starved: When Jeeter's disfigured daughter Ellie May tries to entice her brother-in-law Lov Bensey, her seductive attempts are pathetic because they illustrate her deep need for affection, a need shared by all of these alienated characters. The book attacks the society that allows these conditions to exist with a combination of comedy and horror.

Less well known is Caldwell's fifth novel, *Journeyman* (1935). Set in the wasteland of Rocky Comfort, Georgia, this book satirizes the fraudulent nature of some fundamentalist religions.

Accompanying his preacher-father as a boy, Caldwell had been exposed to many of these sects, most of which his father disapproved. In this novel, a traveling evangelist named Semon Dye arrives portentously in a cloud of black, stinking smoke and proceeds to defraud, seduce, and confound the inhabitants of this hamlet. The final section of the book brilliantly describes a bizarre revival meeting at which spiritual conversion and sexual ecstasy are thoroughly intermixed. Semon Dye, as his name implies, is demonic, a modern rendition of the satanic con man posing as preacher, and *Journeyman* remains one of Caldwell's very best works.

Another underrated novel is *Trouble in July* (1940), a searing indictment of racism in the South. Beginning as comedy, the book ends in a brutal lynching made all the more horrifying because the victim, conditioned by society, cooperates in his own execution. Also worth noting from this period of Caldwell's career are the warm and funny stories in *Georgia Boy* (1943) and Caldwell's caustic view of postwar America in *Tragic Ground* (1944).

Many critics dismiss Caldwell's novels written after World War II, and some of them are rather uninspired.

However, Caldwell has ranked a few of them among his best, and, taken on their own terms, they make up a remarkable study of alienation and loneliness in the modern world. Works such as *The Sure Hand of God* (1947), *Love and Money* (1954), *Gretta* (1955), and *The Last Night of Summer* (1963) deserve re-evaluation.

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