The Last of the Wine Short Guide

The Last of the Wine by Mary Renault

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

Contents

Characters

In the Greek custom to which the title The Last of the Wine refers, a lover tosses out the dregs of his wine to form the initial of his beloved's name. This is a constant symbol, according to Landon Burns, of "the depth and brevity of love." Alexias and Lysis humanize the power of love, as Socrates taught, each drinking life to its lees in honor of the other. The Greeks knew, and Renault shows, that not all men can do so. The greater or lesser capacity to love, as well as the outright failure or rejection of love, motivates all of the principal characters of The Last of the Wine, perhaps most tragically with Alkibiades, the magnetic but flawed leader-turned-traitor who cost Athens dearly for its infatuation with him.

Like Dion in The Mask of Apollo (1966), who led Athens into its disastrous Syracusan adventure, Alkibiades is afflicted grievously by the power forced on him "by the mediocrity, or even the downright moral weakness of his associates." Alkibiades, whose downfall parallels Athens' in The Last of the Wine, proves incapable of the love of honor and freedom and truth over the seduction of cold-eyed, cold-hearted politicians whose love of self blocks their rise. Alkibiades cannot rise to the redeeming self-sacrifice necessary to scale Plato's ladder of love.

Social Concerns

Renault explained her refusal to use the past as a metaphor for the present in a 1973 essay, "History in Fiction": ". . . if what you are really talking about is Nazi Germany or Vietnam or Texas, why not say so instead of misleading your readers about Nero or Caesar or Troy?" Beginning with The Last of the Wine, considered her masterpiece, Renault scrupulously followed Herakleitos' maxim "You could step twice into the same river," recreating ancient Greece and bringing her readers to it, not it to them, as Bernard Dick has noted.

In Athens' fall to Sparta in the Peloponnesian Wars, the setting of The Last of the Wine, Renault offers historical perspectives on problems still bedeviling Western society: the seemingly inevitable linkage of corruption with power in charismatic political leaders like Alkibiades; the nature of democracy and the responsibility of the gifted individual to it; the ambivalent potential of the homosexual relationship. The Last of the Wine illuminates such complexities, and more, in the unforgettably clear light of the Greece of Socrates and Plato.

Techniques

Renault learned well from the master sculptors of the Parthenon, who worked with both Greece's incomparable light and the deep shadows it casts, carving their immortal reliefs to be viewed in the context of the monument as a whole. Landon Casson has pointed out that as Renault shaped the "very special and precious relationship that could exist between men who were lovers" in The Last of the Wine, she simultaneously revealed "the pathetic lot of Athenian women of good family . . . the role of housekeeper and brood mare." Renault's unfailing good taste and Classical restraint also illuminates such sobering Greek practices as infanticide, bringing them into convincing perspective.

As well as adapting material from Platonic dialogues in The Last of the Wine and fleshing out the historical account of the Peloponnesian Wars, Renault adopted the first-person memoir style Classical writers loved and used so often. Renault employed this narrative device in all of her Greek novels except Fire from Heaven (1969), achieving an immediacy and freshness that strongly involves her readers in actions which seem familiar, because of their quintessentially human qualities.

Her characters bridge the gulfs of time and culture between their lives and the readers'.

Themes

Just as the search for individual arete, the inward thirst for achievement knowingly made beautiful, formed the basis for the society of the Athenian Golden Age, the chief theme of The Last of the Wine is Alexias' growth to manhood through his profound relation with Lysis, who was himself the historical subject of Plato's dialogue on Friendship. Together Alexias and Lysis progress toward perception of the Absolute Good, Absolute Beauty, Absolute Truth delineated in Plato's Symposium. Plato espouses the nature of Love, in which physical expression is only the first step to the ennoblement of the human soul.

As Lysis guides Alexias' development, both men illustrate the Classical pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty won by overcoming physical and spiritual suffering. The scene of Lysis' beating during Renault's parody of an athletic contest reveals the perversion of Athens' ideals that lead to the decline of its Golden Age. Alexias, however, by selling himself to feed Lysis, achieves his own maturity. To philotimo, the outward striving for honor, brings both Lysis and Alexias the inward beauty of moral victory, the kind W. B. Yeats called, "Not natural to an age like this, being high and solitary and most stern."

Literary Precedents

Bernard Dick traces Renault's novelistic technique to Herodotus, the fifth century B.C. military historian, chronicler, and ethnographer, who called his history "presentations of research."

Like Herodotus, Alexias and Renault's other narrators reconstruct their past in terms of their nation's history, reminiscing, digressing, and philosophizing, often passing aphoristic judgment on vital human issues, as does Lysis in The Last of the Wine: "A man who thinks himself as good as everyone else will be at no pains to grow better . . . Must we forsake the love of excellence, then, till every citizen feels it alike?"

Renault's love of excellence animates all of her Greek novels, perhaps most pervasively The Last of the Wine, and helps explain why so few historical novels can match its quality. That trap of historical novelists summed up by E. M. Forster's dismissal of Sir Walter Scott — "a trivial mind and a heavy style" — can only be avoided by scholarly devotion, meticulous attention to detail, and an unerring, even Classical, sense of proportion, evidences of literary quality generally lacking in the genre. To make novels like The Last of the Wine more real than history also demands the artistic integrity Renault explained in 1970: "I think one has a duty to the uninformed reader to tell him when one is giving him authentic history and when one is making it up . . . one must aim at enlightening the reader rather than obfuscating him; and nothing pleases me so much as to hear from a reader (as I often have) that I have caused him or her to seek out the actual sources."

Related Titles

Theseus, as the protagonist of Renault's tragedy, passes through five stages of his tragic development in The King Must Die (1958), each connected, as Landon Burns has demonstrated, with the consenting death of a king. In Troizen, the King Horse is sacrificed by Theseus' grandfather Pittheus, who sounds the keynote for Renault's recurrent theme: "It is not the sacrifice . . . it is not the blood-letting that calls down the power. It is the consenting, Theseus. The readiness is all." In Eleusis, Kerkyon, king-for-a-year, perishes, and in Athens, young Theseus voluntarily relinquishes his royalty to join the victims sent to Crete for Minos' tribute; Minos himself succumbs in Knossos, and Aigeus, Theseus' father, answers the god's call, leaving Theseus to assume the throne. Renault clearly demonstrates that it is the king's duty "to fulfill the appointed end with pride, with honor, and with humility."

With each death, as in an episode of a Classical tragedy, Theseus learns more about himself, traveling one step closer to his own consenting destiny.

D. H. Lawrence called myth an attempt to explain that which goes too deep in the blood and soul for rational analysis. With The King Must Die and its sequel The Bull from the Sea (1962), Renault explores the myth of Theseus, Athens' greatest hero in legends predating the Trojan War.

Renault's re-presentation of Theseus' myth again treats what Virginia Woolf called "the sadness back of things" the Greeks knew so well. Renault focuses on the issue of kingship, so she shapes her tragic theme of the king's willing consent to moira, his destiny, to which even Zeus must bow. The King Must Die presents the bright aspect of kingship generally assumed at the outset of the old tragedies, which is the development of a hero worthy to lead his people; while the more somber The Bull from the Sea examines the hybris (pride) which Theseus' success inexorably engenders in his personality, and which brings about his tragic fall.

Renault also develops several secondary themes connected to Theseus' kingship: the hidden son's need to prove his heritage and claim his throne; the father-king's fear of being supplanted; the slaying of a monster to save the nation; male bloodbrotherhood; marital infidelity in thought or deed and its grievous consequences.

Renault binds these together through the religious and sociopolitical role of the king in the ancient patriarchal societies of northern Greece. The king was the embodiment of the Sky God's will on earth as well as the figure primarily responsible for appeasing the gods so that the nation might prosper.

Renault points out in her "Author's Note" to The Bull from the Sea, "On the king devolved the noble responsibility of offering his own life as supreme sacrifice when, in times of great crisis, the auguries demand it." She saw Theseus' entire life as a "tension and conflict" between the patriarchal Sky God of the North and the cult of the Earth

Mother worshipped by the Pelasgian Shore Folk of southern Greece, as well as the Minoans of Crete who built the civilization Theseus helped overthrow.

The worship of both principles, as Renault tells Theseus' story, resounds with rich archetypal overtones still fascinating today, as the immense popularity of both novels indicates.

An even greater human mystery than mythic kingship lights Renault's Fire from Heaven (1969), her fictionalized portrait of young Alexander of Macedon, Theseus' spiritual heir. Achilles' touchstone for a man was, "Theseus would have done it," and eight hundred years later, Alexander celebrated Achilles as his own ideal, saying, "It is a lovely thing to live with courage, and die leaving an everlasting fame."

Renault chronicles the simultaneous conflicts Alexander experienced through international and emotional growing pains. The rise of Macedon under Alexander's powerful father Philip accompanied the self-defeat of the "politically bankrupt, spiritually dying, eternally quarreling" Greek city states, incapable of uniting to defend themselves against Macedonian military might. At the same time, Alexander and Philip were locked in a psychologically complex power struggle between a gifted father and son of surpassing genius; their battle was ended, but not resolved, by an assassin's knife at Aigai. Greece had been Philip's, but the rest of the world had to be Alexander's conquest.

Renault positioned a wealth of scrupulously drawn figures around the already magnetic youth Alexander, based firmly on ancient sources and often confirmed by modern archaeology: the fearsome Philip; Alexander's terrifying half-mad mother Olympias; Leonidas the Spartan, Alexander's tutor; Alexander's companion Hephaistion. Down to the last Macedonian warrior and the least servant at a princely feast, Renault builds each character solidly out of an exhaustive self-taught knowledge of the world of ancient Greece.

To modern eyes, one of the questionable aspects of Alexander's society is its easy acceptance of bisexuality as a norm of male behavior. Renault points out that Alexander's "three state marriages qualified him for normality," and "for [his] contemporaries, his most striking peculiarity was his refusal to exploit defenseless victims like captive women and slave-boys, a practice then universal." She leaves her readers free to decide the nature of Alexander's bond with his beloved Hephaistion, for no physical relationship has been proved; all that is certain is that Alexander described Hephaistion to the conquered Persian Queen Mother Sisygambis as "Alexander, too."

Fire from Heaven is Renault's only novel of ancient Greece told in the third person, keeping more distance between Alexander and her audience than her usual first-person narration allows. By doing so, she is able to show all of Alexander's many gifts — his political shrewdness, his organizational genius, his physical beauty and his intellectual power. She never forgets, however, that Alexander, like Achilles before him, was a consummate soldier. The Macedonian army elected their king, and the sense of honor, his and theirs, that made him their only choice, made all the rest possible.

The two sequels to Fire from Heaven are The Persian Boy (1972), novel and Funeral Games (1981), novel. An associated work is The Nature of Alexander (1975), biography.

Renault reveals the last seven years of Alexander's meteoric career through the eyes of The Persian Boy, Alexander's handsome eunuch Bagoas, with her most precarious treatment of homosexuality in fiction. Some commentators find Bagoas' view of the convoluted politics of Alexander's reign inconsistent with Bagoas' relatively minor position as a household slave, albeit a favored and talented one. Other critics find that the homoerotic aura which usually heightens Renault's creative insights into the remote past somewhat obscures the story of Alexander's achievements. In any case, The Persian Boy exhibits tragedy as well as glory, for Hephaistion, who Renault feels is "the most underrated man in history," appears throughout as "Alexander, too," the better self that Alexander loved and lost.

At his death, Alexander named no heir, and his lieutenants tore his empire asunder. Funeral Games is the fictional memoir of Alexander's one steadfast general, his half-brother Ptolemy, later King of Egypt, and it records the last flickering shadows of the heavenly light born at Macedon. Funeral Games closes Renault's career as well as Alexander's, leaving her readers to ponder the mystery he left behind.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994