

Lust for Life Short Guide

Lust for Life by Irving Stone

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Characters

As in any fiction, the quality of a novel depends largely upon its characters seen in the round and presented in the process of growth, development, and change under stress. Van Gogh is one of these characters. Stone skillfully reveals Van Gogh's frustrations, desires and ill health, as well as the limited successes in his own life time. The artist's character is elaborately worked out on one level where the reader understands his problems and realizes that in addition to epilepsy, Van Gogh suffered torment, frustration, and subsequent nervous breakdowns which included his cutting off an ear and shooting himself. The reader further discerns the artist's relationship to his work as Van Gogh visits and paints universal man in his own surroundings, including the coal mines, the fields, and towns. Because Stone brings reality to his pages, the reader envisions Van Gogh's genius, his ability to bring reality to his canvas and to the world of art. As *Lust for Life* progresses from one scene to the next, Van Gogh's loneliness, coupled with his obsession to create objects on canvas as they appear in real life, becomes the central concern and leads to his physical destruction and early death. When the artist loses himself to nervous collapses at a relatively early age and must fight his way back to health, this struggle becomes one of the themes in which there is the classic confrontation of a character facing his own mortality. The stress of confronting death is often used to reveal the essence of a character. Van Gogh, for example allegorizes it in one of his later paintings as a reaper working in a field of gold.

Social Concerns/Themes

Besides receiving the best press and remaining one of his best known works, *Lust for Life*, Stone's first successful fictionalized biography, gave direction to his career. In this novel, the biographer sets forth well-researched factual material about Van Gogh's life based chiefly on the three volumes of the artist's letters to his brother, Theo, and on material unearthed in research, while dramatizing, often very romantically, the artist's thoughts and conversations. The novel presents a lonely, intense man, suffering from epilepsy, driven by an obsession to create life from his paints. It is a thoughtful examination of his passions, his search for love and his battle against loneliness and physical collapse.

Stone's belief that Van Gogh was misunderstood in his lifetime and subsequently treated unfairly in biographies provided a good deal of the inspiration for *Lust for Life*. Prior gossip and publicity presented Van Gogh as having driven himself insane through his obsession with art. Stone's desire to set the record straight resulted in a benefit to both Van Gogh's personal reputation and to the public. Whoever reads this novel will gain most, if not all, the important facts concerning the life of the painter in a poetic and touching portrayal.

Techniques

Lust for Life is an excellent example of how an author may resolve the potential conflict between a novel that contains entertaining narrative and an historical novel. Stone turns a biography of Van Gogh, who is a far-from-perfect hero because he is driven by passion and lacks certain endearing qualities, from a textbook rendition, which it could have easily become, into a context which entertains while including the many facts of Van Gogh's life that Stone had uncovered. To accomplish this, he develops Van Gogh's rejection of love on a parallel with his devotion to art. By taking Van Gogh's rejection and allowing his character to turn it into energy that creates masterpieces, Stone combines an entertaining story with the facts of Van Gogh's life and the rise of Impressionism.

Adaptations

Lust for Life was filmed, and was released by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in September 1956. Produced by John Houseman and directed by Vincente Minnelli, it was designed and promoted primarily as an extravaganza.

The stars, Kirk Douglas as Van Gogh and Anthony Quinn as his contemporary and friend, Gauguin, helped the film gain a rather successful box office return. The film's critical reception was mixed, as was Stone's novel, with some critics admiring its visual effects and others complaining that, since lives of artists or great men can't be told honorably within the limits of popular entertainment, Van Gogh was presented as less than heroic. Basically, the complaining critics' accusation was that the public is made to look at Van Gogh, a great artist, with shallow eyes.

Perhaps this criticism is more of popular biography's art form than of this particular picture. The critics agreed, however, that Lust for Life came to the screen with impressive fidelity.

Literary Precedents

Many critics believe *Lust for Life* was the first of a new genre, the bio-history novel. This is, perhaps, the reason why several reviewers reacted so severely to it. The offspring of such literary works as Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson and Claudius' history writings of Rome before the fall, it is also related to such narratives that began with Daniel Defoe and Laurence Stern in the eighteenth century. Like James Michener, a contemporary historical novelist, Stone compiles and translates years of data and research into novels, but he is a biographer first; he concentrates on the person. Michener is a historian first and concentrates on historical data.

They both, however, incorporate fiction with history, and as Michener's predecessor, Stone has accomplished much to pave the way for this artistic/historical form.

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