The Master of Ballantrae Short Guide

The Master of Ballantrae by Robert Louis Stevenson

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Characters

While there are several striking portraits of secondary persons such as old Lord Durrisdeer, Alison Graeme, and the somewhat boastful Colonel Francis Burke, the central emphasis is on the brothers Durie. Because the story is told from Henry's standpoint, the reader's sympathy is probably going to attach to this unhappy man; however, the sheer bravado and energy of James is bound to appeal to many, as it does, grudgingly, to the old family benefactor, Ephraim Mackellar.

Owing to the old Lord's desire to avoid losing his estate in "the troubles," and to the result of the coin toss, James is the brother who has the choice of actions: Stay and tend to the estate or go off with the Jacobites to fight for the Stuart cause. James chooses to leave, while Henry remains to take on the family responsibility. The animosity between the brothers (mostly on James's side) is intensified by the marriage of Henry and Alison, and perhaps by Henry's recognition that his irresponsible brother is their father's favorite.

Throughout the course of the novel, the personality of the primary narrator, Mackellar, is revealed in subtle and meaningful ways. For example, while he can condemn the willful ways of James, he also cannot fully abandon his respect for this brother's daring and boldness. Thereby, the reader gains a helpful perspective on the attitudes of the sensible, loyal, and respectful people who made up much of the population of Scotland in the mid-1700s.

The perhaps unfortunate addition of the Indian Secundra Dass to the cast of characters seems to have occurred for plot convenience, since the Indian's function appears to be mainly overhearing important conversations (usually Henry's) so that his master, James, can foil Henry's plans. Dass does, however, add a note of tonal grimness to the closing scene in which he digs up the "body" of his master, thus bringing about Henry's death.

Colonel Burke emerges as another convenience, but he does represent the soldier-of-fortune type of combatant that was frequently found in such rebellions. His account of the Master's adventures, mostly at sea, is vigorous but uneven — there is a realistic aspect in his evident deletion of a passage from the manuscript that he has sent Mackellar, perhaps as Mackellar guesses, a complaint about "what he supposed to be an indiscretion on my part." Stevenson really had no other way to relate the distant activities of James Durie except with the use of such a character as Burke; and this hot-headed soldier, in his ultimate hostility to Durie, aids in developing the sense of careless vitality of the Master. As Mackellar titles one important chapter, in which James returns to Durrisdeer to plague his brother and get more money for his enterprises, there is indeed an "Enemy in the House."

Social Concerns/Themes

all of Stevenson's works, The OfMaster of Ballantrae is the only one which he repeatedly referred to as a tragedy. While many of the earlier titles emphasize success as a result of heroic endeavor, this book seems to suggest that any such endeavor is bound to fail. While many readers view it as Stevenson's finest completed work, others find the grimness of both the plot and the nature of several of the characters (most importantly James Durie, the Master) depressing. That the man who wrote in one of his essays, "There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy" could pen so gloomy and pessimistic a work causes some readers to reject the novel — although many critics explain that this work finally reveals Stevenson's real attitude toward life.

The parallel between the brothers' conflict— James representing the spirit of rebellion and wildness and Henry standing for peace and responsibility — and the external struggle between the forces of rebellion (the Jacobites) against the retention of the House of Hanover on the throne of Great Britain and those who opposed the return of the Stuarts to the throne is a key thematic element in the novel. As the Jacobites came to grief at Culloden (but with great losses on the English side), so James, the Master, seems to "lose" to his more sedate, responsible brother.

Having gone off to fight for the Stuart cause and being reported dead, James reappears several times, only to cause Henry and his wife, Alison Graeme Durie, who had been betrothed to James, almost infinite grief. This brother-versus-brother opposition occupies most of the text — the conclusion, in which both brothers die, strongly suggests the futility of such attempts to achieve ascendancy, especially in the troubled context of Scottish political and military affairs.

Although the story has been criticized for the weak and contrived ending, the somewhat supernumerary character, Secundra Dass, the untidy plot, which has James traveling to a bewildering number of far-flung locations, and the use of two unrelated narrators, many critics argue that the early scenes in Scotland are among the best that Stevenson ever wrote. The atmosphere of the gloomy Durrisdeer household and the bleak surroundings of the estate are well realized and help to give the novel the ominous atmosphere for which the author was clearly striving.

Some critics find fault with the lack of specific detail in the text, apparently a result of Stevenson's focus on the development of the two main characters. However, many scenes, such as the excellent portrayal of the duel between the brothers (and the telling detail that it was considered very unsportsmanlike to seize one's opponent's blade with the left hand, which James does) give more than ample detail.

Certainly, the primary message here is that conflict is costly, particularly in families; that disloyalty is reprehensible, also especially in families; and, finally, that life requires enormous courage and patience of anyone who wishes to accomplish anything worthy.

There is also the added suggestion that many accomplishments are unlikely to be made.

Techniques

As he often does, Stevenson depends on the naive narrator for his plot development. Ephraim Mackellar, of course, knows only what he sees and hears (and, to a degree, what he can deduce from this evidence); so, the reader "sees" the events and the people through the typically sympathetic vision of the loyal old family retainer.

Mackellar tries to accept the ungoverned behavior of James, but his fondness for Henry and his admiration for this long-suffering man impel the narrator to take sides (and, he is so fair in his judgments and reports that the reader must agree with him, no matter how "charming" the Master often appears) and to condemn a person to whom he would have been loyal to the death otherwise.

The interpolated reports from Burke do interrupt the flow of the narrative somewhat, but they provide (in an appropriately breezy style) information about James's doings when he is out of Mackellar's sight. The plot is essentially linear, with a minimum of antecedent information; but, the settings are numerous, far apart, and introduced, perhaps, to stimulate reader interest. The journeys to America, for example, may seem gratuitous to many readers. The action, however, is lively; and, the high opinion held by many critics of the characterization seems justified.

Adaptations

The film adaptation of The Master of Ballantrae utilized to the fullest the swashbuckling talents of Errol Flynn, who appeared as the Master, shown in a more favorable light than this character was presented in the novel. It was released in 1953, directed by William Keighley and produced by Warner Brothers.

Key Questions

Since the principal setting of the novel is Scotland during rebellious, violent times, it might be helpful to study a bit of the history of the two uprisings, especially that in 1745. It may surprise modern readers to learn how many people in that day sympathized with the Stuart cause and believed that it would triumph. Such a study should also reveal the confusion and uncertainty of the era, out of which Stevenson brings some order in his novel.

1. Given the family situation, does the conflict between the Durie brothers seem realistic? Could one brother turn so sharply against the other?

2. Is the character of Alison Graeme developed sufficiently to explain the passion that the brothers seem to have for her?

3. Does Secundra Dass add anything to the story beyond his obvious plot services? For example, is any tonal element enhanced by his presence?

4. Are the piratical activities of James Durie, especially those involving Captain Teach (who Mackellar says is not the Teach known as Blackbeard), truly relevant to the plot, or are they merely entertaining diversions? Do they in any way illuminate the personality of Durie?

5. Douglas Gifford defends Stevenson's use of Mackellar (whom some readers view as an "unreliable narrator") against those who find the device weak. Do you agree that this point of view is valid?

6. Does the Scottish setting emerge as sufficiently detailed to give the gloomy impression that Stevenson clearly intended? What more could have been done, in view of the claim by some scholars that insufficient details are provided?

7. Do you have any sympathy for James Durie, in light of his decision to fight for a cause that he believed to be just and the fact that he undergoes considerable hardship?

8. Which aspect of the text seems to be the most impressive: theme(s), plot, setting, characterization, or style? Do these elements blend successfully in the course of the novel?

Literary Precedents

The phenomenon of brotherly antagonism is as old as the biblical Cain and Abel story. Also, the history of Scotland is rife with tales of families that were divided over the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745. Such familial conflict also reflects the famed intransigence of the Scottish temperament.

Further back in English literature, however, John Fletcher and Philip Massinger's play The Elder Brother (c.1637) deals with such a fraternal hostility, though in a considerably less violent manner than Stevenson does.

As to the whole subject of the 1715 and the 1745 uprisings, probably the nearest precedent (and very likely a strong influence) was Walter Scott, who treated the subject with remarkable objectivity in such works as Waverley (1814) and Rob Roy (1818). In accord with Scott's view, Stevenson appears to set forth the thematic truth that all combat, in howsoever good a cause, is fraught with danger and always costly (the same idea that invests much of The Aeneid).

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