If Winter Comes Short Guide

If Winter Comes by Arthur Stuart-Menteth Hutchinson

Contents

Characters

If Winter Comes is the story of Mark Sabre; although some other characters are interesting in themselves, all exist basically to tell Sabre's story, a tale of Job-like woes which deepen as one disaster follows another. The novel's conclusion, however, illustrates the quotation alluded to in the title, "If Winter Comes, can Spring be far behind?"

Sabre is a decent, thoughtful man with a gift for seeing all sides of a question. His friend Hapgood calls him "Old Puzzlehead" in tribute to this quality. Sabre's life is made difficult by trouble on two fronts: His wife Mabel is a shallow, cruel woman who cares little for him, and his employer, Mr. Fortune, dislikes and belittles him.

Sabre does not return contempt for contempt; he tries to please his wife and to make a success of his work, which is textbook publishing.

Patriotism is one of Mark Sabre's most implicit values. He dreams of writing a new style of history textbook which will inculcate his idealistic vision of England. When war comes, Sabre's idealism leads him to see it as a grand crusade, and he is profoundly disappointed when medical problems prevent him from being accepted into the army. After a few years, when the number of casualties cause standards to be lowered, Mark is thrilled to be in uniform and on his way to "the show" at last. His wife Mabel is glad he is leaving.

The portrayal of Mabel is not one of the novel's strengths. She is defined by her indifference or hostility toward her husband, yet the source of her antagonism is never clear. Her meanness exists simply because it must to make the novel work: Mark, like Job, must be terribly afflicted without understanding why.

Two other female characters are at the center of the novel: Effie Bright, a poor girl whom Mark befriends; and Nona Tybar, the woman he once loved, who chose to marry a nobleman instead of Mark. Both women, in different ways, cause Mark to be tested.

During the war, he persuades his wife to take Effie on as a companion; while he is home on leave, she becomes angry and fires the girl, who then disappears. Mark returns to the army, is terribly wounded, and comes home to stay. Not long after his arrival, Effie writes to him and Mabel, telling them that she has borne a child and desperately needs employment. Mark decides to offer the girl a home; Mabel indignantly moves out.

Mabel's leaving is the least of Mark's trials, however. Soon he is a virtual pariah in the village: He is fired from his job and ignored by old friends. But his nobility of character is such that he tries to hide his misery from Effie, who has moved in with her child. Their relations are platonic, but the town assumes that Effie has returned to her seducer. When she learns that Mabel is seeking a divorce due to her presence in the house, she takes poison and kills herself, the final act of an innocent sufferer who is confident that she will explain everything to God and then it will be "quite all right."

At this point, Mark's fortunes are at their lowest ebb. He feels responsible for Effie's death and soiled by the false accusations laid against him. However, in one of the novel's several melodramatic moments, Sabre is given a chance for vengeance against his persecutors: He learns that Effie's seducer was the son of his self-righteous boss. He goes to the office to confront the boss, only to find the man weeping: His son has been killed at the front.

Sabre's nobility asserts itself at this point. He throws his evidence into the fireplace and attempts to comfort the man who has tormented him. Under the strain of all these events, Sabre collapses. As he slowly recovers, he is attended by his friend Hapgood and by Nona, whose husband has been killed in the war. The long suffering endured by both Mark and Nona is ended, and they are engaged to be married as the book concludes.

Mark's relationship with Nona carries out the theme of selfless, pure love. Early in the novel, Nona admits that her marriage to a loutish aristocrat was a mistake; Mark struggles unsuccessfully to make his marriage work.

Their love is acknowledged but mostly unspoken. Nona wants to leave her husband for Mark, but he dissuades her, not wishing to act dishonorably.

As a result, Nona stays with her husband until his death. Finally Mark and Nona are both free, their virtue rewarded.

Mark's nature is revealed throughout the book by his relationship with the three women, whose characters are somewhat stereotypical. Mabel is a motiveless embodiment of cruelty, hypocrisy, and avarice; Effie is the innocent, self-sacrificing angel, too good for the world; and Nona is the intelligent, loving woman whose early error, her marriage, has added seriousness and compassion to her character.

Her suffering gives her experience and attitudes that make her, finally, an appropriate mate for Mark.

Social Concerns

Hutchinson's fiction is very much a product of its time and of Hutchinson's relation to his time. Hutchinson is an heir of Dickens in his treatment of social concerns: He shows social ills without recommending a political solution; rather, he believes that individual reformation is the proper path.

If Winter Comes shows the problem of unwed motherhood: The hero, Mark Sabre, believes that society is correct in its condemnation, yet he laments and cannot participate in the resultant social excommunication of a girl abandoned by her family. The self-righteousness and cruel behavior Sabre deplores typify the people around him, who despoil a peaceful landscape in the name of progress and profit, and who belittle the lower classes in the name of proper social order.

Hutchinson treats the corning of the Great War as a time of moral invigoration. The mode of the novel is similar to that of Rupert Brooke's popular poem written at the outbreak of the war: "Now God be thanked who has matched us with His Hour, /And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping." War is seen as ennobling, giving a valiant death to boyish clerks, philanderers, and noblemen alike. In the view of Hutchinson, the son of a British general, the war was a necessity which England could not have honorably avoided.

Techniques

A simple plot summary would make If Winter Comes appear very melodramatic and didactic. Hutchinson's style in the novel works to lessen, although not eliminate, those tendencies. Humor is one saving grace: for example, Mark and his wife have two servants, sisters named Jinks. Mark nicknames them Hi-Jinks and Lo-Jinks. Their appearance in the plot occasionally breaks the tension, and the last word of the book is theirs, a comic underpinning to the dramatic reunion of Mark and Nona.

A second and more effective device is the use of Mark's friend Hapgood as narrator. A minor character, Hapgood works well as a narrator. He appears at the beginning of the book, giving the reader background information by telling of his recent visit to Mark. Then he disappears for a while as a traditional narrative takes over. But when Mark's fortunes are at their lowest, Hapgood appears, and the reader finds out what has happened from Hapgood's somewhat flustered but sympathetic account, written as a barstool monologue directed to a mutual friend.

The distancing provided by Hapgood's personality helps to interrupt and minimize the melodrama of Mark's misfortunes.

Themes

Two interwoven themes dominate If Winter Comes, the need for proper moral action and for selfless love. Both themes are carried out through the behavior of the main character, Mark Sabre. One reviewer summarizes the theme as "gentle soul beset by a stupid community." Sabre lives by a moral code so profoundly his own that he hardly needs to reflect before acting, even though his right actions will cost him dearly. Surrounded by intentional and unintentional cruelty, he maintains a gentle dignity and consistency in his behavior. Personal sacrifice, before, during and after the war, causes him to win out.

Literary Precedents

Hutchinson's fiction derives from the great tradition of the English novel as seen in the work of Charles Dickens.

Like him, Hutchinson believes in the moral function of literature. His characters are rewarded for long-suffering virtue, punished for their sins, and sometimes redeemed through their punishment. Reading This Freedom (1922), one is reminded of Dickens's chastened heroes at the end of Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son (1848) and Hard Times: For These Times (1854): A horrible shock breaks the blinding pride of Dombey and Gradgrind, as it does that of Rosalie Occleve. If Winter Comes has a Dickensian tone, but perhaps some of its popularity resulted from its drawing from other, more current sources: Its relative frankness about illegitimacy reminds one of Esther Waters, George Moore's 1894 novel.

But Hutchinson's didacticism separates him from Moore and other realists; his closest affinities remain with Dickens.

Related Titles

Hutchinson followed the success of If Winter Comes with This Freedom. Like If Winter Comes, it is an intensely serious novel and manifests rather conservative views. Unlike the former novel, however, This Freedom creates issues more convincingly than characters. The novel deals with a married couple, Rosalie and Harry Occleve, and their children, Hugh, Dora, and Benji. Her early life has led Rosalie to believe that she cannot be happy without a "man's" career, so she works passionately in business, leaving her children to care for themselves, which they do with results made predictable by the thesis of the novel. The eldest son, forced into a loveless marriage with a lower-class girl, is finally jailed for embezzlement; the daughter dies on an abortionist's table; the younger son kills himself. All of these disasters happen within days of each other: Hutchinson builds his background so that the cataclysmic ending has the predictable suddenness of Greek drama.

Critics were quick to find the novel shallow in its propagandizing against the post-World War I "New Woman."

One critic commented that the novel was remarkable in its assumption that children's lives could be utterly ruined simply because their mother had a career.

Hutchinson's prewar novels had been marked by puckish humor and romance; critics noted the individuality of his wit and the strong human interest of his work. His turn to the serious in If Winter Comes had struck a responsive chord in the reading public. However, with This Freedom, Hutchinson shows that he is not at his best in attempting a serious style. The characters he presents as unsympathetic tend to be Dickensian stereotypes who unfortunately lack the stability and fascination of a Dickens villain.

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