Harvest Home Short Guide

Harvest Home by Thomas Tryon

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Characters

Mr. Constantine, would-be artist turned advertising executive, his nervous, rundown wife, Beth, and their chronically-ill daughter, Kate, exemplify those whom Thoreau described as living lives of quiet desperation. Their flight from New York City to Cornwall Combe partakes of the romantic backto-the-land movement — conveniently hastened by Ned's losing his job and the pair of them falling in love with an eighteenth-century house that needs renovating.

They meet a great many local people who receive somewhat sketchy, but distinctive characterization: a kind neighbor, Maggie Dodd, and her blind husband, George, who is always listening to recordings of classic books; a traveling peddler who sees too much, talks too much, and suffers a grisly fate; a stalwart, handsome, blond farmer (almost a caricature of the Jolly Green Giant) who is the Harvest Lord, a title held for seven years; a local sexpot named Tamar and her feebleminded girl-child, a village seeress; an ill-fated young man who rebels against the system; and, of course, the Widow Fortune, local midwife, expert in herbal cures, maker of fine traditional quilts and unique scarecrows, honored elder of the secret Corn Mother ceremonies, attended only by women — except for the Harvest Lord, who with his chosen Corn Maiden, performs the ancient ritual that assures the fertility of the fields.

Social Concerns

If one were to take Harvest Home seriously, one would suggest that it dramatizes an ancient male awe and dread of the Female as a source of love, creativity, and death. The author may have no actual belief that contemporary men still carry that secret fear of female power, although its vestigial presence in many men, in spite of longstanding male domination supported by the Judeo-Christian tradition, may seem clear from a study of history and Freudian psychology. (Try reading the infamous Malleus Maleficarum, the Hammer of the Witches, medieval guide to recognizing witches, for its amazing, superstitious dread of female sexuality.)

The imagining of an archaic farming community in New England, ostensibly Christian, but actually more concerned with the ancient Corn Mother of pagan Europe and Celtic England, is not so fantastic as to be utterly implausible for literary purposes. Certain pagan customs, or at least related superstitions, and the arts of herbal folk medicine, often dominated by women, may still persist among isolated rural communities.

The village Cornwall Combe was presumably settled by people from Cornwall, England, which, according to the novel, once had some racial intermixture with Cretan sailors, long before the Caesars invaded Britain. Ancient Crete, the reader should realize, was the stronghold of the cult of the Mother Goddess, as many archaeological artifacts amply attest — goddesses associated with snakes, bees, or water birds. Moreover, Robert Graves and other popular mythologists have maintained that religion was once dominated by a Triple Goddess of Moon, Earth, and Underworld. She was variously represented in different parts of Old Europe and the Middle East and associated, as well, with the Three Fates of Greek mythology and the three Norns of Scandinavian myth who meted out justice under the world tree.

Perhaps the best known is Demeter, Grain Mother of Ancient Greece, and her daughter Persephone, who was both the Spring Maiden and, in another phase, queen of the dead. The cult of Demeter was a viable religion for two thousand years.

The Great Goddess not only controls the propagation, nurture, and death of all living beings, but also, according to Robert Graves, acts as the poet's Muse, or inspiration of all art. In Harvest Home, the protagonist's talent as a painter, long stifled in an urban business setting, blossoms among the bucolic scenes of Cornwall Combe, just as the mental and physical problems of his wife and asthmatic daughter are likewise healed. He finds these benefits have a rather terrible price, however, and require a degree of submission to the female-dominated order that he cannot accept. The Widow Fortune, apparently the high priestess of the Corn Mother, seems to be everyone's nurturing grandmother, but, for Ned Constantine, she turns into what every man fears (according to Freud): the Terrible Castrating Mother.

Techniques

Occasional mystery and gradually mounting suspense combine with local color, folklore, and mythic symbols in this tall tale. The Widow Fortune, with her obviously symbolic name and the scissors that hang at her belt, might be the third Greek Fate who cuts off the thread of life. Most of the folk festivals, ceremonial fires, and pagan fertility rituals will be recognizable to readers of James Frazer's The Golden Bough (1890).

Adaptations

Harvest Home was adapted as a made-for-television movie with the aging Bette Davis perfectly cast as the mysterious Widow Fortune.

Literary Precedents

Actual late survivals of pagan customs in rural England are probably more accurately portrayed in Thomas Hardy's The Return of the Native (1878).

Certainly ritual bonfires, the ashes of which were sprinkled on the fields, lived on long after the earlier burning of human sacrifices was replaced by the burning of effigies made of straw.

In Harvest Home, the scarecrows are ritually burned, but Ned discovers to his horror that one bonfire includes a hidden human victim.

Ancient cults of the Mother have received considerable attention from mythologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and also many feminists who take comfort in the former prominence of female deities. For interesting contrasts to Tryon's horror story, one may turn to Robert Graves's Seven Days in New Crete (published in America as Watch the North Wind Rise, 1949) and Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists of Avalon (1982). The former deals with a Utopian reconstruction of the religion of the Mother Goddess in Crete because of the obvious failure of maledominated Western culture that emphasizes technology and war. The Bradley book deals with the interface between the receding cult of the Mother and the new Christianity in early Britain — the King Arthur legend retold from the point of view of the women involved. Both of these books deal more kindly with a female-dominated religion than Tryon's American gothic. On the other hand, for the theocratic horrors of what might happen if chauvinist males, resentful of recent advances in female power, could impose their will on society, one may read Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1986).

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