The Lime Twig Short Guide

The Lime Twig by John Hawkes

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Characters

The events of the novel revolve, for the most part, around Michael Banks who leaves home early one morning with his lodger, William Hencher.

Following Banks, readers skulk apprehensively in the dark, awaiting Rock Castle's arrival on a river barge at a London harbor. Later, at a race track in Aldington before the running of the "Golden Bowl" (Hawkes admits to a Jamesian reference), readers descend into a Hadeslike latrine beneath the race track, join Banks in a steam bath during a murder, revel with him in a Walpurgisnacht parody of promiscuous sex. Through each scene, related peripherally rather than described directly, the dreamlike quality pervades; intensely poetic language and vivid imagery combine to form a prose of incantation, a fiendish mixture of love and horror. With Banks, the reader wanders like fate from scene to scene so that each event seems a random occurrence without the causal and logical coherence of events in the conventional novel.

Margaret Banks, Michael's wife, also has several scenes. She is the antithesis of her husband: as Michael actively pursues his dreams and sexual fantasies, his wife is impelled toward an eradication of self. Her anxious vigil while she awaits her husband's return, her placidity as Little Dora veritably leads her into the room where she is held prisoner, her submissive ecstasy as she is beaten to death by the unsavory Thick — all these reveal Margaret as a character who, like her husband, lives out the realization of her deepest desires and is subsequently destroyed by them.

As indications of Hawkes's growing preoccupation with point of view, two other characters are of particular interest. Although not a "character" in the conventional sense, the newspaper reporter Sidney Slyter gains force as a personality in the excerpts from his column which precede each chapter, a device reminiscent of Dos Passos.

(Hawkes has commented that he included these opening "Slyter Says" comments at the request of his editor who felt that readers might need some clarification of each chapter; one might recall Faulkner's response to a similar editorial request — both the Slyter sequences and the appended genealogy in The Sound and the Fury [1929] have raised more questions than they have answered.) Possibly the most dislikable character in the novel, Slyter comes to reveal himself as a banal, bantering, ultimately superficial handshaker; he is one of life's onlookers, a spectator — a faceless embodiment of the nameless millions who watch, comment, pass unscathed through life's tragedies. At the other end of the human spectrum, William Hencher is a man of deep sensitivity and compassion. His opening first-person monologue not only foreshadows Hawkes's intense interest in narrative perspectives, but sets the stage for the tragedy of the Banks whom Hencher unwittingly draws into the intricate web of his own dreams of love and companionship. Although he is trampled by Rock Castle in the first chapter (just as Michael Banks is at the novel's end), Hencher's portrait remains perhaps the most memorable of the novel.

Social Concerns/Themes

T he Lime Twig, a novel about an ordinary man caught up in an underworld scheme to kidnap a race horse and win a stakes race, was inspired by a newspaper account of legalized gambling in England. But the novel does not, nor do any of Hawkes's novels, address social controversies in any Dickensian sense. Rather, current events and personal experiences typically serve to incite the author's associative imagination, inspiring him "to write about large issues of human torments and aspirations," as he has described it. In this third novel, Hawkes reveals his preoccupation with the problems of individual survival in a modern world which is often alien, even nightmarish. His concern with social issues is thus linked inextricably to his persistent thematic pursuits — the problems of solipsistic loneliness, satiation of subconscious desires, the potential for violence lying just beneath the surface of everyday events.

Although many consider this work the most accessible of Hawkes's fictions, the first-time reader will discover quickly that expectations one generally brings to the novel — expectations of coherent plot, character development, a relatively lucid theme — are quite simply irrelevant to Hawkes's interests as a novelist. Nevertheless, certain themes emerge through the density of the prose. Perhaps the central motif in The Lime Twig questions the relationship between desire and fulfillment as each character gradually comes to live out the phantoms of a dream wish that turns unerringly into a nightmare reality. For instance, Michael Banks's fantasy of owning a horse, an image charged with implications of sexuality, draws him into the criminal world of gangsters and murder, of Dionysian revels where he plays musical beds with a string of various women, and of self-destruction as he throws himself in front of the field of racing horses where he is trampled by Rock Castle — the famous race horse cum sexual image. Hawkes explores the dimensions of the imagination, dramatizing its creative potential as the unleashed faculty materializes one's subconscious desires.

Techniques

Hawkes once remarked "that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme" and that "totality of vision or structure was really all that remained." Like each of his novels, The Lime Twig reflects this concern with structure and, as though the novel were a canvas, with capturing a haunting impression to evoke a complete vision. While the sequence of events follows a fairly chronological unfolding, the organization of the chapters is less conventional. The first section, what one might expect to be chapter one, receives no chapter designation at all, but functions as a kind of first-person "preface" to the following narrative proper. The second section of the novel, after Hencher's monologue, begins with a numeral one and announces the main narrative which, cast in a third-person point of view, shifts occasionally to the various characters.

Although critics have not come to any agreement about its effect, the use of Hencher's preface provides a point of impulsion for the dramatic action — Michael Banks's involvement with the theft of Rock Castle. Hencher, having gained the reader's sympathy and transferred his devotion from his dead mother to Michael and Margaret Banks, then prompts Michael to realize his dream: the owning of a race horse and the concomitant expression of sexuality.

Another technique Hawkes relies on, one characteristic of all his fiction, emanates from his concern with maintaining a "distance" between himself, his materials (which are generally based on his personal experiences), and their fictive rendering. Thus, Hawkes will often fasten on an image to represent an emotion he wishes to provoke, wrap the image in poetic language, and then let the reader connect. For example, Hencher's nostalgic love for his mother might be mere sentimentality in the hands of most authors; Hawkes manipulates the emotion, making it at once strange and familiar. Hencher recalls: "No fields, sunlight, larks — only the stoned alley like a footpath on a quay down which a black ship might come sailing if the wind held, and down beneath the mists coming off the dead steeplecocks the boy with the poor dog in his arms and loving his close scrutiny of the nicks in its ears, tiny channels over the dog's brain, pictures he could find on its purple tongue, pearls he could discover between the claws. Love is a long close scrutiny like that. I loved Mother in the same way." With images and poeticity, Hawkes achieves a distancing effect, blending the strange and the familiar to produce a unique quality.

Literary Precedents

Critics have placed Hawkes's novels in various categories which, depending on one's particular perspective, have their respective merits. Certainly, it is easy to recognize elements of terror and surrealism in the fiction, thus seeing Hawkes within the tradition of American fiction as practiced by Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, and joining such twentieth century writers interested in the grotesque aspect of reality as Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Djuna Barnes, and Nathanael West. Emphasizing the humor rather than the nightmare quality of Hawkes's fiction, one might place him alongside such writers of "black humor" as Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut.

But Hawkes is also a writer whose poetic prose aspires to break through the traditions of the conventional popular novel. In this mien, his forerunners are such authors as Herman Melville (as well as Poe and James) who demonstrated a similar interest in narrative perspectives, especially the firstperson unreliable narrator. Other more recent innovators in limited point of view techniques include Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Ken Kesey, and William Golding.

Related Titles

Second Skin (1964) continues to be one of Hawkes's most widely read novels, its rich and allusive narrative texture making it conducive to continued study. Like The Lime Twig, it teems with death and nightmarish events; yet unlike its predecessor, this fourth novel contains, as Hawkes has emphasized, much that is "affirmative" as a story of "the life-force versus death."

As its main theme, the struggle between life and death informs the plot, the setting, the use of characterization, and the structure of the novel.

In fact, so dependent is each of these on the novel's theme that Second Skin provides an excellent example of artistic unity and tension. The magnetic pull toward death is countered by the Skipper's efforts to save his daughter Cassandra from suicide (he fails) and at the same time to renew his own bungled life (he succeeds), both of these providing the novel's central conflict.

Skipper, a fifty-nine-year-old exnaval officer, narrates the story while most of the other major characters choose their places on one side or the other of the life-death struggle. As residents of the nightmarish dark island in the cold Atlantic (based on Hawkes's visit to Vinalhaven off the Maine coast), the "black widow" Miranda, the Captain, and his son Jomo operate on the side of death as the two men sexually pursue Cassandra (the Second Skin Skipper's childishly innocent daughter), finally driving her to suicide. On the side of the life force are the residents of the warm, balmy island which Hawkes has identified as Grenada, the "paradise island" where he wrote the novel: Catalina Kate is the Skipper's adoring mistress whose birth of a child (possibly the Skipper's) at the novel's end marks the victory of the life force.

In addition, Sonny (the black cook who has followed Skipper from the Navy) and Sister Josie (a nun who lives on the island), are further supportive of the narrator who finds not the humiliation and scorn accorded him on the dark island, but instead receives acceptance, warmth, joy.

Like The Lime Twig, Second Skin also relies on a careful structure and the poetic distancing technique. However, the structure of the fourth novel no longer depends on a conventional chronology but is dictated by the life versus death theme so that the Skipper's recollections take the shape of the dichotomy — memories of his hellish past marked by the suicides of his father, wife, and daughter; recitations of his present affirming the way in which he has imaginatively transformed life's tribulations. In this way, the novel can quite rightly be taken as the potency of the imagination as a metamorphic device capable of creating reality, a theme which increasingly becomes predominant in Hawkes's fiction after Second Skin.

In addition, Hawkes's growing fascination with first-person narrators (and thus his admiration of Melville), evident in Hencher's opening monologue in The Lime Twig, now takes center stage: All his following novels use exclusively first-person narratives. In

Second Skin, the Skipper's narrative has, in fact, made this novel one which has provoked most critical dissension about its meaning — one view argues that the Skipper is a sympathetic figure, the other that he is an unreliable narrator whom Hawkes shows as uncomprehending and thus an initiator of the tragedies around him. The truth, it seems, lies in neither camp but rather in the ambiguity, "truth" itself becoming that nebulous and constantly shifting perspective which emanates from the eye of each individual reader.

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