Lady Merion's Angel Short Guide

Lady Merion's Angel by Jane Yolen

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Overview

"Lady Merion's Angel" is a funny, upbeat tale of a young woman's experiences with a small, cherubic angel that wanders into her prized, immaculate garden. Somewhat spoiled and unhappy that she seems no longer the center of her father's universe, Lady Merion greets the angel first as "a welcome distraction" and then as an irritant that may mess up her flowers the way her half-brother Clyve had ruined her tapestry. The little angel, quietly but determinedly inspires a short journey of selfdiscovery in Lady Merion, who discovers in her heart there is more love and compassion than anger and jealousy. None of this is weepy or thumping-on-the-head moralizing; the story remains throughout charming and funny.

About the Author

Born on February 11,1939, in New York City, Jane Yolen showed early promise as a writer; she wrote a play for her firstgrade class, and a piece on pirates written in the eighth grade was likely the source for her first published book, Pirates in Petticoats (1963).

Yolen wrote avidly while attending Smith College, producing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. She graduated in 1960 and took jobs with publishers, while continuing to write. Her success with books for young adults and younger children enabled her to move on to graduate school, earning a master's in education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts, and she eventually returned to Smith College to teach. She has become Lady Merlon's Angel one of America's most esteemed experts on literature for young readers. Amid the vigorous activity of her writing career, Yolen has managed to marry David Stemple, a college professor, and have three children, a daughter and two sons. Her experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing, including her fantasies.

Setting

The era in which "Lady Merion's Angel" is set is the seventeenth century; it was an era in which there were lords and ladies who had sumptuous homes and many servants, and it was an era in which at age fourteen Lady Merion would be considered old enough to marry. The place is either northern England or Scotland (probably Scotland, because it was a Scottish locale that inspired the story), a place north of the firths where English would be spoken.

Lady Merion's garden sounds like a traditional English garden, with well-kept paths and a mixing of trees and flowering bushes. Given that Lady Merion has taken good care of it, it sounds like a place that might actually attract a wandering angel, as at first appears to be the case when an angel flies in to smell the flowers.

The action in the kitchen serves primarily to show that others besides Merion can see the angel and that their attitudes toward it are similar to her own. Cook does not seem frightened by the appearance of a supernatural being, and in fact seem annoyed by its presence, treating the angel like a stray bird, or, as Lady Merion suggests, like a bat. This suggests a matter-offact acceptance of the existence of angels— there is no philosophizing or debate about the possible existence of angels; instead they are a fact of life.

The focus of the narrative of "Lady Merion's Angel" narrows as the angel moves into the home. From an expansive garden, where Lady Merion shoos it away, the angel flies into the confines of a kitchen, where Lady Merion's attitude changes from worry that the angel may mess up her garden the way Clyve messed up her tapestry to concern for the angel's safety, and then Lady Merion takes it to her bedroom, a place of privacy that symbolizes her inner self. It is within Lady Merion that the important action takes place, as she confronts her own inner demons in the form of angels and takes a leap in maturity as she recognizes the childishness of her attitude toward her family and discovers in herself the ability to say no to her selfish desires and yes to caring for and protecting another.

Social Sensitivity

Angels themselves are a controversial subject in the present age. As in "Lady Merion's Angel," the existence of angels was once taken as matter-of-fact. The tone and structure of "Lady Merion's Angel" are enough like a fairy tale (although not exactly like a fairy tale) for those who are uncomfortable with the idea that angels exist to accept it as a charming moralistic fantasy. Certainly, many grown-ups would like young adults to make the leap in maturity that Lady Merion does, whether angel inspired or not. For those who believe in the existence of angels, "Lady Merion's Angel" may be a welcome respite from the modern age of skepticism; it presents cherubic angels like those found in countless paintings and sculptures in a manner that makes them seem like natural, even everyday, parts of human experience.

Literary Qualities

"Lady Merion's Angel" is a deceptively told tale, a comic narrative about a serious subject. The comedy is both forthright and sly. The chasing of Lady Merion's visitor in the kitchen is broad slapstick, and Lady Merion's assertion "an angel is not a bat to tangle in your hair" is broad comic dialogue. On the other hand, much of the story's humor lies in the sly juxtaposition of the remarkable and the commonplace, as when "Lady Merion wondered idly if the aura [of the angel] afforded any kind of protection from the rain. It rained a lot north of the firth." The humor is often carefully layered into Lady Merion's point of view, as when she notes that "getting a message out of it [the angel] would be a miracle," as if the angel's presence in her garden were not miracle enough. Much of the comedy is ironic, relying on a presentday audience's probable perception of angels as always miraculous, while the story's characters react to angels as ordinary; the phrase "The angel was a welcome distraction" sets the tone for the ironic humor of "Lady Merion's Angel."

Yet the comedy belies the underlying seriousness of the story. Lady Merion suffers from jealousy and the feeling that she is being neglected, failing to realize that it is she who is separating herself from her family, as she does by refusing to attend Clyve's party. From a standpoint of structure, the angel is plot device—in this case a device that draws Lady Merion from her worldly concerns into her own conscience. Lady Merion has been using her garden as a place to escape from her family, but the angel draws her into herself enough that it becomes plain that Lady Merion has used her garden to distract her from herself, and when she sees the angel, it is to her "a welcome distraction"—something to take her mind off of her destructive and painful thoughts about her family life. As her personal creation, the garden is representative of Lady Merion herself; it is an outward manifestation of the beauty and order (the garden is carefully manicured) that Lady Merion wishes for her family life. The angel's appearance in it is therefore an appearance of the divine in her life, and it is significant that she views it as a sign of disorder. The idea that a disorderly life, especially a disorderly emotional one, is preferable to the well-ordered life Lady Merion imagines that she wants, one in which she is the center of attention, is echoed by the darkest angel that speaks in an orderly monotone, "as if it were chanting."

When the angel flies inside Lady Merion's home, it brings chaos to the orderly life in the kitchen, but it is not the angel that is chaotic, the chaos stems from the way the kitchen staff reacts to it. This movement into the kitchen draws Lady Merion into herself by eliciting from her an emotional but fundamentally kind response: She protects the angel. The full importance of this action becomes clear in the third stage of the story, the action in Lady Merion's bedroom, a private place where she can be herself without concern for other people.

There, she notes how the angel is like her half-brother Clyve, although not exactly like him. Her reaction is to want to protect the angel from harm, especially when other angels show up demanding its return, declaring it to be a naughty child. "But is just a wee thing," Lady Merion says, realizing that she is echoing "what Nurse had tried to say

to Lady Merion herself when Clyve had so tangled her tapestry." Thus both structure and theme are united at the end, with Lady Merion realizing through her care for the little angel that within her is a fundamentally caring nature, and that she cares for Clyve. The visiting angel has given her an opportunity to see within herself, to know herself better than she had before.

Themes and Characters

Lady Merion was working in the garden when she saw the angel. She should have been at her half brother Clyve's second birthday party, but she was furious with him. He had gotten into her room again and this time he had ruined her embroidery.

The angel was a welcome distraction.

Thus begins the tale of "Lady Merion's Angel," with the situation and fundamental issue of the story laid out. Fourteenyear-old Merion may be old enough to marry, but she is still beset by childish impulses; her staying away from Clyve's party is more the act of a child than that of an adult. The angel is at first as distraction from her angry, jealous thoughts.

She notes that "It was definitely an angel; small, but not small enough to be a fairy. Its wings were white and feathered, rather than veined like a church window."

The angel is cherubic, small, and like a baby. It is also a mystery, and by being a mystery it helps Lady Merion discovery mysteries within herself. Lady Merion becomes irritated with the angel, fearing that it will mess up her garden the way Clyve messed up her tapestry, but Lady Merion is intelligent enough to realize that there may be more to the angel than its having a passing fancy for her beautiful garden: "But why, Lady Merion wondered, is an angel in the garden?"

Close observation of the angel reveals little of its intentions: The angel's skin was sweetly pink as a baby's, with the same round flesh that Clyve had. Its eyes were gooseberry green, not at all like Clyve's, which were like small round blue pebbles washed up on shore. There was an aura around the angel, a kind of apricot color that shimmered in the sun. Lady Merion wondered idly if the aura afforded any kind of protection from the rain. It rained a lot north of the firth.

Although Lady Merion does not recognize the importance of her observation, the story's audience is likely to do so: She compares the little angel to Clyve. This is an important clue for the unifying theme of the story, because through the angel Lady Merion will recognize some truths about herself and her attitude toward Clyve.

A significant aspect of the angel is that it does not speak. Other angels in the story do speak, but not this one. Instead it seems to wait expectantly for Lady Merion to figure out what is going on: "But the angel, small and plump and quite naked, settled over the rose arbor. It seemed to be waiting for her." Lady Merion realizes that "getting a message out of it [the angel] would be a miracle. But clearly it had one to deliver."

This tells the reader not only about the angel, but about Lady Merion—that she has the intelligence to recognize that the angel expects something of her, that it has a message for her to find out.

The message is a tough one, not easy to find out, because it is a matter of selfdiscovery. Lecturing Lady Merion about her attitudes would be pointless, because lectures would not result in the leap in maturity that she needs to make. Instead, Lady Merion follows the angel, not realizing that as she does so she is making a journey into her own heart. When she follows the angel into the kitchen, Lady Merion sees that "Cook had a broom out and was trying to swat the angel"; this would seem to echo her attitude in the garden—that the angel is a pest—but her reaction is made without thought, and she protects the angel, saving it from Cook and taking it into her own bedroom.

By doing this, she does something she would not have done for Clyve, whose visits to her bedroom have plainly been unwelcome intrusions that she has resented. She gathers the angel into her arms, and "The angel felt warm and nicely squishy, like Clyve right after his bath." This moment stands out in the narrative, because it represents a shift in Lady Merion's thinking, which had been bitter toward Clyve and her family; by holding the angel, with whom she had just a moment before been angry like she was angry at Clyve, she remembers something she likes about Clyve.

This shift to caring rather than anger sets up the confrontation with the angels that come for the little one.

"The room was suddenly golden with light and crowded with angels, some dark as plawms, some light as peaches." They have come for the wayward angel in Lady Merion's arms, and they seem angry. She refuses to surrender the angel, "How do I know it's yours?" Lady Merion stands her ground, as if the group of angels were no more than a group of adults pestering her: "Don't be tiresome, child," says one. "I am not tiresome in the least.... Nor am I child," she retorts.

Then the darkest angel is deputized to reason with her: "There was an odd smell coming from the angel [the darkest one], and it was not—Lady Merion was sure— either lavender or lily. She knew her flowers. This smell was more compost and rot."

It says: "Give us the child and we will give you your heart's desire."

"And what is my heart's desire?" Lady Merion asked.

"The ... removal of your stepmother and half brother. The trees to quicken in your garden. Your father to turn his face once more to you." The angel said these things in measured tones, round and perfect. But somehow, said that way it all sounded . ..

pitiful. And childish.

Lady Merion hears her thoughts voiced by another, and they seem childish to her. At this moment, Lady Merion makes her leap from viewing the world like a child to viewing the world like an adult, and the unifying theme is clarified: It is the difference between childish perceptions of family and grown-up perceptions.

This is a difficult theme to present in a way that is concrete without becoming simplistic, especially in a tale intended for an audience that is likely to include those who have yet to make Lady Merion's leap from one point of view, that of a child, to the dramatically different one of an adult. Even so, Yolen does an artful job of never lecturing, never explaining, but having the events of her story speak for themselves. "But it is just a wee thing," Lady Merion says of the angel, almost instantly noting that her comment is like that made by Nurse when Clyve ruined her tapestry. In the garden at the start of "Lady Merion's Angel," she had been all anger toward Clyve, the rival child who had stolen her father's attention and messed up her life, but in her bedroom, alone with the angels and her thoughts, her response has changed to understanding: Clyve is only a small boy, not a rival child. As an adult, Lady Merion has a new perspective, recognizing innocence in both angel and half brother. Even for those not ready to take Lady Merion's leap, this is a good explanation of why grown-ups do not necessarily see conflicts between children in the life-and-death terms that youngsters may. Free of the burden of her jealousy of her brother, able to recognize the angel in him, Lady Merion "went to find out how much of the party she had missed."

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does the darkest angel seem childish to Lady Merion?

2. Why are not Lady Merion and Cook in "Lady Merion's Angel" frightened or awed by the angel that flies into Lady Merion's garden and then into the kitchen?

3. What does the large dark angel mean when it says, "That will be counted in the child's favor .. . And yours"?

4. "Lady Merion's Angel" is comic. Does this detract from its serious theme?

Should serious themes be presented only in serious fiction? Can comedy be serious?

5. Are angels, which some religions believe in, appropriate subject matter for fiction, or should writers avoid them because they are part of religious beliefs?

6. What is the darkest angel?

7. Why does Lady Merion go to her broth-er's birthday party?

8. Why would Lady Merion decide to make a "tapestry full of horses for" Clyve's room after he had invaded her room and ruined the tapestry she was working on?

9. Lady Merion wonders, "But how much company is a silent angel?" How much company is her silent angel?

10. Lady Merion seems angry with the angel for not talking, so why does she gather it into her arms?' Would its hitting its head not seem to serve it right for being irritating?

11. Why does the angel in the garden not speak?

12. Yolen says the angel in the garden of "Lady Merion's Angel" was inspired by a butterfly. How is the angel like a butterfly?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Why would Lady Merion be deemed old enough to marry at age fourteen?

In what era would this have been the custom? What other grown-up behavior would have been expected of Lady Merion?

2. How does the angel of "Lady Merion's Angel" compare with the others in Here There Be Angels?

3. What does the Bible say about angels?

Do any of them resemble the one in "Lady Merion's Angel"?

4. What might Lady Merion's garden look like? What would have been typical of English gardens of her era?

5. Lady Merion seems to tend her garden and make her tapestry for pleasure.

What else would a young woman of her age and social station have done for entertainment in seventeenth-century Scotland?

6. What sort of tapestry would Lady Merion work on? What would it look like? What would be its most important features? How would she make it?

7. What would the kitchen of Lady Merion's home look like? What food would have been prepared there?

For Further Reference

"Jane (Hyatt) Yolen." In Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series. Volume 29.

Edited by Hal May and James G. Lesniak.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1990, pp. 463-69.

A summary of Yolen's publications, with a brief interview with Yolen.

Cooper, Ilene. Booklist 93, 4 (October 15, 1996): 425. A tepid recommendation.

Telgen, Diane. "Jane Yolen." In Something about the Author. Volume 75. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp. 223-29. A list of Yolen's publications, with a short biography.

West, Michelle. Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction 92, 5 (May 1997): 128. Admires Here There Be Angels, stating that "the book is aimed at a younger readers market, but it really is an all-age collection."

Wilton, Shirley. School Library Journal 42, 11 (November 1996): 119. Enthusiastic recommendation.

Yolen, Jane. "America's Cinderella." Children's Literature in Education 8 (1977): 21-9.

Yolen discusses the history of the Cinderella fairy tale, explaining that she prefers the strong character of the original tale to the weakened versions in modern retellings. "The Woman Who Loved a Bear" is an example of her continuing interest in the Cinderella figure, particularly the strong, courageous version she finds in the original tales but not in many modernized versions.

——. "Jane Yolen: The Bardic Munchies."

Locus 26 (January 1991): 4, 78. Yolen discusses why she thinks writing for children is challenging, as well as what she regards as important elements in her fiction.

——. "Jane Yolen." In Jim Roginski's Behind the Covers: Interviews with Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1985, pp. 224-38. In an interview with Roginski, Yolen explains why she writes what she does.

——. "Jane Yolen: Telling Tales."Locus 39 (August 1997): 4-5, 72. In an interview, Yolen talks about the creative process involved in composing her works.

——. Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood. New York: Philomel Books, 1981. Yolen explains why she prefers tough characters, noting that they help to clarify the differences between good and evil by defying evil.

——. The Writer (March 1997): 20. Yolen is interviewed by John Koch. She explains her views about style, and discusses why she enjoys writing.

——. Writing Books for Children. Boston: The Writer, 1983 (revised edition). A discussion of how to write books for children, emphasizing technique.

Related Titles

Yolen has written several stories and poems about angels, a number of which appear in Here There Be Angels, Although in stories such as "Lady Merion's Angel" and "Fallen Angel" (please see separate entry) Yolen's angels may be childlike and innocent, overall her angels are varied and not uniform in shape, size, or tone. The angel of "Fallen Angel" is large, looking like a grownup, but the angels of "Lady Merion's Angel" are small, looking like babies. Although the angel that tempts Merion is childish, with only its darkness and earthy smell to indicate its menace, Yolen's angels can be more insidious, as well as frightening. For instance, the angel of "Angelica," even in doing a seemingly good act, is terrifying in the depth of her evil; she brought the serpent to Eden and she saves the life of Adolf Hitler so that he may continue her destructive work. Yolen's angels can even be mystifying in their neutrality: The angel of "Wrestling with Angels" is mysterious in its designs, only being revealed as the angel of death when it finally comes to take away its old antagonist, a former police officer who had intercepted it on its way to a child many years before. In general, Yolen's angels are as varied as her unicorns (for instance, in Here There Be Unicorns), and their appearances tend to be as revealing of the inner natures of the human characters as is the angel in "Lady Merion's Angel."

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