In the Beauty of the Lilies Short Guide

In the Beauty of the Lilies by John Updike

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Characters

Chronicling four generations of the Wilmot family, Updike concentrates on one member in each generation: Clarence Wilmot, a Protestant minister; his youngest son Teddy, who earns his living as a postal carrier; Teddy's daughter Esther, who becomes a Hollywood star; and Esther's son Clark.

Updike devotes less attention to Clarence than to any other of his major characters. A minister in Paterson, New Jersey, at the turn of the twentieth century, Clarence is a model clergyman until doubts about the existence of God finally drive him to leave the pulpit. The loss of faith shatters his will to live, and although he drifts from job to job in a desultory attempt to support his family, it is appar ent that he has no enthusiasm for life.

Clarence's behavior appears extreme, and may strain readers' credulity; nevertheless, Updike uses him as a means of displaying to readers the devastation that loss of faith has caused in America.

Teddy, Clarence's youngest child, is certainly shaped by his father's experiences. Forced to live in poverty after Clarence abandons his ministry, Teddy develops a reclusive personality; he chooses to live quietly outside the mainstream of American life, wilfully denying any ambition to achieve greatness. Although he is initially reluctant to move from Paterson to rural Delaware, he soon comes to see his out-of-the-way village as a haven from the world which crushed his father. Teddy avoids thinking too deeply about the issues which drove his father out of a comfortable living into a career for which he was unsuited, and which finally drove him to an early grave.

Consequently, Teddy consciously sets his sights low, opting to live modestly in his new home town, where he marries his clubfooted neighbor Emily and takes a job as a postal service employee. Even in that position he displays an unusual lack of ambition; he refuses even to apply to become postmaster, insisting that walking a route is sufficient for both his income and his mental stability. Despite what some might see as character flaws, Teddy has many endearing personal qualities.

His is the typical American family of the first half of the century: Teddy works hard at one job all his life, his wife keeps a good house, and the two of them provide stable love for the children, who become imbued with the American values which drove so many to strive to improve their material circumstances and make some mark in their community.

While many never achieved that dream, Teddy's daughter Esther does. A natural beauty who learns to use her feminine wiles with great success in a society where doing so is not only acceptable but expected, Esther charms young men and old as she pursues a career first as a model then as an actress. Her earliest efforts are met with limited success, but eventually she emerges as a genuine Hollywood film star, taking the screen name Alma DeMott. In a career which includes starring roles beside most of the leading men of the 1940s and 1950s, Esther establishes herself as a household name in America; yet she never drifts too far from her roots in Delaware, returning home

occasionally to visit family and friends, and recloaking herself in the mantle of daughter and neighbor. Through her Updike shows how, on occasion, ordinary Americans can be transformed by their dreams into people of stature and importance. He also indicates to readers the impact of the cinema, and later television, on the lives of Americans, many of whom live vicariously through these stars they idolize.

Esther's son Clark, born of a husband she rejects and befriended by one of her later, younger partners, is the fourth major character whose history helps explain Updike's vision of the American character during the twentieth century.

Clark is a moody child made to accept the adult world before he is ready to do so. Largely ignored by his mother, who is too busy with her career and personal happiness to give him the attention he craves, Clark drifts away from Hollywood, looking for work and fulfillment in various places across the country. He ends up employed briefly by his uncle, who owns various businesses in Colorado. There he takes up with a religious cult whose leader runs a compound where drugs, sex, and separatist views dominate the lives of those who have been duped into following him. When the members of the compound are accosted by the police, a bloody standoff causes Clark to think critically about his life and its missed opportunities. Ironically, although he seems to have failed by the standards of his great-grandfather and grandfather, Clark emerges as a character whose wit, presence of mind, and concern for others make him admirable despite his misguided actions.

Social Concerns

In many ways, In the Beauty of the Lilies is the story of American society in the twentieth century. The four principal fictional characters, all members of the Wilmot family, live through these eventful hundred years, witnessing the growth of the United States from an emerging industrial and political leader among nations before World War II through the decades of warfare and internal turmoil that culminate in the country being left as the lone superpower on the planet. Surprisingly, however, little of national or international politics takes center stage in the novel. Instead, Updike focuses on the domestic and personal sides of the Wilmots's lives, intent on examining not the character of a nation but the character of individuals whose collective experiences have shaped the moral fiber of the country.

James Garner, an early reviewer of the novel, links Updike's attempts with those of many of his predecessors and contemporaries. Writing in the National Review, Gardner says that American novelists are obsessed with the desire to "send their characters across the great expanse of this continent to find themselves and discover what it means to be American." What emerges in Updike's version of this journey toward self-discovery is a continual struggle between material wealth and spiritual poverty. As the country becomes more diversified ethnically and economically, and as the standard of living rises for those who manage to take advantage of good fortune, there is a concurrent reduction in the importance of spiritual values in guiding individual lives.

In Updike's vision, the cinema becomes a new form of religion for Americans in the twentieth century. On the silver screen, rather than in the pulpits, Americans find the inspiration for fulfilling their dreams—dreams which have become devoid of any need for considering one's eternal fate. As a reviewer in Commentary, a religious publication, noted about the novel, "In America, the theater has replaced the church," and "the movie goer's passive suspension of disbelief has replaced the religious believer's active embrace of faith." The internal struggle over theological matters which drives the patriarch of the Wilmot family to give up his place in the Church plays no part in the life of his granddaughter; his greatgrandson, however, eventually turns to religion, albeit an extremist sect led by a destructive false prophet, when he becomes disillusioned with the materialistic society in which he has grown up.

Techniques

To tell his story of the changing nature of American society during the twentieth century, Updike turns to one of the most popular forms of fiction during that era: the saga or chronicle novel. Updike's imagined history of the Wilmots spans four generations, and although he gives unequal play to the progenitor of the clan, Clarence, he manages to display how the values which prompted Clarence's actions at the turn of the century linger in his great grandson at the end of the period. The modern chronicle novel, usually expansive and filled with details of everyday life, captures readers' attention by presenting generations of everyday people whose stories are both interesting in themselves but also typical of the adventures that many families have faced in their attempts to establish roots and make a good life for themselves.

Updike is a master at creating characters and providing minute details of ordinary life. His descriptions of houses and business establishments, of neighborhoods, and of political and social ceremonies, have a ring of reality so strong that readers find themselves transported imaginatively to these places and events.

Additionally, two leitmotifs characterize In the Beauty of the Lilies. a focus on religious issues and a running commentary on the American cinema. The novel opens with a description of the production of D. W. Griffith's The Call to Arms (1910), which is juxtaposed to scenes from ordinary life in Paterson, New Jersey, where Reverend Clarence Wilmot is struggling with thoughts of atheism.

The novel ends with the destruction of a religious cult, whose final days are witnessed by all of America via broadcast television, the technological stepchild of the movies. Throughout the novel Updike contrasts the hopes provided by conventional religious belief with those offered to Americans by the make-believe world played out for them on the big screen. Updike accentuates this counterpoint by telling his story through the eyes of his four principal characters, each of whom responds to the lures of religion and the movies in different ways. Hence, readers gain multiple perspectives on the power of these dominant forces in American culture as they influence the lives of Clarence Wilmot, then his child, grandchild, and great grandchild.

The title, In the Beauty of the Lilies, is taken from Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," a patriotic song that espouses the righteousness of the Union cause during the American Civil War by asserting that God is leading the North's effort. Ward's lyrics, which Updike uses as a Preface to his novel, reads: "In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea,/ With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me."

Updike has commented that the stanza has always haunted him, presumably because it suggests Christ's promise of salvation. In this novel, however, there is no hint that any character has been transfigured; there is only the continuing search for meaning in a world where commercialism has replaced religion as the dominant cultural force.

Themes

As he does in many of his other works, Updike promotes a theme which has troubled many of his critics but earned him the appreciation of a large reading audience: a gentle acceptance of the human condition which recognizes that sexuality and spirituality are equally important in the development of the human personality. Unwilling to judge his characters too harshly, Updike is willing to reveal their strengths and weaknesses and leave it to readers to determine what is good and what is evil. The critic A. O. Scott, writing in The Nation, characterizes Updike's vision of modern man in this way: "erotic desire, religious belief and worldly ambition are three aspects of the sacred drive to connect the self with the world." The desire of all individuals to develop a sense of self-awareness and self-worth in an increasingly complex and impersonal world has always fascinated Updike. Each of the major figures in In the Beauty of the Lilies undergoes this struggle toward self-awareness; each faces a personal crisis in which self-worth is questioned. How each resolves these crises is what makes them interesting as people.

Surprisingly, In the Beauty of the Lilies offers only modest commentary on a theme common to many of Updike's major works: America's preoccupation with sex. Although all of the characters in this work undergo some temptation, there is a greater quality of naivete about sexual matters among the Wilmots than one finds in most of Updike's heroes and heroines. Even Clark, who grows up late in the century in an atmosphere of permissiveness where experimentation with sex and drugs is looked upon as commonplace, is more concerned with other matters. Perhaps Updike intentionally mutes his interest in sex because he wants readers to understand the innocence which underlies the Wilmots, whose life stories represent mainstream America's progress through the century.

Key Questions

Because it shares many characteristics of other novels chronicling the development of the American character, In the Beauty of the Lilies offers great opportunity for discussion of a number of historical, sociological, political, cultural, and moral issues. The changing nature of Americans over the decades of the twentieth century, and the ongoing preoccupation of Americans with religious and moral issues, are two areas which can lead to particularly fruitful debate. The unusually muted treatment of sexual issues makes the novel one of the few by Updike which can be examined without fear that an overemphasis on the physical description of sexual attributes and activities may diminish attention on other matters. The widely divergent lifestyles of the four principal characters also presents opportunities for comparisons of ways Americans have attempted to achieve success and personal fulfillment.

1. The novel opens with a description of Hollywood director D. W. Griffith filming a scene for one of his movies, A Call To Arms. How does Updike use this opening to set a tone for the novel? Griffiths was also the director of one of the most famous silent movies ever made, Birth of a Nation (1915). Do you think Updike wants knowledgeable readers to recall this fact? Why might that add resonance to your understanding of the opening scene?

2. After the Wilmots move from Paterson, New Jersey, to Basingstoke, Delaware, the youngest of Clarence's children, Teddy, has several opportunities to move to a major metropolitan area to make his fortune. He chooses not to do so. Why do you think he remains in Basingstoke?

3. Even after she achieves success as a movie star, Teddy's daughter Esther returns home periodically to visit family in Delaware. What is the significance of these trips home for her? Do they seem "in character," or does she seem to be simply carrying out an outmoded social ritual? How do her parents and friends react to her return visits?

4. After he joins the religious cult in Colorado, Clark is given a new name, Esau. Do you see any parallels with the biblical figure of Esau? How is Updike using Clark's behavior with the cult to comment on religion in American society?

5. A number of reviewers have commented that, while In the Beauty of the Lilies traces the history of an American family, the four sections are not particularly well connected; rather, they resemble four novellas, only loosely connected by the use of the same characters in more than one of the stories. Do you agree with this assessment? Why, or why not?

6. Near the end of the novel, Esther's brother Clark, who has spent his adult life working for the Central Intelligence Agency, tells his nephew Danny, "I try to be dispassionate about it, but I love this crazy, wasteful, self-hating country in spite of itself." Do you believe Updike shares this view? Why might it be appropriate for Danny to be the one to make this observation?

7. Updike has often been called America's finest stylist and one of the great wordsmiths. His ability to create mellifluous prose has, at times, been seen as a drawback: some critics argue that his concern for creating beautiful word pictures sometimes obscures rather than illuminates his themes. Do you think this is the case in In the Beauty of the Lilies?

What passages seem to be overdone?

Which ones bring Updike's themes into sharp focus? Do you see any differences in the passages you have identified?

8. The story of the Wilmots is set against the backdrop of twentieth-century American history. From time to time, Updike mentions events that have significant impact in shaping the course of America's destiny during this eventful century. How do these real-life events affect the Wilmots. Which ones seem most significant? Which seem to have little relevance to their lives? What is Updike suggesting by introducing these events in the way that he does?

Literary Precedents

In the Beauty of the Lilies can best be classified as a chronicle novel, a popular genre in twentieth-century American fiction. Linked to historical events, it depicts the lives of a single family over a number of generations. Like the novels of Kenneth Roberts, John Jakes, and Howard Fast (to name but a few), it relies on real chronology to establish background and setting for the fictionalized accounts of the family whom Updike chooses as his representatives of Americans affected by the changes in technology, politics, culture, and religion over the course of the century. Among the more noted literary figures who have also written works of importance in this genre is John Steinbeck, whose East of Eden (1952) tells the story of three generations of an American family. Like Updike, Steinbeck uses the chronicle novel to explore not only the development of the American character, but also universal issues of human morality and social justice.

Updike is not the only serious novelist to make use of the movies as a leitmotif in his fiction. In his most highly regarded novel, The Moviegoer (1961; see separate entry), the Southern writer Walker Percy also uses the movies as a symbol of modern society's penchant for seeking substitutes for religion as a means of coping with contemporary problems.

Related Titles

Although no other Updike novel follows a family through four generations, there are a number of parallels between In the Beauty of the Lilies and others by the author. The four fictional works commonly referred to as the Rabbit novels—Rabbit, Run (1960); Rabbit Redux (1971; see separate entry); Rabbit Is Rich (1981); and Rabbit at Rest (1990; see separate entry)—chronicle the life of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, Updike's modern hero who grows up in modest circumstances and makes a comfortable life for himself despite the many anxieties he faces from adolescence through old age.

These novels portray the changing face of America from the late 1950s through the early 1990s. Like a number of the characters in In the Beauty of the Lilies, Rabbit Angstrom struggles with religious doubts and with the lure of material culture. One can also find similarities between Clarence Wilmot and Roger Chillingworth, the hero of Roger's Version (1986) who becomes obsessed with obtaining verifiable proof for the existence of God.

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