The Inheritance Short Guide

The Inheritance by Louisa May Alcott

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Edith Adelon functions in a thematic framework that sustains characters who are largely types of manners and morals, rather than fully developed individuals.

The majority exist primarily to lend atmosphere, define other characters, or drive the plot. Among these are bubbly, seventeen-year-old Amy, whose delights are excursions, parties, and Edith's presence. Brother Arthur is frank, warmhearted and generous, but so far as the reader knows, also idle and boring. Arthur functions as the heir to be displaced.

As for Lady Hamilton, she is the dowager of convention, haughty but tender toward her children. In the final scenes of confrontation it seems that Lady Hamilton might emerge into sharper focus, but the moment passes. She returns to her convenient role of Edith-worshiper.

Lord Arlington, as Edith's unwanted suitor, might have developed as a figure of conflict, but he is scantily sketched.

"Selfish, passionate, discontented," he seems created to be a fighter of the system except that Edith will not respond.

He retreats into the role of foil to thoughtful Lord Percy. And since aristocrats must have servants, Alcott throws in a few, all taken from stock. Thanks to a faithful old servant, the secret papers arrive. Theresa, dying former nursemaid, makes known Edith's charity work.

Theresa also functions as a worried mother, the inspirer of the promise Edith cannot break. As for son Louis, he moves events to conclusion in the role of good boy turned temporarily bad.

Even as the major character, Edith herself is somewhat the stock, simpering young woman of sentimental literary tradition, standing out pardy because she is so overdrawn. The reader first sees Edith as a girl seated apart, "beautiful indeed," with "drooping head" and "large, mournful eyes" filled with tears.

She sketches well, plays the organ, sings "divinely." Those around her pronounce Edith lovely, generous. Lord Percy declares her "rich in woman's truest virtues" and "noble by a warm and sinless heart."

Edith herself is remarkably immersed in low self-esteem. "I am a poor and humble girl," she says. "You are Lord Percy. Then how can we be friends?" She repeatedly allows Lady Ida to bully her.

Yet Edith transcends Alcott's overdone, repetitious presentations of her. Edith is likable for her genuine goodness, talent, and sheer forbearance. And Edith is intriguing, after all, for her mysterious, pitiful past and her reaction to the discovery of it. There is at least

a grain of feminist grit in Edith's decision to conceal her inheritance. Edith might now tell all and have for herself the adoring Lord Percy, but she does not necessarily view her future, as Lady Ida does, in terms of the chase after a man.

Alcott undoubtedly pitted Edith against Lady Ida to add contrast as well as conflict, and as the standard villain Lady Ida does well. She insults openly, in terms that leave no question about her feelings.

"You have no right to stand between me and my happiness as you do," Lady Ida says to Edith, "and I hate you for it."

Certainly Lady Ida lacks subtlety, but from another point of view she is arguably the most interesting, perhaps even a sympathetic character. She is ambitious, envious, but not without reason. "With bitter disappointment, she saw year after year go by." Aging, dependent, Lady Ida is caught in a system that benefits relatively very few. Unlike Edith, she does not sit and weep. Lady Ida takes action to change her woman's fate, forcing Edith to a final stand for selfless virtue. Unwittingly, Lady Ida tosses her rival into the very arms she wanted for herself, thus making Edith even more likable as the winner in a charming romance.

Clearly Edith is the better choice for Lord Percy. He is kind, compassionate, utterly versed in the system he represents.

He is a supreme example of aristocratic wealth, a horseman, a dancer, a man of impeccable manners. Lord Percy, too, is built upon a sentimental type. Edith makes him happy, but he will not impose his love upon her if she feels more comfortable not hearing of it. Still he is there, looking in a window, gliding past a door.

Selfless Lord Percy is Edith's male counterpart, overdrawn but still sympathetic for his sincerity, his strong feeling, his concern for the poor. And he leaves hope for the prospect that social position truly may be second best. "I am one who finds his greatest happiness in simple things and cares little for the rank and riches of the world," he tells Edith, "for these are nothing to a noble human heart."

Social Concerns

The Inheritance is built on the premise that birth into a family of wealth and high social position empowers the individual, and the main question is how young Edith Adelon can find her true happiness and place. For much of the novel, which is set in the nineteenth century, Edith is cast as a sad orphan living among landed British aristocrats.

Now of marriageable age, she was brought from Italy years earlier by wealthy Lord Hamilton to serve as playmate and teacher to his daughter, Amy.

Edith's devotion to her task, and her outstanding good qualities, have endeared her to Lady Hamilton, now widowed, and to teen-age Amy and Amy's older brother, Lord Arthur Hamilton. Although fiercely attached to the Hamiltons, who have treated her well, Edith feels a keen sense of loneliness. She must play the part of an outsider in this social milieu.

Alcott's depiction of Edith as isolated and unhappy, at least until the story resolves, touches several social issues in varying degrees. Edith's case evokes that of any orphaned or adopted child who seeks a social and emotional anchor through knowing biological parents.

Edith yearns for family ties of her own.

At one point, in fact, as the result of her daring rescue of Amy from a fall down a cliff, Edith is elevated by a grateful Lady Hamilton to "sister and friend." Edith is gratified, but nothing really changes for her. The novel's thrust is that Edith's great talent and virtues cannot enable her to surmount the social distinction between her and the members and associates of the high-born, affluent household in which she resides.

Notably Edith, as long as she believes that she is a lowly orphan, cannot and will not indulge her attraction to Lord Walter Percy, the high-born, wealthy houseguest who falls in love with her.

Edith's outlook is plain from a conversation about the parson's daughter who turned down a marriage offer from an adoring, beloved nobleman. Edith would do the same. "I should be ill-fitted to perform the duties of my high state," she says. It is "wise" to forestall the "bitter grief a nobleman would surely confront.

He would find his wife "sneered at for her poverty and looked coldly on because of humble birth."

Nonetheless, conflict in the novel revolves around the potential for a lovematch between Edith and Lord Percy, mainly because Lady Hamilton's niece, Lady Ida Clare, schemes to thwart it. The qualities in Edith that so endear her to the Hamiltons have roused nothing but jealousy and ire in the heart of Lady Ida, who lives in the household. Lady Ida is determined to snare Lord Percy for herself, and she makes life miserable for

Edith. She even plants false evidence to indicate that Edith is a thief. So desperate is Lady Ida that the reader is led to consider the place of women in this society.

Through Lady Ida's situation Alcott shows that, even in this novel written at age seventeen, she possessed a seed of the feminist awareness which scholars and critics over a century later have found in her mature work.

Lady Ida, though "highborn and lovely," is "poor" and receives her living entirely from her aunt. Without a dowry, her prospects for an advantageous marriage are grim. The system, then, often turns women into rivals. Lady Ida, who is aging, hates Edith partly for displaying the youthful grace and beauty that might boost a noblewoman's chances. Lady Ida is also a social snob. When Lady Hamilton elevates Edith to "sister and friend," Lady Ida fears that her aunt will raise Edith "higher still." Lady Ida makes a vow. "I'll send her friendless from this house before I will see her placed above me, even by my aunt."

From another viewpoint, Lady Ida's situation hints at the means by which this rigidly divided society deals with its impoverished members. Lady Ida relies upon the largesse of her wealthier aunt, who willingly has her poor relation in the home. Those lower in the social scale depend upon servile work or the compassion of individuals like Edith or Lord Percy, who perform deeds of charity among them. Edith ministers to the dying former nursemaid to the Hamilton children, Theresa, and accepts responsibility for Theresa's teen-age son Louis, a page for the Hamiltons. In the absence of government or private welfare agencies, outreach by society's more fortunate members meets a crucial need.

Techniques

Alcott set herself the task of conveying the characters and atmosphere of a novel about manners and morals. Accordingly, it is peopled with lords and ladies who reside in a "stately home, half castle and half mansion," and who speak in sentimental, somewhat stilted language. These idle rich also indulge in pastimes proper to their station, like an excursion on horseback or an elaborate birthday dance and boating party. They circulate against a backdrop of servants and "happy villagers" or troubled ones. But Alcott had yet to hone her skills. The novel lacks the realism and lively dialogue that mark her mature work. The Inheritance is rich in conventions, formulaic plot lines and largely one-dimensional characters.

Too often the reader finds out what the characters are like through authorial commentary rather than subtleties of dialogue and action, although exceptions exist. Edith is repeatedly seen through the comments or thoughts of other characters, a technique which helps the reader to define and differentiate her. The problem is that characters are described so often that the effect surpasses any necessary rounding out or reinforcement, and discrepancies creep in. Thus Lady Hamilton says at one point that Edith is "poor and lowborn," at another that she is "wellborn, though poor." Amy tells Lady Ida that Edith's mother was "poor indeed but of good family." Edith and Lady Ida agree on "poverty and humble birth."

On the other hand, Alcott shows the ability to develop theme through contrast among characters, like pitting Edith against Lady Ida. Shown, too, is Alcott's capacity to incorporate classic elements, like a thwarted romance, a scheming villain. In fact, the novel reflects the two strands of writing for which Alcott became known after the discovery a century later of her anonymously published adult thrillers. The novel is a leisurely, sentimental romance that shifts to a fasterpaced tale of intrigue. The mysteries of Edith's past, which serve to evoke sympathy and enliven her story, resolve, although by startling coincidences. Can the reader believe that Edith's uncle, not knowing who she was, picked her out of all the orphans in Italy? Could the old servant really want to search for the rightful heir all those years? Nevertheless, Alcott persuades by her effective development of theme, of intrigue, of Edith's good character and Lord Percy's love, and by the sheer earnestness with which she tells the tale.

Themes

Edith is ceaselessly presented as the embodiment of remarkable goodness, noble self-sacrifice, infinite patience.

Besides her charitable deeds, she immerses herself in moral bondage to her host family. She effaces herself before Lady Ida, even agreeing to the woman's demand not to join the group's activities.

But Amy will not let Edith enter into seclusion. Thus Edith continues to participate, to discourage Lord Percy, and to yield before Lady Ida's verbal barbs which grow ever more hateful as the desirable nobleman increasingly, and despite himself, reveals where his affections lie.

For much of the novel it seems that Edith must find the identity and inner peace she hopes for through the self-sacrifice she practices fully. The reader might conclude for a time that virtue is its own reward, even though this virtue saddens and isolates the virtuous one. The reader may surmise also that personal moral qualities are better than wealth and social rank, because Edith holds herself apart and because those she confronts are not necessarily good and kind. These conclusions seem bolstered for a time by later events, which unravel Edith's past. A strange old man, her deceased father's servant, appears with papers that prove Edith is the lawful child of Amy's uncle.

This "eldest brother of Edith's kind protector" had married secretly "a fair Italian lady, poor, indeed, but of noble birth."

Now Edith faces a moral dilemma. She, not Amy's brother Arthur, is rightful heir to the Hamilton estate. Can she reveal the truth, and shock her family?

Not without bitter inner struggle does Edith reject her claim to inherit, but finally she burns the papers. Gladly, it seems, she will face "the loveless, solitary life now hers," the certain poverty and dependence on those "whose wealth was all now rightfully her own." Yet Alcott, despite her youth and inexperience, built thematic complexities into The Inheritance.

She constructed a moral network in which personal virtues cannot exist without obedience to the demands of social rank and the family ties integral to its existence. Even though Alcott depicts the aristocratic system as a source of unhappiness, in her novel the system is a given fact, a basic good.

Edith's morality includes her absolute acceptance of the importance of family values. She will not disrupt the lives of those to whom she now knows she is related. At the same time, the moral sense Alcott depicts in Edith embraces the entire system of birth, wealth and social rank. Given the society Alcott depicts, to achieve a satisfying result the Hamilton family should know the rightful heir.

Edith should be rewarded for her virtues by becoming known as that heir, by finding her birth family. She should find within the system the true happiness and identity she seeks.

Accordingly, Edith discovers that Louis the page has stolen money from Lady Hamilton. Edith counsels him, and he retaliates by secretly taking the Hamilton will before she can burn all the papers.

Lady Hamilton discovers that someone has stolen from her. Lady Ida, determined to oust Edith, plants evidence according to information from Lady Hamilton: The bills were marked by her with a tiny cross. Lady Ida produces such a bill she has marked herself, and accuses Edith. Lady Hamilton confronts Edith, who denies the crime. Edith refuses to reveal that Louis is the one who committed it.

Given by Lady Hamilton a deadline by which to reconsider, Edith wiles away the time, then tells her benefactress she cannot tell on moral grounds. But during that time a newly contrite Louis has confessed privately to Lady Hamilton and produced the will he took. Having read it, Lady Hamilton tells Edith that the truth is out. In an amazing display of magnanimity, the family rejoices and grants Edith her rightful place as heir. She in turn grants her true family the love and obedience she still feels she owes, and the right to continue in the household as before. The way is now paved for Lord Percy's marriage suit. Edith possesses the rank and wealth to accept him, but she remains her humble self. "I can bring you nothing but a grateful heart," she tells Lord Percy. "I need no richer dowry than the love of such a heart," he replies.

Edith's quest is at an end. The moral questions are resolved.

Adaptations

Not long after The Inheritance was auctioned in 1996 to Dutton Books, film and television rights were acquired by Cosgrove-Meurer Productions. In April 1997 the novel aired on CBS as a Kraft Premier Movie. The script preserves the basic plot lines of Edith's struggle with class differences, the deep family secret and romance, as well as the backdrop of nineteenth-century manners and morals.

The setting, however, is changed from England in the early nineteenth century to Massachusetts in the 1870s. The titles of nobility are removed. Changed, too, is the Hamilton household. No longer is there a widowed Lady Hamilton but a tremulous wife named Beatrice. Henry Hamilton, her husband, is a strong Victorian figure with some advanced views of how women ought to behave. He takes an avuncular interest in the welfare of Edith, the orphan the couple have taken in to be daughter Amy's companion.

Lord Walter Percy's name is changed to James Percy. In the CBS movie, Cari Shayne appears as Edith, Thomas Gibson as Percy, Meredith Baxter as Beatrice Hamilton, and Tom Conti as Henry Hamilton.

An abridged reading of the novel, produced by John McElroy was published in 1997 by Penguin Audiobooks of New York. The reader is Kate Burton.

Key Questions

Inasmuch as The Inheritance was Alcott's earliest novel, it can readily be considered in the broad context of its relationship to the body of her work. How did Alcott mature as a writer? Readers may consider the novel as a reflection of the two directions which critics believe Alcott took in her later work. In what ways does The Inheritance foreshadow the adult thrillers she wrote anonymously, and the novels written after 1868 which identified her in her day as "the children's friend"? The obvious context of feminist elements in the novel should also stimulate thought.

Besides the possibilities for a comparison of Edith to Beth March and Jo March in Little Women, readers may also wish to consider the "Amy" characters in both novels. Another fruitful line to pursue is the degree to which Alcott succeeds in a novel of manners and morals. Readers may wish to compare the work to that of a Jane Austen novel, such as Pride and Prejudice (1813).

1. How realistic is Edith's characterization? Is she truly likable in her role of fortuneless young woman forced to serve an aristocratic family?

2. What sort of romantic hero is Lord Percy? Is he too compliant with the system he benefits from?

3. Are the virtues the novel depicts, such as assisting the working poor, or clinging to family values, truly out of date?

4. What sort of motivations really drive Lady Ida? Does Alcott make them clear?

Does Lady Ida's hatred of Edith seem reasonable, inasmuch as Edith will reject any suitor she believes above her rank?

5. Does Alcott adequately develop theme? Are there possibilities for various interpretations?

6. Is the character of Lord Arlington truly necessary, given the plot requirements? Is he developed fully enough to be understandable?

7. How well does Alcott dramatize her scenes? Handle dialogue? Consider the rescue of Amy, the horseback ride, the birthday party, the confrontations with Lady Hamilton and Lady Ida Clare.

8. How believable are the events that bring Edith's case to a conclusion? Is there more of a children's fairy-tale quality to the novel, or is the plot mature in concept but unskilled in presentation?

Literary Precedents

The Inheritance has obvious ties to the sentimental tradition traceable to Jane Austen in England. An outstanding example of Austen's work is Pride and Prejudice (1813), which embodies the manners and sisterly relationships Alcott endeavored to portray in her work. The Gothic tradition is evident in Alcott's elements of intrigue, such as Lady Ida's machinations, the secret legacy, the mysterious old man, Edith's exotic Italian birth and the home that is an "old, decaying castle." Devices like these have ties to Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto (1764), and Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) and The Italian (1796).

Alcott read widely, and she especially liked Charlotte Bronte and Charles Dickens. Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847; see separate entry) includes tableaux vivants such as those in The Inheritance. Alcott's portrayals of the poor, like the servant Theresa, owe much to such Dickens novels as Oliver Twist (1838- 1841). Alcott loved the theater and Shakespeare, and her scenes are efforts to dramatize. The novel's opening scene particularly reflects the attempt to set the stage. For her creation of a selfless, virtuous Edith, Alcott is unquestionably indebted to the fact that her father Bronson Alcott, like many parents of his day, insisted that his daughters study and practice the morality depicted by John Bunyan in his Pilgrim's Progress (16781684).

Related Titles

Alcott's editors Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy see The Inheritance as the forerunner of an early short story, "The Masked Marriage," published in December 1852. The main character in the story, Alice de Adelon, shares both surname and nationality (Italian) with Edith, and the plot involves a thwarted romance and a secret inheritance. These editors also note certain similarities between The Inheritance and Alcott's classic, Little Women (1868-1869), written about the March family. Both novels, the editors claim, depict relationships among women, and both stress the importance of unselfish virtues.

In fact, in its sentimental aspects The Inheritance foreshadows what is generally thought of as the Little Women Series, the enormously popular "children's books" which Alcott published after Little Women (see separate entry) until shortly before she died in 1888. Of particular note are the novels Little Men (1871) and Jo's Boys (1882) which, together with Little Women, comprise the "March family trilogy."

Again in the case of Little Women, it is hard to miss the resemblance between the characters of Edith and Beth March.

In her overdrawn selflessness, her rejection of any sort of self-assertiveness, Edith foreshadows Little Women's quiet, self-sacrificing Beth. Unlike Edith, however, who lives on to reap a reward for her submissive virtues, Beth dies before she can reach maturity. Feminist critics a century later have interpreted Beth's death as Alcott's subtle integration into her sentimental novel of a disapproving attitude toward women's subservience.

From another perspective, Lady Ida foreshadows the scheming women in many of the "blood-and-thunder" tales Alcott published anonymously in magazines and dime novels until the popularity of Little Women forced her to another approach. Strong-willed Jean Muir, for example, in the novella Behind a Mask (1866; see separate entry) uses subterfuge to entrap in marriage a wealthy nobleman— though unlike Lady Ida, she succeeds. The novella V. V.: or, Plots and Counterplots (1865) finds the orphan, now victimized widow, Virginie Varens disguising herself in order to try to gain an estate and title by remarriage. Feminist critics see in tales like these the proofs of Alcott's rebellion against traditional domesticity for women.

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