The Man with the Golden Arm Short Guide

The Man with the Golden Arm by Nelson Algren

BOOKRAGS

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Characters

The key to Algren's characterization lies in his oft-repeated lines from Whitman which call for the author to identify with his characters — "Here among West Division Street drinkers I felt that, did I deny them, I denied myself." The novel's protagonist, Frankie Macjinek, is called Machine because of his "golden arm," referring to his dealing method. He is a doomed veteran with a Purple Heart who is caught up in a hopeless entanglement of transgression, confession, and atonement. Frankie's alter ego is the comic character Sparrow (Solly Saltskin); together, Frankie and Sparrow form the male friendship dyad which is the staple of so much popular picaresque storytelling. What makes them different from one another is the degree to which head rules heart, as Frankie is by nature emotional, expressive, and vulnerable. He has been traumatized by the War and by an environment which denies emotions, and is ultimately betrayed by the more crippled — that is, more grotesque, twisted — Sparrow, whose street-wise instincts put his own survival ahead of brotherhood.

Perhaps Algren's female characters are most noteworthy in their celebration of the "bad girl" with a heart of gold — prostitutes, b-girls, strippers, and women whose good-natured vulnerability leads them to a fate no better than that of their men. Molly-O is the most pure of this type, the commonlaw wife of Drunkie John, a sadistic abuser who lives off her while continually attacking her both physically and emotionally. Her relationship with Frankie both redeems her by allowing her to devote her self-sacrificing nature to someone who repays rather than victimizes her and further destroys her by exposing her to punishment for hiding him. In fact, the beaten woman is a sort of female saint to Algren; the submissive, suffering, abused female becomes a virtuous figure. In addition, women are defined totally by their sexuality, with submission and eventu ally motherhood, both of babies and grown men, their crowning glory.

The other side of the devoted, submissive woman is the woman who seeks to deny her own femininity and victimize men, through rigid self-assertion and instilling guilt, as does Zosh, Frankie's neurotic wife who, it is suggested, develops a psychosomatic paralysis to both punish and further entrap Frankie. In asserting her pride and resenting male exploitation, she denies her female nature, crippling herself and destroying Frankie.

The other inhabitants of West Division Street — Frankie's boss, Antek the owner, the shady "fixer" Zygmunt, Violet and Old Husband, Blind Pig, and Nifty Louie are wonderfully individualized stock characters. Placed in opposition to Frankie, Sparrow, and all the denizens of the Tug & Maul is Captain Bednar, Record Head, who represents both established order, a system which legitimizes man's control of man, and the dilemma of the "respectable" citizen, whose denial of others' humanity denies his own human feelings. By seeing his victims not as humans but as "records" he commits an essential sin against charity.

Social Concerns

this novel of Chicago street life, Inthe Midwestern city becomes a metaphor for American experience, epitomizing a system which requires one either to become a victim or to victimize others. Algren's portrait of the alienation, exploitation, and degradation of dispossessed people explores the familiar naturalistic themes of fate and choice, struggle and defeat, success and failure. But unlike the gospel of Social Darwinism and the Protestant Ethic so often present in popular literature, Algren's portrayal celebrates losers caught in the peculiarly American cycle of success and failure, the "special American guilt" of owning nothing "in a land where ownership and virtue are one." This critique of the Horatio Alger myth so common in popular literature (that everyone can succeed with determination, hard work, and a little luck) advances that dialogue one step further, uniting the message of classic American realism with the popular appeal of irreverent humor, remarkable comic and dramatic characters, and exotic low-life settings.

Algren's white ethnic ghetto dramatizes the conflict between vulnerable, displaced, traditional people in a landscape characterized by an unresponsive, dehumanized system of social control. His Midwestern landscape puts American readers in touch with their immigrant past and with the experience of those "outsiders" in WASP culture, the Eastern European and Mediterranean immigrants whose inner life remains alien in a country devoted to the work ethic and distrustful of the interior life, the "silent people" Michael Novak calls the "white ethnics." Ethnicity, for this third-generation child of Jewish, Swedish, and German immigrants, means not to fit into the social machine, means to be marginal, alien, and exploited, cut off from the mainstream and robbed of power and identity.

The criminal underworld, while long a staple of American popular fiction, is here invested with a humanity which goes beyond good guys and bad guys, showing social problems with social roots. The Man with the Golden Ann is perhaps most notorious for introducing American readers to a lengthy, graphic depiction of drug use. Frankie Machine has a "thirty-five pound monkey" (Algren's coinage) on his back, a morphine addiction inherited from a shrap nel war wound. With this device, Algren shows how Frankie is victimized both by society, in the person of Nifty Louie the pusher, and by himself, as his habit delivers a momentary joy and intensifies the guilt which rules his life.

Drugs are also an apt metaphor for midcentury commercial capitalism, as Louie both creates and fulfills a need for his goods. Urban people, no longer workers or producers, are instead unemployed consumers, driven by advertising, commercialism, and commodity culture in the "rutted tunnels that lead between the advertising agency and the bank." His hustlers, the mirror image of respectable businessmen, deal alike in sales, commodities, and consumption.

Algren's depiction of what he called the "usurpation of man over man" is made more complex by his analysis of the alternate victimization and exploitation which exists in the relationship between the sexes. Although his world of barrooms, boxing matches, racetracks, and prisons is a peculiarly male one, women exist to relieve the unrelenting competition and one-upmanship of male sparring. Men and women come together not so much for passion as to fulfill a mutual need for warmth and nurturing, needs denied or exploited by the world outside. At the same time, though, Algren is one of the writers to deal most in depth with issues of sexual violence — the beaten woman is a familiar character in his stories — and sexual exploitation in prostitution.

Algren's concern for the loser continues in his ubiquitous depiction of the complete victimization of the individual by society epitomized by the cops — criminals dance and the prison system, itself a vehicle for the ultimate in human degradation, capital punishment. The prison scenes in The Man with the Golden Arm join an array of the convicted in Southern prison farms, small town jails, and on death row in a plea for the dignity of human life denied by capital punishment.

Techniques

Algren's most abiding technique is simply that of classic realistic fiction — the graphic depiction of details of slum life, drug deals, card games, boxing rings, and all the other settings which represent the winner-loser environment: the dim barroom environment of the Tug & Maul; the grubby tenement shared by Frankie, Zosh, Molly 0, Violet and Old Husband; Nifty Louie's lair, where Frankie gets "fixed"; the station house in front of Captain Bednar's desk; the prison where Frankie does a stretch for stealing; and always, the streets, alleys, and doorsteps of Chicago.

Also important is Algren's surprising gift for dialogue, for capturing a particular kind of speech — fast talking, rapping, tall tales, and scams, represented in this novel by the ubiquitous chatter Frankie deals out with the cards. Indeed, Algren sets up his own mythology of urban life, complete with heroic characters, jargon, proverbs, and folk wisdom. But most remarkable of all is the prevalent, pervasive presence of Algren's unique humor — flat, understated, delighted in word plays ("moral warpitude") and turnabouts upon elevated diction, especially that of law and the courts, which mock respectable euphemisms. In addition to the comic element inherent in his use of language, Algren creates situations that are comic in their absurdity — the love triangle of Violet, Old Husband, and Sparrow; Sparrow's dognapping of Rumdum, the beer-drinking mascot; and the theft of a bag of underwear that lands Frankie in jail.

The darker, tragic notes underlie the comic themes — the murder of Nifty Louie; the decayed, subhuman specter of Blind Pig, who winds up with Louie's roll and Louie's pusher's job; the defeated, loser's life of Molly Novotny; the lives devoted to destruction and self destruction. The familiar images — here, the El itself, looping and twisting its steel girders across the city — provide an apt metaphor for human life, going quickly but going nowhere, up and down, like the merry -go-rounds, roller coasters, the junkie's high and the pain of coming down "cold turkey." Juxtaposed to the realistic detail is a type of romantic lyric, an elegiac tone employed by the narrator to celebrate periods of intermittent joy and humanity and to express the pathos his characters register, but rarely acknowledge.

Themes

Besides the social issues which arise from environment and the socioeconomic system, Algren pursues other more universal themes. Perhaps the most apparent is that of interconnectedness and interdependence. Cops and criminals are brothers — the same types, with a mutual understanding which unites them eternally against the "squares" who inhabit a world removed from elemental existence. Everyone "had been twisted about a bit" the narrator observes, so that the perversion or predilection of each finds its complement in the other — cop and criminal, man and women, con and mark, pusher and junkie.

Because of this interconnectedness, people become dependent upon one another, a situation which has both positive and negative aspects. While the intimacy achieved by these relationships belies the cold isolation characteristic of urban life in general, it also results in an archetypal victimabuser relationship, in which the abuser himself is a victim not only of society, but often of his very victims — Frankie's rejected wife Zosh turns herself into a wheelchair victim in order to intensify his guilt and bind him to her even more firmly, and Frankie and Sparrow murder the pusher Nifty Louie.

Because of this dependence, "For everybody needed somebody," people need lies, "poor man's pennies," illusions which appear as the notorious tall tales and "rapping" in the stories.

"Everyone had to pretend a bit to be somebody," so that the con artists, shills, and fast talkers — whose lines make up the life in barrooms and card games — become emblems of the need for identity, achievement, and uniqueness all share.

The imperative to either victimize or become a victim to maintain illusions at the expense of others' needs generates betrayal, the underside of the brotherhood found in friendship, as the system uses people's own best instincts against them. Sparrow's selling out Frankie after the underwear theft, Molly's selfless decision to hide Frankie from the police, which results in her conviction, and moreover, Blind Pig's betrayal of all the denizens of the Tug and Maul result from a system which demands and rewards the abuse of one's most human emotions. Because people can maintain their illusions and sometimes their very life itself only by exploiting, victimizing, or otherwise denying others' needs, their lives are filled with fear of others' vengeance and anger and a sense of their own guilt. Hence, Frankie, whose rejection of Zosh leads to her revenge, the psychosomatic crippling which victimizes both herself and Frankie at the same time, is consumed by a guilt which drives him further into his addiction.

Adaptations

The Man with the Golden Arm was a sensational movie hit in 1950, rendered even more sensational in that it initially was denied clearance by the Production Code because of its portrayal of drug use and paraphernalia.

Produced by Otto Preminger for United Artists, the film was unfavorably reviewed, and Algren himself thought the picture a misuse of film rights and purely a vehicle for its star, Frank Sinatra, who played Frankie Machine.

Forced by a lack of funds to drop his lawsuit, Algren emerged with only $15,000 for the film rights.

Literary Precedents

Algren falls without a doubt into the camp of traditional literary realism, along with Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane, but his most complete identification is with Walt Whitman, whose democratic vision included "conquered and slain" persons as well as victors, and with Carl Sandburg, the poet of Chicago. Because of his comic style, his ironic humor, and his technique of dialogue and depiction of low-life characters, he has roots also in Mark Twain and in the Midwestern tale of riverboat brawlers, eye-gouging wrestlers, con men, and gamblers.

Looking at the continental roots of his realism and his urban settings, one finds elements of Villon, Zola, and Baudelaire. In his philosophy Algren recalls Jean-Paul Sartre's No Exit (1944), most notably in the portrayal of human relationships in which men both devour and seek to be devoured, where they seek to be united with others and yet seek independence from others.

Algren himself set precedents in graphic depictions of urban life found in novels such as William S. Burroughs's Naked Lunch (1959). A relationship between Algren's work and that of nonfiction chroniclers of the urban proletariat (e.g. Mike Royko and Studs Terkel) is also evident.

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