M.C. Higgins, the Great Short Guide

M.C. Higgins, the Great by Virginia Hamilton

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

M.C. Higgins, the Great is a book about growing up, the period of changing from a child to an adult. In the space of a few days, M.C. Higgins learns about freedom, responsibility, and the strength of family ties. He falls in love but finds out that love is not always reciprocated, at least not as he wants it to be. He also comes to understand that his own prejudices and superstitions can hurt not only the people at whom they are directed but also himself. The novel is written in Hamilton's unique style, at once poetic and exciting, combining action with M.C.'s daydreams. Although many of the characters have a mythic, larger-than-life quality, they remain believable and moving.

The problems that M.C. faces will be familiar to most readers: the confusion of a first love, getting along with parents and siblings, learning to accept and like people who are different, and dealing with the ever-present threat of pollution in the modern world.

Hamilton tells a story in which the characters overcome some of their problems and learn to live with others.

This realistic picture of life offers readers a good model to follow in making their own transitions to adulthood.

About the Author

Virginia Esther Hamilton was born on March 12, 1936, in Yellow Springs, Ohio. She was the last of five children, and she says that her parents and siblings pampered her. Hamilton's father, Kenneth, was a musician, and Virginia grew up with a love of music, singing solos in an African Methodist Episcopal church choir by the time she was six.

She always enjoyed school and graduated from high school with honors. She then studied, on a full scholarship, creative writing and literature at her hometown college, Antioch, from 1952 to 1955. She left Antioch for Ohio State University and later studied at the New School for Social Research in New York City.

Hamilton married Arnold Adoff, a poet, in 1960, and they have two children, a boy and a girl. The family has returned to Yellow Springs after ten years in New York, and they live with many pets on a piece of land that is the last of the farm belonging to Hamilton's family.

Hamilton enjoys living in the midst of her large extended family. Many of the recurring themes in her books come from her own life or from experiences of her kinfolk. Her characters tend, like Hamilton herself, to have a strong sense of family and of history, and they are all deeply connected to a place, whether it be an old farmhouse or a mountain.

Various aspects of the Afro-American experience are dealt with in Hamilton's writings—her own maternal grandfather was a slave who escaped to Ohio—and she draws on history and mythology to help explore and clarify this experience.

Her interest in the future has led Hamilton to write several science fiction novels.

Hamilton wrote her first novel, Zeely, seven years after her marriage. It received the Nancy Block Memorial Award of the Downtown Community School of New York and was an American Library Association Notable Children's Book, as have been six of her other books. Most of Hamilton's books have received awards, the most notable being the John Newbery Honor Book Award for The Planet of Junior Brown, the Edgar Allan Poe Best Juvenile Mystery award for The House of Dies Drear, and the Newbery Medal, the National Book Award, and the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for M.C. Higgins, the Great, the first book ever to win all three of these awards.

Hamilton was the first black author to receive the prestigious Newbery Medal, and in its first year, M.C. Higgins, the Great garnered a record number of awards for a young adult book. Her later works have also been honored. Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush was named a Newbery Honor Book, won the Coretta Scott King Award, and received the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, making Hamilton the only two-time winner of this prize. Hamilton's renditions of black American folktales in The People Could Fly won her another Coretta Scott King Award.

Hamilton's prolific and celebrated career is motivated by a personal need to write; she says that "writing is who I am." Hamilton writes, not only to reflect on and explain aspects of life, but because she values art itself. "Art," she says, "must be the essence of how and why we live."

Setting

The story begins in the early 1960s in an isolated mountainous area near the Ohio River, where coal and steel are the major industries. The exact location is never given, for the story takes place in an area cut off from the outside world, where the characters identify not with their state or county, but with the mountain on which they live. M.C.

Higgins's world consists of Sarah's Mountain and the surrounding countryside. It is a landscape both beautiful and wild, tangled and untouched in the bottomlands, but flat and scarred on the top, where strip-miners have worked. A giant spoil heap, made up of broken tree limbs, dirt, and mining refuse, has been left by the strip-miners above M.C.'s house, and the heap is slowly sliding, threatening to one day bury the house and anyone inside it.

Nearby is Kill's Mound, a mysterious, forbidding mountain where the Killburns live. They are believed to be witches, and they live in the midst of a huge vegetable garden. To avoid trampling the vegetables, the Killburns have built a system of ropes hung above the ground that connect the buildings, and they climb or swing from place to place, occasionally dropping to the ground to weed or harvest vegetables. Kill's Mound thus looks like it is covered with a gigantic spider web.

Another nearby landmark is the lake where the Higgins family swims. M.C.

comes here before dawn with his mother, Banina, and finds that a young woman, Lurhetta, has made her camp on the bank. This lake is the scene of M.C.'s dangerous trip through an underwater tunnel that foreshadows his journey through the last days of childhood and his emergence into young adulthood. Lurhetta accompanies him on both of these trips, sometimes hindering him, sometimes helping, but always testing his strength and merit.

Social Sensitivity

M.C. Higgins, the Great deals with three issues that parents or teachers may want to discuss with their children: pollution, parent-child relationships, and sexuality. Hamilton's portrayal of the effect of pollution is a perfect springboard for discussion of pollution today, either on the local or the global level. Nuclear waste and acid rain threaten many countries, and the depletion of the ozone layer is of concern to many people. Hamilton's story shows an individual taking responsibility for a dangerous situation and protecting himself and his family from the threat of pollution. M.C. deals only with symptoms, not with the source of the problem, but he does respond positively to what might seem an overwhelming problem.

The relationship between M.C. and Jones is sometimes tense and volatile.

As Jones watches his son outdistance him, he naturally feels proud of his son's strength and growing independence, but he feels somewhat jealous as well. It is significant that the story opens on M.C.'s birthday, probably about his fifteenth, although Hamilton does not give an exact age. In turn, M.C.'s ambivalent feelings are marked by "a sullen anger at his father and an abiding admiration at the same time." These feelings are nearly universal during adolescence, and Hamilton handles them with honesty and compassion, siding with neither parent nor child.

Hamilton's novel draws its power from taking on real issues and dealing with them authentically. Her portrayal of M.C.'s awakening sexual curiosity may be disturbing at times because of its apparent link, in his mind, with a dangerous game of cat and mouse. M.C.

is socially isolated at an awkward age, and he is accustomed to the teasing and roughhousing common between younger boys and girls. This is probably what prompts him to frighten Lurhetta and, as it may seem to an adult reader, actually attack her. The images associated with M.C.'s early meetings with Lurhetta suggest hunters, knives, trapped animals, and killing. Perhaps M.C. feels like a hunter as he ventures into the area of sexual experience, but his identification with the hunter/stalker and Lurhetta's corresponding role as the hunted animal reach rather extreme proportions. M.C. follows a rather archaic model of sex roles, although Lurhetta stands up to him and is a strong and self-determined character. Parents or teachers may be concerned that this grim portrayal of the "boy meets girl" scenario will perpetuate sexist attitudes, and they may wish to discuss M.C.'s attitudes with young readers.

Literary Qualities

Hamilton's writing tends to be poetic and descriptive, detailing landscape, clothing, and facial expressions. As in all good writing, the language conveys the mood; for example, the spoil heap is "an enormous black boil," "half-congealed," and "a thing." Hamilton's use of dialect is also effective. Her characters speak naturally, with a normal amount of slang, local expression, and grammatical error.

Hamilton's writing can be appreciated on several different levels. Younger readers will enjoy her plot and her characters; older readers will appreciate the symbolism and mythic elements of her story. One of the first symbols to appear is M.C.'s pole, presented to him by his father after M.C. swims the Ohio River.

The pole is a prize, a symbol of M.C.'s strength and bravery. It also has sexual connotations, being described as "slippery and smooth" and "forty feet of glistening, cold steel, the best kind of ride."

M.C. uses his pole to attract Lurhetta's attention the night of their fight by climbing it, waving a burning mop, and calling to her, "Pretty! Pretty!" But readers also learn that the pole is, especially for Jones, a grave marker. When M.C.

plays on his pole, he is connected to his ancestors.

Another symbolic element is Hamilton's use of water in initiation rites.

M.C.'s first test is swimming the Ohio River, and he thus proves himself to his father. His second test is with Lurhetta, taking her through the underwater tunnel. It is a dangerous passage, requiring skill, concentration, and physical strength. M.C. makes the journey and saves Lurhetta's life. In myths, crossing water signifies death and rebirth: M.C.

the child is dying, and M.C. the young man is being born. Tunnels and caves are traditionally sexual symbols: M.C. has gone through the tunnel with Lurhetta, and because she is his first love interest, the passage is frightening and difficult as well as exciting and transforming.

The spoil heap is both a reality, threatening M.C.'s home and future, and a symbol of the problems of adolescence that seem to mount higher and higher. M.C. faces the temptation to be a child and let his parents make decisions, to give up his right to choose his own destiny. While working on his retaining wall, M.C. finally musters the strength to confront his father, declaring that he will play with Ben, and daring his father to say no; he is even willing to defend Ben physically (with Lurhetta's knife) if necessary. Besides questioning his own prejudices and learning to make decisions, M.C. contends with the problems brought on by his sexual awakening. What becomes M.C.'s retaining

wall begins as an assault on the spoil heap, brought about by anger at Lurhetta for leaving and sadness that she did not choose to stay with him.

Finally, the wall itself is a symbol of the need for roots and the strength that comes from knowing one's past. It is a sense of connection with the past through a place, Sarah's Mountain, that so distresses M.C. at the thought of leaving, making him determined to stop the spoil heap. Sarah's grave stone strengthens the wall and gives it a firm foundation. One believes that this wall will hold back the spoil heap forever.

Themes and Characters

The story begins with M.C. setting off at dawn to check his rabbit traps. He contemplates the problem of how to get his family to leave the mountain and is unhappy about having to leave. The spoil heap threatens disaster, however, and he is unable to ignore it. He hopes that the Dude, a traveling anthropologist who is taping mountain songs, will take a recording of his mother's voice to a record company and make Banina a star. Then the family will move to the city before the spoil heap falls.

M.C. is responsible for watching over his siblings when his parents are at work. He cooks for them and often provides meat for the family by hunting and fishing. In many ways, M.C. is the most pragmatic member of the family. He is the only one who fully understands the danger posed by the spoil heap. Although Jones, his father, is intelligent and strong, he refuses to listen to M.C.'s warnings because he cannot face leaving Sarah's Mountain, where his greatgrandmother settled when she escaped from slavery. There is some friction between M.C. and his father as M.C. grows up and becomes stronger and more independent. They play rough games that sometimes have undercurrents of more serious fighting. Jones teases M.C. a good deal, and M.C. sometimes wishes his father would take him more seriously. M.C. is portrayed as a visionary, one who looks into the future and who also connects strongly with the past, as he sits atop his forty-foot pole that overlooks the countryside and marks the graves of his forebears below him. His father thinks that M.C. has a gift for seeing the future.

As he walks that first morning, M.C.

meets Ben Killburn, his best friend, on the path. Jones has forbidden M.C. to play with Ben because his family, with their six-fingered hands, are thought to be "witchy." In fact they do seem to be gifted healers, and their mountain is a sort of Garden of Eden. They live happily together, communicating with animals and trees, eating no meat. Yet the stripmining affects them too; the acid runoff blights their crops. With Lurhetta's help, M.C. later comes to terms with his ambivalent feelings toward the Killburns, and he discovers that his prejudice has kept him from enjoying the company of the people on Kill's Mound, "the happiest place he'd ever known."

Going home, M.C. sees Lurhetta Outlaw on the path. Curious, he stalks and frightens her. He seems unsure of how to act with a girl. That night he stalks her again, and the two fight, M.C. cutting her with his hunting knife during the scuffle. After they meet again at the lake, M.C. apologizes and a cautious friendship begins. Lurhetta is a city girl, streetwise and a bit surly, and M.C.

knows that he has met his match. She is older than M.C., and she teaches him the value of friendship, challenging his fear of the Killburns. M.C. falls in love with Lurhetta and wants her to stay on the mountain. Of course she does not, but she leaves him the

tool that helps him save his family from the spoil heap.

Lurhetta is a wanderer and a loner, but she envies the closeness of the mountain families and appreciates their family histories.

M.C. comes to realize that he is responsible for his own future: the Dude will not solve his problems; Lurhetta will not always be around; Ben can be a friend only if M.C. stands up to his own fears and his father's superstition. M.C.

discovers a way to save his mountain, and the book ends with the indication that M.C. will be able to face and overcome the inevitable difficulties that await him as he continues to grow into adulthood.

Topics for Discussion

1. M.C., Ben, and Lurhetta have taken a rabbit from one of M.C.'s traps when Lurhetta asks to visit Kill's Mound. They leave the rabbit, and when M.C. comes back for it, someone has cut off its feet.

M.C. blames the Killburns. Do you think the Killburns did this? Why or why not?

What is the significance of this incident?

2. On Kill's Mound, the three friends meet an old woman in the barn, one of Ben's grandmothers. She is sitting on a chair, rolling cabbages into a pit, and laughing. When Lurhetta says that the grandmother should not be left alone in the barn, Ben says, "It's her place to be [there]." What is the reason for Hamilton's inclusion of this character, and what might she symbolize?

3. The spoil heap poses a real threat to M.C. and his family. Why do you think Jones and Banina refuse to do anything to protect the house and family?

4. Lurhetta often tries to teach M.C., showing him things about his life and actions that he has not recognized. Do you think she learns any lessons from the mountain people?

5. Why does Lurhetta leave her knife behind?

6. M.C. stands up to his father about Ben. Do you think that Jones will ever give up his superstitions about the Killburns? Why or why not?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Although much of M.C. Higgins, the Great is realistic and believable, there are supernatural elements as well—for example, M.C.'s sensation of Sarah's presence and the Killburns' healing powers. Do the supernatural elements detract from, or add to, the total effect of the story? How and why?

2. Try to rewrite the basic plot of M.C.

Higgins, the Great with a city setting.

Can you find a parallel environmental threat to the spoil heap? What would Jones's superstitions center on? What would Lurhetta's character be like? How would a city setting affect M.C.'s outlook and decisions?

3. Research the lifestyles of mountain people in America. How does Hamilton's portrayal of a mountain family fit the picture you get from your research? How does it differ? Is it a fairly accurate portrayal?

4. Hamilton has said that in each book she tried to clearly present one aspect of the black experience. How does this book present the black experience?

Does it deal with only one theme of that experience? If so, what is that theme and how does Hamilton clarify it for the reader? If not, what themes does she present, and how are they developed?

5. This novel includes many symbols, such as the spoil heap, M.C.'s pole, and the water and tunnel. Choose two or three symbols and discuss how Hamilton uses them to develop her themes and characters.

For Further Reference

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Nasso, Christine, ed. Contemporary Authors, First Revision Series. Vols.

25-28. Detroit: Gale Research, 1977.

Includes a biographical sketch highlighting Hamilton's personal background, career, and writings.

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Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1975. Includes a short sketch on Hamilton's life and works up to 1975.

Stine, Jean C., ed. Contemporary Literary Criticism Vol. 26. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983. Contains excerpts from criticism of Hamilton's books. More extensive and up-to-date than Block and Riley. Some repetition of Block and Riley but excerpts tend to be longer, and there are more excerpts for each novel.

Related Titles

Hamilton's first novel, Zeely, features a girl who, like M.C., must cope with the transition to adulthood. In The Planet of Junior Brown, Junior and his friend Buddy confront an urban world that drifts toward madness; they face their own limitations and, like M.C., must develop for themselves sound, honest values. Unlike M.C. and Junior Brown, the heroine of A Little Love has no extraordinary intellectual gifts. Family is an important issue in this novel. While M.C. learns about independence from the prejudices of his family, Sheema learns the value of love in general and of the special love of her guardians. Although the style of Zeely is somewhat awkward, Hamilton's novels of the 1970s and 1980s all feature a complex and vivid style. These books have strikingly memorable images and symbolism that give their plots satisfying depth.

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