Hawk of May Short Guide

Hawk of May by Gillian Bradshaw

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Contents

Characters

Bradshaw effectively individualizes the familiar characters of Arthurian myth. Gwalchmai develops through a series of moral choices which bring him to a lifelong commitment to aid the Light. Several features of his character are drawn from the legendary Gawain, most familiar to readers from the popular medieval romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. One such trait identifies him with the sun god. Like the original Gawain, Gwalchmai has strength that waxes at noon and wanes with the decline of the sun.

His battle madness is also a mythic feature. When Gwalchmai acquires the horse Ceingalad from the Isles of the Blessed, he rides him into battle where he fights like a demon but remembers nothing of his deeds afterwards.

Both Lot and Agravain are minor characters but sharply delineated. More impressively developed is Morgawse, an ominous woman in her intense devotion to sorcery and her total lack of human feeling. A minor figure in this novel is Medraut, the ultimate villain in the Arthurian legend, better known as Mordred. Fostered by Lot, he is raised as a brother to Gwalchmai, and indeed both are intelligent children, drawn together by love of music and of study, but whereas Gwalchmai is horrified by Morgawse's diabolic rituals, Medraut is a fascinated accomplice.

Social Concerns

The central social concern of the trilogy (Hawk of May, 1980; Kingdom of Summer, 1981; and In Winter's Shadow, 1982), introduced in this first volume, is the deglorification of war and of heroism in combat. The hero is Gwalchmai, a gentle and sensitive boy who much prefers harping to fighting, in contrast to his father Lot and his brother Agravain, both of whom are warriors. In his family, Gwalchmai is the object of scorn for his artistic and intellectual nature. To their dismay he cannot fight on foot at all but only on horseback, for he is an exceptionally skilled horseman. Through Gwalchmai the traditional view of heroism as exemplified in the legends of Arthur and his knights is subjected to negative scrutiny. Neither military nor political acts of aggression are presented as heroic, and those who seek fame and glory on the battlefield or on the throne are instead depicted as victims of a false ideal.

Techniques

One of Bradshaw's most effective literary techniques is the thematic interweaving of recurring motifs. One example is her artful use of a quotation from the Aenead of Virgil. When Gwalchmai and his foster brother Medraut are studying the poem in Latin, they translate the line warning them that while the descent to Avernus is easy, the climb up from the underworld into the light is very difficult.

This line recurs in several situations, always involving the easy descent of an individual into evil behavior.

Another technique is the use of fantasy. Gwalchmai spends time in the Blessed Isles, an enchanted place, where he meets the god Lugh and where he finds the magical sword Caledvwich that burns with power to fight the Dark. Later when he returns to the real world he is joined by the otherworldly horse, Ceingalad, whom none but he is able to manage.

Perhaps above all Bradshaw has mastered the technique of adapting the familiar Arthurian materials to an absorbing and entertaining narrative with the immediacy of a modern novel.

The setting is neither the chivalric late Middle Ages nor the lighthearted Cam elot of musical comedy fame but rather the dark period of early medieval Britain, a time of tribal conflict and barbarism when an idealistic leader named Arthur tried to civilize and unify the British as a nation. In this harsh time the characters come to life as individuals dealing with moral and psychological problems that both reflect and transcend their moment in history.

Themes

The controlling theme of the trilogy, also introduced in this first book, is the moral conflict of good and evil, here posited as the Light and the Dark.

Gwalchmai as a boy discovers the Dark manifested in the person of his own mother, Morgawse, a sorceress. When Morgawse follows her grim experiments in the occult to a brutal human sacrifice, her son rebels and runs away from home. In one of his many subsequent adventures he finds himself in the Isles of the Blessed, home of the sun god Lugh. It is here that Gwalchmai decides to commit his life to the defense of the Light, as symbolized in Lugh, against the threats of the Dark, symbolized in his mother.

These adventures also represent the growing up and coming of age of Gwalchmai. It becomes the young man's deepest desire to join the Family of King Arthur, whom he feels represents the Light in its most forceful manifestation. When he tries to impress the king whom he idolizes with his skill in battle, however, he fails, for he still does not understand the true meaning of heroism. It is only when the battle-weary young man takes time out to console a dying man that he achieves the heroism Arthur most admires. Arthur accepts him as a follower, but Gwalchmai fights only when riding his enchanted horse from the Isles of the Blessed. On that horse he fights like a madman in battle but can never remember what he did.

Along with the themes of moral conflict, coming of age, and the nature of heroism, the novel develops the theme of active virtue. It is a conviction of the young King Arthur that "to act with a desire for the good, even if we may act wrongly, is better than not to act at all." Through several episodes in the novel readers encounter the failure of a well-intended virtuous act, but such actions are not to be judged in terms of whether they succeed or fail.

In this world, and in the nature of humanity, good and evil are mixed, and there is no such thing as total victory for either.

Literary Precedents

Bradshaw draws upon both the medieval sources and some of their modern adaptations. She writes in the modern tradition of fictional adaptation of the legend as evinced in such writers as T. H. White (The Once and Future King), Vera Chapman (the Three Damosels trilogy), and Mary Stewart (the Merlin trilogy).

Related Titles

Kingdom of Summer Narrated by Gwalchmai's servant, a man named Rhys, Kingdom of Summer (1981) continues many of Bradshaw's social concerns and themes but also introduces others. The negative scrutiny of war is still of major importance as is the reevaluation of conventional notions of heroism. A simple country man, Rhys much prefers his farm and fields to the glories of battle, and when he marries, the joys of family life conflict with his inescapable involvement with conflicts remote from his daily life.

Further protests against the senselessness of war come from a new character, Elidan, a nun whom Gwalchmai has dishonored and who has borne him a son, without his knowledge. Elidan speaks out against the knights of the Arthurian family, whom she regards as hypocrites who betray the ideals they so aggressively assert. When she bore her son, she determined that he would become a priest, not a fighter.

The theme of the conflict between Dark and Light is also further developed in this work, with the force of the Dark concentrated in Morgawse, sorceress mother of the protagonist. The theme is deepened, however, through the prevailing recognition of the inevitable mingling of Dark and Light. Narrator Rhys expresses the point of view that the world is a mixture of good and bad, and that things always eventually go wrong. A further observation is made by Gwalchmai's father and other characters that there is darkness within the knights following Arthur, so that their fight against the outer forces of the Dark can never be wholly successful. The ending of the novel is therefore double-edged, as befits its transitional nature as the middle volume of a trilogy.

She argues passionately for the supreme reality of the Dark, reversing the traditional Christian belief that darkness is but the absence of light. A new theme prevalent in this work is the idea that in this world the forces of dark and light are actually mingled. As Rhys remarks "the world's a mixture."

The eventual defeat of the Arthurian ideal is inevitable because of the darkness within the knights themselves.

The ending of the novel is accordingly double-edged, with Morgawse dead, killed by her own son Agravain, but with Medraut alive and determined to destroy Arthur.

Two new characters establish the feminine point of view on the major themes. One is Eivlin, the Irish serving maid whom Rhys marries. Pert, spunky, and witty, Eivlin is quite independent but also treasures the delights of family life, she sees the Arthurian family of knights as a threat to peaceful domesticity. Her husband and children are more important to her than the abstract goal of defeating the Dark.

The other is Elidan, the young woman who joined the convent after her seduction by Gwalchmai. She has also borne the knight a son, keeping his existence a secret while

she raises him in the convent. Courageous and strong in her convictions, she also resents the warrior code of the Arthurian family.

Rhys as the narrator is a well-developed character. Essentially a simple man, he tries to combine the joys of marriage and farm life with his desire to help fight for the Light. His practical knowledge and his bargaining skills are very useful to the brave but socially inexperienced knight whom he serves. Throughout the novel his homely philosophy of life serves as choral commentary on the catastrophic events in the tale. His is the perspective of the ordinary man caught up in world-shaking events beyond his control.

In this middle work of the trilogy, the fantasy element appears in the form of witchcraft. Morgawse is a mistress of occult powers and a devotee of the Dark. She murders her husband by means of long distance magic and endangers the lives of Rhys and Eivlin by sending a shadow-demon to enchant them. The only adequate, countermagic to her spells lies in Gwalchmai's enchanted sword.

Another technique is the separation of the narrative voice from the protagonist. Although the novel is about Gwalchmai, it is Rhys his devoted follower who narrates the events and comments on them. A keen and sensitive observer, he guides and enlightens the reader, providing an outside point of view on the Arthurian knights.

In Winter's Shadow In Winter's Shadow (1982), the concluding novel in Bradshaw's Arthurian trilogy (see separate entry), focuses on the tragic events that lead to the death of King Arthur and the end of his hopes for a unified Britain. The concerns expressed in the earlier volumes over the dangerous glorification of war are brutally fulfilled in the destruction of the society achieved by Arthur. This moving work is narrated by the queen, Gwynhwyfar (Guenevere), providing a feminine perspective on the action.

Through the queen a new theme is developed, the role of women in a patriarchal society and the vulnerability of feminine ideals in the context of war and politics. Even more than Eivlin and Elidan, who are victims of the heroic knightly code, the queen with her own regal power and intense involvement in aiding the king embodies a passionate protest against the vanity of seeking glory in battle. Through her the reader sees the meaninglessness of lives lost for an abstract ideal.

A further theme emerges in the concluding chapters of the book, the bittersweet consolation that life goes on even after the ravages of war cease.

After the catastrophic last battle, the grieving queen realizes that "our failure did not put out the sun." The novel ends with the approach of Easter, emphasizing the renewal of life.

Gwynhwyfar as narrator-protagonist is one of the first and probably the most effective of fictional portrayals of a wholly sympathetic queen in the Arthurian story. She is a courageous woman, struggling to face the challeng ing and demanding role of ruler while Arthur is away fighting, which is most of the time. Her job is to provide supplies needed both at the battle front and at home. She must also keep the accounts and deal with all sorts of troublesome and recalcitrant people.

She must play the roles of diplomat, treasurer, counselor, and housekeeper.

Overworked and overwrought by anxiety, Gwynhwyfar falls into an adulterous relationship with Bedwyr (in most versions called Lancelot), but her betrayal is made to seem understandable, almost inevitable. Her own feelings of guilt are convincingly delineated. Bradshaw's portrayal of Gwynhwyfar is a compassionate envisioning of the much maligned queen. She is a hero.

Bedwyr is also an appealing figure.

This gentleman was more the scholar than the warrior until converted by Arthur to the cause of defending the Light in active combat. He is also depicted as a complex figure, with a bright, eager mind but with intense passions that conflict with his reason both emotionally and religiously. He discusses philosophy with Arthur and reads Virgil with the queen.

Medraut is the villain of the work. It has always been difficult for writers to make this incestuous son of Arthur who kills his father and destroys the Arthurian ideal anything but a totally evil figure. Bradshaw makes him somewhat more complex, partly by introducing him as a bright young boy who falls under the influence of his vicious mother, Morgawse. Devious, twisted, but also pathetic, Medraut is rendered sympathetically as a lonely, misunderstood youngster.

Bradshaw uses the technique of the recurring thematic motif very effectively in her portrayal of the queen.

Endlessly burdened by administrative details, Gwynhwyfar keeps inventory lists. Her daily life is measured and her energies drained by lists of trivial but compulsive items. When the queen finally learns of Arthur's death in battle, she reacts with one telling, dramatic gesture: she closes her inventory book. Still later, when she learns that her lover Bedwyr is in Less Britain on the continent, she realizes that she must write to him, but for her the chore is simply one more tiring item on her long lists of things to do.

A further technique is the thematic resonance of a familiar moment in a classical work of literature. A striking example occurs when Gwynhwyfar and Bedwyr yield to their desires. Their fall into adultery follows their reading of the tragic love affair of Dido and Aeneas in Virgil's epic poem. The echo here is of Dante's account of the guilty love of Paolo and Francesca, who also surrender to their passions while reading about Dido and Aeneas. Dante's lovers are doomed to hell.

A pervasive and sophisticated technique in this final volume of the trilogy is Bradshaw's use of tragic irony. Both tone and narrative structure contribute to this almost Sophoclean sense of tragic irony. The failure of the Arthurian ideal of civilization is in large part a matter of good intentions leading inevitably to evil consequences. The knights in the Arthurian Family are genuinely committed to defending the Light, but they have within them contradictory impulses from the Dark.

Furthermore, in the outward fates which affect them are tragic moments of accident and disaster which are no one's fault. Darkness is also partly a matter of fate. The accidental death of Gwalchmai's son at the hands of Bedwyr is one of the most painful examples. The mutilation beyond recognition of Arthur's body on the battlefield and the pathetic attempts of the bard Taleissin to preserve the lost glory at least in a heroic song both attest to the pattern of an inevitable yet poignantly ironic death of an ideal. Bradshaw's controlled prose saves the tragic tone from either sentimentality or pathos.

In this concluding volume of the trilogy as in the two earlier works, Bradshaw is both drawing on medieval sources for the Arthurian materials and following the modern tradition of adapting them. In the final volume she is also writing in the tradition of feminist revisioning of the major characters, in particular that of Guenevere, whose role she enriches.

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