

The Key to Rebecca Short Guide

The Key to Rebecca by Ken Follett

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Characters

All of the major characters in *The Key to Rebecca* are defined in terms of their sexuality. William Vandam and Alex Wolff differ not only in their national loyalties, but also in the way they relate to women.

Vandam had married a woman of great beauty and personal strength who unfortunately possessed very little warmth of character. Despite the shallowness of her affection for him, he remained faithful to her memory long after her death. During the course of events in *The Key to Rebecca*, he finally falls in love for a second time, in this case with a woman of deeper passions, and becomes dedicated to improving her lot in life.

Wolff, on the other hand, uses women only for his personal pleasure and has no sense of fidelity or genuine love. He delights in dominating his women, and in lovemaking he prefers the unusual and the forbidden to the everyday. In fact, it is while luring Elene Fontana into an evening of debauchery with himself and Sonja El Aram that Wolff's espionage activities begin to go awry.

Elene Fontana is much more like Vandam than like Wolff but has drifted into the life of a kept woman due to family problems and financial difficulties. Her father, an orthodox Jew living in the slums of Alexandria, lost his trade because of blindness, and at age fifteen Elene had been sent as a servant into a wealthy British household. When the son seduces her and she is fired, she fears returning in shame to her family and experiences a period of terrible poverty.

In desperation she allows herself to become the mistress of a wealthy man, the first of a series of generous benefactors.

Later, when Major Vandam recruits her as a counterspy, her true nature reveals itself, and she becomes Vandam's passionate lover and eventually his intended wife.

While the basic goodness of Elene is implicit in her virtuous love for Vandam, the basic evil of Sonja El Aram is implied by the perversity of her sexual life. A belly dancer who delights in exciting men through her sensual performances, Sonja is incapable of loving anyone but herself.

She possesses extraordinary ingenuity in inventing sexual games and is happiest when being rejected and humiliated, especially by another woman. Her desire for an encounter with Elene is even stronger than Wolff's and is a primary cause of his defeat.



Social Concerns

One significant concern in *The Key to Rebecca* is the problem of British colonialism in Egypt. Although the goal of the heroic characters in the novel is to assure the victory of Britain over Rommel's invading army, a formidable barrier to this victory is the fully justified hostility of the Egyptians toward the British. The British, the elite governing class, are portrayed as arrogant and intolerant toward their Egyptian subjects, almost universally using the insulting epithet "WOGS" to refer to the Egyptians. Follett emphasizes the demeaning nature of this ethnic reference by having the German spy, Alex Wolff, explain the word's origin. He tells Egyptian friends that the letters W-O-G-S stand for Workers on Government Service and were once stenciled on the uniforms of the Egyptian hirelings of the British Colonial Administration. The Egyptians are still subservient to the British and many of them clearly resent their second-class status in their own country.

One of the most resentful and rebellious of the Egyptians is the historical character, Anwar el-Sadat. Follett narrates an incident witnessed by the child Sadat, the execution and flogging of several Egyptians by the British in the village of Denshway, to explain the determined resentment of Sadat, the young Army officer. In the novel, Sadat becomes the center of an Egyptian plot to cooperate with the Germans in the overthrow of the British.

Sadat's co-conspirator, Kernel, is an Egyptian police officer who complicates the task of the British to subvert German espionage efforts when he feeds false information to British Intelligence about German master spy Alex Wolff. Entrusted with the surveillance of a houseboat suspected of being Wolff's center of operations, Kernel falsely reports to his British contact that Wolff is no longer making use of the houseboat. Later, he attacks and ties up a British officer who is about to capture Wolff.

Even more vehement in her resistance to the British is Sonja El Aram. Because her father was flogged to death by the British, she hates all Englishmen with an almost insane passion. The villainous Alex Wolff makes use of Sonja's hatred to convince her to help him steal British military secrets. Her powers of seduction prove very effective for accomplishing Wolff's purpose.

Although the British are shown to be morally superior to the Germans, Follett clearly indicates that in their treatment of the Egyptians, they deserve little respect and have, in fact, behaved much as one would expect their German enemies to behave. As a result, they defeat the Germans only after overcoming the Egyptian collaborators, enemies of their own creation.

Techniques

Follett weaves elements of history and Egyptian local color into his fictional narrative to create a sense of verisimilitude. The events of *The Key to Rebecca* occur against a historical and cultural backdrop which suggests their reality.

Actual figures of the 1940s rub elbows with characters of Follett's own creation in the streets and the homes of Cairo.

This exotic and cosmopolitan setting allows Follett to show the interaction of people of diverse nationalities. The novel's various scenes center primarily on the lives of a Jew, an Arab, an Englishman, and a German-Arab half breed. Lives that at first are unconnected are gradually drawn together. Most of the glimpses of the book's characters are narrated from a third person point of view. But Follett now and then gives a more intimate look into his characters' lives. On more than one occasion, Follett makes a sudden shift from third person to first person narration, a device that works most effectively in a scene told from the perspective of Alex Wolff.

It must be admitted also, that Follett spices up his spy tale by inserting scenes of sex and violence at regular intervals throughout the novel. The sex scenes are not especially noteworthy for their subtlety or indirectness.

Themes

The Key to Rebecca is about the struggle between a magnanimous decency and a brutal egotism. Although a number of the British characters are shown to be morally flawed, the heroic William Vandam embodies many of the best traits of civilized Western man. His contest of wits with German agent, Alex Wolff, pits the strengths and weaknesses of virtue against the strengths and weaknesses of vice.

Vandam is man of intense loyalties: a soldier who never shirks his duty to the Allied cause, an officer who respects and is respected by his men, a widower with a haunting love for his dead wife, a father who is nurturing and caring toward his son, and, eventually, a lover who would risk life and reputation for his beloved.

Attempting to satisfy all these loyalties, Vandam sometimes finds himself at cross purposes, and must extricate himself from dilemmas created by Wolff to defeat him. By coping with the most distressing and dangerous situations that Wolff can devise, Vandam establishes the superiority of courageous selflessness over maniacal vanity.

Wolff possesses the power of unbridled ruthlessness. His actions are never inhibited by concern for the innocent. As a result, he is a formidable opponent for the highly moral Vandam. On one previous occasion, in fact, Wolff has achieved an espionage coup at the expense of Vandam's reputation, and at the even greater cost of a woman's life. During the events central to The Key to Rebecca, Wolff's ruthlessness again gives him an undeniable advantage over Vandam. But this advantage becomes a liability when Wolff runs out on his closest ally, Sonja El Aram. By trusting a woman as corrupt as himself and then abandoning her, Wolff further assures his final defeat by raising the stakes too high in his contest with Vandam. He kidnaps Vandam's lover and his son in order to dissuade Vandam from pursuing him, and instead, he intensifies Vandam's determination to defeat him and everything he represents. This miscalculation leads to Wolff's capture and the triumph of good over evil.

Adaptations

The exotic setting and the sensational touches of *The Key to Rebecca* made it an ideal choice for a motion picture adaptation. In 1985, a two-part television miniseries based on Follett's book was produced by Taft Entertainment. The cast included Cliff Robertson as William Vandam, David Soul as Alex Wolff, Season Hubley as Elene Fontana, Lena Raymond as Sonja El Aram, and Robert Culp as Field Marshall Erwin Rommel.



Key Questions

Follett is one of the world's most celebrated authors of fiction about international intrigue, and *The Key to Rebecca* is one of his most celebrated novels. If group members are familiar with some of his other novels, a discussion may find an effective beginning in examining *The Key to Rebecca* for traits that it has in common with his other works and for how well those traits are handled relative to his other fiction. Another approach would be to dive into the historical background of the novel. Does Follett sensationalize mundane aspects of life in Egypt during the war? Is he faithful to the historical record, or does he move events and historical figures around to suit the flow of his plot—a common practice in historical novels. How important is the history to the pleasures to be derived from the tale?

1. Is the Egyptian hostility toward the British well motivated? How do they act on their hostility?

2. From the Egyptian point of view, what are the significant differences between the Germans and the British?

From our point of view as readers of the novel, which side is more villainous?

3. How are William Vandam and Alex Wolff contrasted? What does each represent on a moral level?

4. Are Wolff's miscalculations inevitable results of his personality? Are they symptomatic of evil?

5. Is Vandam more fortunate in his second love than his first? What advantages did his wife offer him that Elene Fontana does not? What advantages does his new love have over his wife? Which woman would bring him the greater happiness?

6. Is Elene Fontana a stereotypical heroine or does she have traits that make her different from typical romantic heroines?

7. Sonja El Aram and Elen Fontana both have checkered pasts, making Sonja a potential romantic heroine. What turn in her character makes her a villain? What turn in her character makes Elen a heroine?

8. What do Sonja's sexual attitudes symbolize?

9. How effective is Follett's use of historical figures? Is he true to their real lives?

10. What are the effects of the firstperson narratives?

11. Do the violent and sexual scenes advance any themes in the novel?

Literary Precedents

Although *The Key to Rebecca* is based upon an actual incident during World War II, an account of which can be found in Anthony Cave Brown's *Bodyguard of Lies*, it is fundamentally an example of the novel of espionage and intrigue. Its plot and atmosphere have more in common with the works of Ian Fleming and Frederick Forsyth than with objective accounts of history. Enough factual details are contained in Follett's story to place it in the tradition of the historical novel, but it is the sense of the exotic and the clandestine which gives the book its fascination.

A less substantial but plausible connection suggests itself between *The Key to Rebecca* and various works centering on the decline of the British Empire. The writings of E. M. Forster, Joyce Cary, and George Orwell (see separate entries) may at least be faintly echoed in Follett's novel.



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