The Keys of the Kingdom Short Guide

The Keys of the Kingdom by A. J. Cronin

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Characters

Francis Chisolm is a character of the same unaffected purity as the young David Copperfield or Oliver Twist in Dickens's novels of those names. Chisolm suffers extreme hazards and hardships in China while he attempts to clothe the poor around him, relieve their pain, and extend to them unprejudiced friendship. He is, despite heroic efforts, chided, and is under review by his superiors for the small number of converts he makes among the Chinese.

In contrast to Chisolm, his contemporaries, dining and drinking with the elite of England, seek to achieve high positions in the Church, where one succeeds essentially for his amiability and support of the arts. In this the reader is presented with appearances versus reality. The difference may be seen in this way. In Chisolm's superiors are the doctrinally correct words that issue from a life of uncompassionate adherence to the dogmas of the Church. On the other hand, Chisolm has not led a life of ignorance or dogma, but has a compassion that comes from a life of understanding. But a character such as Chisolm, and the corresponding theme in opposition to organized religion, would not again issue from Cronin's pen. Cronin returned, a few years after The Keys of the Kingdom was published, to Catholicism, the faith which he had abandoned inwardly, if not outwardly, in his youth. Chisolm is, then, the embodiment of Cronin's faith at the time of writing.

Social Concerns/Themes

In The Keys of the Kingdom Cronin is concerned with two main themes, one of which is a constant concern throughout his life and work, while the other was never to appear again with such fervor. The first is Cronin's concern for children who are ill-treated or neglected. As is often the case in Cronin's novels, children also have great potential intellectually and socially.

His protagonist, Francis Chisolm, is such a child, an orphan, and when he is removed from adverse conditions in which he is being raised, the reader sees Chisolm bloom into a bright youth who is full of unprejudiced compassion, a trait which his early hardships brought to him. Such a theme recurs in Cronin's works, as, for instance, in the character of Mary in Hatter's Castle (1931; see below).

The second theme is theological.

Francis becomes a priest, but from the time he begins his training, he finds himself at odds with his superiors and peers in theological stances. He announced to a teacher, "Surely, sir, doctrine is such an accident of birth that God can't place an exclusive value on it." The statement typifies the faith that Cronin, in this novel, would proffer. It is a faith opposed to organized religion, but only insofar as it is harmful to faith.

Techniques

The Keys of the Kingdom is a bildungsroman, the development taking place within a flashback. Cronin introduces the protagonist as an old priest who is under review for his odd doctrinal positions, or, more accurately, his mere wording of doctrines: He would like to express a truth by way of Confucius as well as by way of Christ. The reader sees this in a short first chapter, after which Cronin takes the reader through fast-moving chapters which recount the protagonist's life. He returns to the original scene only in the last chapter.

Adaptations

The Keys of the Kingdom was released as a motion picture in 1944 by Paramount. Directed by John M. Stahl, it starred Gregory Peck, Thomas Mitchell, Vincent Price, Roddy McDowall, and Peggy Ann Garner. Critics had less praise for the film than might have been expected. They were largely disappointed with the trite ways in which the film dealt with difficult issues in the novel.

A film version of The Citadel, starring Robert Donat and produced by MGM, appeared in 1938 and was voted the best film of that year by the New York Film Critics. It appeared more recently, starring Ben Cross, in a ten- part series on Masterpiece Theatre on public television.

Literary Precedents

The Keys of the Kingdom resembles Dickens's novels in its image of a naturally good character persecuted for being good. And it is similar to Dickens's Great Expectations (1860-1861) in its picture of a mistreated orphan boy in love with a young sweetheart who dies. But the setting of The Keys of the Kingdom is more modern than earlier English novels, as are the problems the characters encounter. It is more similar to a novel such as the French writer Georges Bernanos' Diary of a Country Priest (1936). Indeed, the protagonists in both novels are very much the same character.

Literary Precedents Cronin's fiction falls very much in the tradition of Charles Dickens's in his concern for the poor and his portraits of young and poor boys who are nonetheless bright and full of high ideals.

They are also personal portraits: Dickens has much of himself tied into David Copperfield (1849-1850), as does Cronin in The Keys of the Kingdom and The Citadel.

The Citadel (see below) is a bildungsroman, a novel which traces the development or life of a character from youth into adulthood. The Citadel takes the reader through the very first diagnosis of the young Dr. Manson, through a sometimes tumultuous marriage and his compromise of his medical ethics, to a point at which he recovers his moral stance and plans to set up a practice with friends who hold like values in practicing medicine. In this development the novel is not so similar to Dickens's novels in that Dickens's protagonists, if they fall, do so out of ignorance, not out of willfulness. Although The Citadel retains a line through to earlier English novels, in this respect it is more like Somerset Maugham's Of Human Bondage, or E. M. Forster's The Longest Journey (1907). The descriptions of high society are much like what Forster achieved in Howards End (1910) and Room With a View (1908), descriptions which take the sheen off of all the rich possess and leave the reader with a strong distaste — sometimes, as in The Citadel, even repulsion — for the characters. In keeping with this technique, he, like Dickens, causes his reader to empathize with the lower class.

Related Titles

The Citadel Within The Citadel (1937), as in many of Cronin's other novels, there is a constant concern for the poor, especially with the poor whose situation is worsened by an aristocracy who, morally blinded by wealth, use the poor for increase. And Cronin concerns himself with the corrupting power of money not only on his aristocratic characters, but on his protagonist. At one point in The Citadel he shows the dilemma wealth placed on the protagonist, Dr. Manson: "a struggle between all that he believed and all he wished to have." Manson gives in to his desire for wealth, keeping a horde of hypochondriac and aristocratic patients.

Inventing sicknesses for them, he charges incredible fees for the injections — useless — which are supposed to cure them. This is the same Manson who, early in his career, was pitted against such practices of medicine. To Cronin, with wealth comes the danger of moral decay. Among Manson's aristocratic friends are those who are noble and have not lost their heads to money, but these are few and the exception.

When he returns to his practice of honest medicine, he breaks the loose ties, not sadly, he had made among the rich. Their commitments went only so deep as their own desire for gain.

Converse to this, Cronin has a deep respect for the working class, derived from his own poverty when young and from working in mines in Wales and throughout England. Cronin often visited and worked in the tunnels that were the lives and sometimes equally the deaths of the miners. These workers appear in many of Cronin's novels, and in The Citadel he gives his audience a deeper look into their prejudices, but more, their deep commitments to those who deal fairly and justly with them.

Unlike the rich, the workers and the poor throughout Cronin's novels have a deep sense of respect for humanity. If they hold a grudge or are, indeed, prejudiced, such a fault can be traced back to a source of the poor's struggle to keep a sense of their own self-worth in a world which often uses and looks down on them.

Manson is a character of the natural and unaffected goodness of a protagonist from one of Charles Dickens's novels, but he is also a tragic figure.

He compromises his values, but in his fall, a fortunate fall, he is restored to earlier values, though not without punishments. Manson's wife, Cris, is a patient and loving wife who, even in the face of Manson's extramarital affair, perseveres. She is very much the image of Mary in Hatter's Castle (1931), but not at all the passive wife of Brodie.

In The Citadel, Cronin expresses distaste for the rich and respect for the poor. When moral stances appear in Cronin's works, they appear without sermon. Even the passages in which Cronin moralizes are exact, succinct, honest. But in these passages, and in passages clearly taken from his own experiences with the poor, in the mines, with the rich patients he kept in London, there is a change of voice which is not

consistent with the voice in which the rest of the novel is written. In such instances the reader cer tainly knows that the voice of Cronin the doctor is before him, and not the voice of Cronin the novelist. This may well have contributed to his popularity, and hence the critics' admiring comments on his honesty. But to other readers it may appear as a flaw in the fabric of the novel. In either case, similar instances of change in "voice" are easily found in both early and modern English novelists.

Hatter's Castle In Hatter's Castle (1931), Cronin deals with an interest he developed when he worked, during his college years, in an asylum for the insane: the cruelty that mentally ill people can inflict on their loved ones. His main character, James Brodie, is unbalanced. He is a self-assumed English gentleman — a hatter by trade — possessed by an inordinate degree of pride in his family and personal possessions. But the novel is not so much concerned with Brodie as it is with how his pride, possessiveness, and fiercely tyrannous and despotic behavior finally destroy his family, reputation, and all that he has.

The novel is a tragedy, then, in the classical sense with one difference: Brodie, the tragic figure, comes to perceive none of the reasons for his fall. Brodie is more like the character of Mr. Wilcox in E. M. Forster's Howard's End (1910). Neither of these characters will "connect"; they will not realize their own link with the rest of humanity. Although Mr. Wilcox finally connects, after the death of an important figure in Forster's novel, Brodie, remains impenetrable to reason even after the suicide of his most loved daughter, an act to which Brodie has driven her by his fierce nature and impossible demands. The only fate Cronin leaves for his tragic figure is the hope of death. With Brodie there is little psychology that is useful to the audience.

While James Brodie himself is merely a horror whose reasons for being so remain unanswered, the other characters are better psychological studies.

All the characters are stripped, by Brodie, of their basic human dignity.

To Cronin, being human demands that a person be given due respect and justice no matter what his station in life may be. But Brodie strips his family of all these basic rights, and Cronin unfolds the psychological effects of Brodie's behavior upon his victims.

Brodie's wife is obedient to all of her husband's demands and sickeningly patient under his derision after each deed she performs, no matter how well she has done. She has no spirit, not even as much as Chaucer's Griselda.

She never resists, nor does she demand any realization from Brodie of her worth. In such a passive state she succumbs to disease, asking for a doctor only when it is too late. She dies, Brodie growing impatient with the amount of time she takes, with no real sense of her worth in the world. But she has loved her children, a reward Brodie would never have.

Second, and contrary to Brodie's wife, is his eldest daughter, Mary, who fights against Brodie and seeks, not just to live, but live with a sense of purpose and self-worth.

Innocently, not in the least realizing the outcome of the act, she has become pregnant by a not altogether ignoble young man whom she loves. Brodie, upon finding out, beats her and turns her, dressed only in a nightgown, out of the house during the worst winter storm of the year. In her deliberate choice to survive, Cronin shows that such a choice is the first step in acquiring and sustaining an understanding of human worth, not least one's own. Cronin later rewards her with a happy life and marriage, rewards which submitting to the false dignity of the hatter's castle would never have afforded her.

Brodie's youngest daughter, on the other hand, succumbs to the abuse, breaking mentally under the constant rage, and kills herself. She, unlike her mother, acts under the strain. Yet unlike Mary, she acts negatively, having tied up every shred of her worth in the performance of a task to please her father. It is a task done for a man who cannot be pleased and a task at which she fails.

Hatter's Castle draws heavily on the traditions in English novels. There is the symbol of a house, as in Dickens's Bleak House (1852-1853) or Forster's Howard's End, standing as a symbol for a larger theme. In this case it is Brodie's absurd idea of himself and his family. It is an image his family is embarrassed to live under and which his friends mock. He is, in a sense, the Mad Hatter from Lewis Carroll's tales of Alice.

The novel is, too, a Scottish novel in the way that Sir Walter Scott or George MacDonald wrote such works. Cronin writes the dialogue in a rendition, more readable than MacDonald's transcription, of the Scots' dialect of English. And the novel follows the use of devices seen in Gothic and Victorian novels: the horror and gloom, melodrama, occasional coincidences, stock characters, and, at the end, a ghostly image of Brodie appearing before his maddened daughter, as well as a rendition of a little Gothic castle like Horace Walpole's in Twickenham. Walpole was a primary Gothic novelist, and his home was a model of many Gothic novels: It was a place full of dark staircases, armor and weapons in corners, and the outside looked like a mock castle. But for all the devices Hatter's Castle contains of earlier English novels, it is a modern novel in that Cronin deals with sexual issues with less restraint than Dickens or Scott could. In this respect he follows the sensitivity Forster used in dealing with such issues in Howard's End.

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