The Last Unicorn Short Guide

The Last Unicorn by Peter S. Beagle

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BOOKRAGS

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Characters

The central character in The Last Unicorn is, of course, the unicorn herself; she is more than a magnet to whom the rest of the characters are drawn, but a fascinating character in her own right. It is her quest to discover the fate of her race that propels the plot, and her judgments and observations that express the central ideas in the book. Because she is unique, the last of her breed, the search for her lost comrades is also a search for her own identity. She is horrified to be mistaken for a horse, and pleased when a butterfly recognizes her true nature. The fake horn that Mommy Fortuna forces her to wear is almost as distressing to the unicorn as her captivity, and her attachment to Molly Grue arises not from Molly's longlost virginity, but from her ability to see her for what she is.

The unicorn's transformation into the Lady Amalthea brings about a fundamental change in her character. While she remains herself, she is trapped in a mortal body: "I am myself still. This body is dying. I can feel it rotting all around me."

Through this experience she learns, as the people of Hagsgate have not, that there is beauty and joy in the transitory. As she later becomes involved with Prince Lir, however, Amalthea seems to forget herself, and the story looks for a while as if it will become a simple love story between a man and a woman who was once a unicorn. It is only by recalling her true identity that the unicorn is able to complete her quest and rescue her comrades.

Schmendrick joins the unicorn's quest after rescuing her from Mommy Fortuna.

He is an appealing bungler whose magic tricks never quite work as planned, but beneath the surface is a formidable magician waiting to be born. Despite his youthful appearance he is actually quite old, having been granted a kind of immortality by his mentor, Nikos. Unable to train his bumbling young apprentice, the great magician had announced, "My son, your ineptitude is so vast, your incompetence so profound, that I am certain you are inhabited by greater power than I have ever known. . . . Therefore I grant it that you shall not age from this day forth, but will travel the world round and round, eternally inefficient, until at last you come to yourself and know what you are." Schmendrick's story complements Amalthea's: she is an immortal creature who must suffer mortality for a time, while he is made to endure immortality until his powers finally manifest themselves. It is fitting that both are restored to their former states at the same moment, the moment that Schmendrick's true magic emerges at last.

Molly Grue's first words to the unicorn are surprising: "'Where have you been?' she cried. 'Damn you, where have you been?'" Molly has spent her entire life waiting for a unicorn; now that one finally appears in the evening of her life, she feels resentful: "And what good is it to me that you're here now? Where were you twenty years ago, ten years ago? How dare you, how dare you come to me now, when I am this?" As Molly journeys with the unicorn into King Haggard's barren domain, however, she undergoes a change in appearance as well as attitude: "Molly was becoming a softer country, full of

pools and caves, where old flowers came burning out of the ground. . . . Her rough hair bloomed, her skin quickened, and her voice was nearly as gentle to all things as it was when she spoke to the unicorn." Despite her initial outrage, Molly becomes the unicorn's most faithful companion, following her even into the forbidding tower of King Haggard.

King Haggard's son Prince Lir also undergoes a metamorphosis in the unicorn's presence. Initially soft and lazy, he transforms himself into a model of knightly virtue in an attempt to win the love of Lady Amalthea. The litany of his labors recalls every fairy tale ever told: "I have vanquished exactly fifteen black knights waiting by fifteen fords in their black pavilions, challenging all who come to cross. And I've long since lost count of the witches in the thorny woods, the giants, the demons disguised as damsels; the glass hills, fatal riddles, and terrible tasks; the magic apples, rings, lamps, potions, swords, cloaks, boots, neckties, and nightcaps. Not to mention the winged horses, the basilisks and sea serpents, and all the rest of the livestock."

Heroism is a role that Lir self-consciously assumes, but it is no less genuine because of that. When it appears that the unicorn is about to be defeated by the Red Bull he sacrifices himself for her, declaring that "heroes are meant to die for unicorns."

Mommy Fortuna and King Haggard are similar characters in many respects.

Both are motivated by the desire to possess, even for a while, the immortal creatures they hold captive. "Not alone!" cries Mommy Fortuna triumphantly after Schmendrick and the unicorn free her prisoners. "You never could have freed yourselves alone! I held you!" Even as the escaping harpy swoops down to destroy her, she delights in her momentary victory. Likewise, King Haggard's only joy is in the power to hold onto that which cannot fade with time: "All things die when I pick them up. I do not know why they die, but it has always been so, save for the one dear possession that has not turned cold and dull as I guarded it—the only thing that has ever belonged to me."

If both Mommy Fortuna and King Haggard earn some sympathy from the reader, perhaps it is because they embody a longing that we all share for the eternal.

Social Concerns

The Last Unicorn is a fantasy novel, set in a far away world of wizards, enchanted castles and talking cats, yet it reflects the turbulence of the decade in which it was written, and it has had a lasting impact on generations of readers.

The story of a unicorn's search for her vanished comrades follows the lines of a traditional quest narrative, but reverses many of the usual conventions. A unicorn, more often the elusive object of such a quest, is instead the protagonist; she is also female, in contrast to the archetypal image of the male unicorn tamed by the female virgin. This double reversal undermines our expectations of the story, allowing us to witness unanticipated wonders in the otherwise familiar realm of the fairy tale.

Peter Beagle's masterpiece is an elegy mourning the loss of magic in the world.

The unicorn is frequently mistaken for a horse by humans who no longer have eyes to see unicorns. When put on display in a traveling carnival she must wear a false horn in order for the spectators to see her for what she really is. Most of the novel's human characters see only what they expect to see, and their expectations are determined by what society defines as real. The few characters who do recognize the unicorn turn out to be social misfits—Schmendrick, the incompetent would-be wizard, and Molly Grue, mistress to the leader of an outlaw band. The novel suggests that if the world seems empty of magic it is because we are blinded to its presence by a society that denies its existence.

This critique of society's role in shaping our perception of reality turns the traditional hierarchy of age and youth on its head; those who see the world clearly are not the old and wise, but the young and inexperienced. The older generation is frequently depicted in The Last Unicorn as cold and selfish; King Haggard, the possessive tyrant who has imprisoned all the other unicorns in the sea beside his tower, is "seventy years old, or eighty, or more." His realm is a barren wasteland; the only flourishing town in his domain is cursed to prosper only until he is killed by "one of Hagsgate town." The people of Hagsgate take no pleasure in their wealth, which they know will pass, and in an attempt to avert their doom they have no children, lest one of them be the cause of their undoing.

The late 1960s saw young men being sent to fight a questionable war in Vietnam by an older generation, who were blamed by the younger generation for the racial inequities and other social injustices in American culture. The Civil Rights movement comprised mainly young people, as was the anti-war movement, and many members of this generation viewed themselves as occupying the moral high ground in a struggle with their elders. The Last Unicorn offered readers a temporary respite from the turmoil of the era while addressing some of its central issues in the form of fantasy. The citizens of Hagsgate represented an older generation preoccupied with material wealth.

The enslaved unicorns could be seen as any of the oppressed classes in American society that the new generation sought to liberate, and King Haggard was the archetype of the tyrannical ruler obsessed with control, a role that President Nixon soon came to fulfill for many Americans. Most importantly, the inability of the novel's characters to see the world as it truly was reflected the frustration of many young people because of society's failure to recognize what were, to them, the obvious moral imperatives of racial equality and world peace.

It is not surprising that The Last Unicorn was written in the late 1960s, when a rift was opening between the generations, and young people were questioning the values that society imposed upon them. It found a receptive audience among those for whom fantasy was not merely escapist fare, but a means of attaining a new perspective on human experience. The Last Unicorn was largely responsible for a sudden increase in the popularity of unicorns in art, fiction, jewelry, and so on, but its influence on those who have read and loved the novel has outlasted any effect it had on fad or fashion.

Techniques

The frequent use of anachronism sends ripples across the otherwise mirrorlike surface of the novel's illusory world.

"'Death takes what man would keep,' said the butterfly, 'and leaves what man would lose. Blow, wind, and crack your cheeks.

I warm my hands before the fire of life and get four-way relief.'" Although he is in the novel for only a few pages, the butterfly leaves a powerful impression on the reader that outweighs even the signifi cance of his oracular utterance about the Red Bull. The butterfly seems to flit through time itself, mingling scraps of Shakespeare with song lyrics and advertising catch phrases to produce a "heap of broken images" from a thousand years of popular culture. Time also seems to work backward for Captain Cully, outlaw and would-be folk hero, who mistakes Schmendrick for Mr. Child, a famous collector of ballads to whom he wishes to supply a few he has already written about himself. For Cully the line between cause and effect is slightly blurred, as is that between truth and legend.

If the novel's use of anachronism disturbs the reader's suspension of disbelief perhaps that is the intended effect, for in The Last Unicorn the characters themselves seem to be aware that they are characters in a story. After transforming the unicorn into a woman, Schmendrick tells her "you're in the story with the rest of us now, and you must go with it, whether you will or no. If you want to find your people, if you want to become a unicorn again, then you must follow the fairy tale to King Haggard's castle, and wherever else it chooses to take you. The story cannot end without the princess." When Amalthea complains about her new form, Schmendrick refers to a familiar theory about the origin of the unicorn by acknowledging that "it would make no difference to you if I had changed you into a rhinoceros, which is where the whole silly myth got started."

While some readers may find such anachronistic references to the fictional nature of the narrative world jarring and intrusive, others will appreciate the subtle humor of the novel's self-reflexive wit.

This amounts to more than just a running gag, however, for it illustrates the novel's message that what we dismiss as illusion possesses its own level of reality.

Themes

The Last Unicorn weaves together a number of different themes, including the loss of enchantment, the limits of perception, the quest to redeem one's race, and the struggle to retain one's identity, but the overriding theme of the novel, the one that unites all the others, is the love of that which is transitory. The people of Hagsgate, cursed to prosper until Haggard's fall, ask Schmendrick: "How can we delight in our good fortune when we know that it must end, and that one of us will end it? Every day makes us richer, and brings us one day nearer to our doom. Magician, for fifty years we have lived leanly, avoided attachments, untied all habits, readying ourselves for the sea.

We have taken not a moment's joy in our wealth—or in anything else—for joy is just one more thing to lose." Hagsgate's response to its predicament illustrates our own destructive tendency to "avoid attachments" to anyone or anything that we fear we might lose.

In the second half of the book Schmendrick changes the unicorn into a woman, whom he names Amalthea. After her transformation she asks: "How can anything that is going to die be real? How can it be truly beautiful?" Schmendrick responds: "I know something that a unicorn cannot know. Whatever can die is beautiful—more beautiful than a unicorn, who lives forever, and who is the most beautiful creature in the world." As a result of her metamorphosis the unicorn learns to love a mortal being, and through this love she is able to overcome the Red Bull that guards the captive unicorns, and to set her people free.

Adaptations

The Last Unicorn was the basis for an animated film made in 1982 from a screenplay by Peter Beagle. Produced by Arthur Rankin and Jules Bass, a pair known chiefly for their Saturday morning cartoon shows, this film surpassed many of the team's earlier efforts. This was largely due to the vocal talents of a stellar cast, featuring Mia Farrow in the tide role, Alan Arkin as Schmendrick, Angela Lansbury as Mommy Fortuna, Jeff Bridges as Lir, and legendary horror film star Christopher Lee as King Haggard.

The animation was directed by Katsukisha Yamada, and its occasional use of abstract color and pattern is characteristic of the Japanese style that has come to be known as "anime."

Beloved fantasy novels are notoriously difficult to adapt to film, not only because of the challenge of depicting a world entirely different from our own, but because the reader often imagines what amounts to his or her own version of the film while reading the book. The filmmaker must compete with a thousand different versions of the story, each already flickering upon the screen of an audience member's mind. Because Beagle himself wrote the screenplay, however, the filmed version of The Last Unicorn is a relatively faithful adaptation of the book.

The plot and dialogue remain true to the original, and the imagery of the film evokes a sense of enchantment that approaches that of the novel. The soundtrack includes original performances by the rock band America; while the music is occasionally intrusive, it does not detract from the overall experience of the film, and frequently enhances the visual spectacle.

Key Questions

Unlike the characters in many fantasy novels, those in The Last Unicorn are not black and white, but colored with complex hues. The motivations of Mommy Fortuna and King Haggard may provide interesting topics of conversation, as may the different ways in which Schmendrick and Molly Grue relate to the unicorn.

Comparing The Last Unicorn to other fantasy novels and familiar fairy tales may also provide fuel for debate. The Lord of the Rings will be familiar to many readers, and the two novels have many points of comparison. Other novels that address common themes or employ similar techniques are R. A. MacAvoy's Tea With a Black Dragon, Gordon Dickson's The Dragon and the George, and William Goldman's The Princess Bride.

1. Does the unicorn's gender have a significant impact on the novel? How would the novel have been different if the unicorn were male?

2. How effectively does Beagle incorporate songs and poetry into the novel?

Are they simply adornments, or do they serve to advance the plot?

3. What effect do the novel's anachronisms have on the story?

4. In what ways is Mommy Fortuna similar to King Haggard? Is either character evil in the traditional sense? If not, what are their motivations?

5. Schmendrick admires the effectiveness of the witch's curse on Hagsgate.

What effect would such a curse have upon our own society?

6. What is the nature of the relationship between King Haggard and the Red Bull?

7. Is Schmendrick's immortality a blessing or a curse? How is Amalthea's experience of mortality essential to her ultimate victory?

8. When does Prince Lir become a true hero? What is true heroism?

9. How does true magic differ from the "tricks of seeming" employed by Mommy Fortuna?

Literary Precedents

The unicorn appears in cultures as far removed from one another as Ireland and Japan, although it probably has its origins in China, India, or the Middle East. Its earliest appearance in western literature is in the writings of Ctesias, a Greek doctor who served the king of Persia in the fourth century B.C. He described the unicorn as a "wild ass" with a single, multicolored horn in the middle of its forehead. The unicorn also appears several times in the book of Psalms; early translators identified the Hebrew word "Re'em" as "one-horned," which in English became "unicorn." By medieval times, the unicorn had come to signify purity or chastity, and was usually depicted as pure white in color. In the iconography of medieval tapestries the unicorn was often associated with the Virgin Mary, and its horn was assumed to have magical powers. Frequently used in heraldry, the unicorn was eventually adopted as the symbol of Scotland; it now appears next to the English lion on the British coat of arms.

The unicorn is also a common figure in modern literature, appearing in works ranging from Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass (1872) to Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie (1945).

While The Last Unicorn owes less to any single source than it does to a thousand years of tradition and folklore, one inspiration for Mommy Fortuna's Midnight Carnival is Charles G. Finney's 1935 novel The Circus of Dr. Lao. In this idiosyncratic novel a small town in Arizona is visited by a bizarre circus of mythological monsters, including a chimera, a satyr, a roc, and a unicorn. All of the creatures are shabby, faded images of what they once were, before centuries of human disbelief drained them of their vitality.

When Dr. Lao is struck by a serpent, violence erupts among the creatures; the unicorn does battle with the chimera amidst the chaos of the struggling monsters, but the audience remains unimpressed by this spectacle from a bygone age.

The Last Unicorn would not have had the impact it did without an audience that was prepared to receive it, and for that audience Beagle and his fellow fantasists owe their thanks and their livelihood to J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings (19541955; see separate entry). This trilogy of novels became popular on college campuses in the 1960s, creating a demand for fantasy novels that transported the reader to a fully-imagined world of marvels that nevertheless inspired belief. The Last Unicorn shares with its predecessor the sense of loss at the departure of magic from the world, as well as the desire to restore some of that magic through the power of words.

Related Titles

After the spectacular success of The Last Unicorn Beagle felt the usual pressure to repeat himself, either by writing a sequel or by returning to the same milieu.

This was a temptation that Beagle resisted, swearing never to write another "unicorn novel." For two decades Beagle turned out short stories at a craftsmanlike pace, writing only one novel during that time, the fantasy The Folk of the Air (1986). In 1993, however, Beagle drew upon his previous work for the character of the unnamed magician in The Innkeeper's Song, identifiable to the discerning reader as none other than an older, wiser version of the transformed Schmendrick from the final chapter of The Last Unicorn.

While it is not a sequel in any conventional sense, The Innkeeper'.; Song is an extension of some of the themes introduced in The Last Unicorn.

Beagle's career has seen a creative surge in the last decade, with The Innkeeper's Song followed by Giant Bones (1997), a collection of stories set in the same fictional universe as the novel. The previous year Beagle had produced another novel, The Unicorn Sonata. As the title suggests, Beagle finally relented in his determination to avoid another "unicorn novel," but he did not succumb to the commercial temptation to produce a sequel. Instead, The Unicorn Sonata is more of an urban fantasy, in which a young girl discovers a passage to a land in which unicorns are abundant, but plagued by an illness which she alone can cure.

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