

Men and Angels Short Guide

Men and Angels by Mary Gordon

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| Men and Angels Short Guide..... | 1 |
| Contents..... | 2 |
| Characters..... | 3 |
| Social Concerns..... | 4 |
| Techniques..... | 5 |
| Themes..... | 6 |
| Key Questions..... | 7 |
| Literary Precedents..... | 8 |
| Related Titles..... | 9 |
| Copyright Information..... | 10 |



Characters

The tension throughout *Men and Angels* is focused on the conflict between Anne Foster, the mother of two young children, and Laura Post, the young woman employed as their nanny. It is the very generosity and openness of Anne Foster's personality that blinds her to impending evil. Anne is portrayed as a fiercely loving woman with a strong sexual nature. In the absence of her husband, she turns to Ed Corcoran for sexual fulfillment, an act that Laura interprets as sin. While Anne is an attractive character, she is also naive and, perhaps, self-indulgent.

Laura clearly shows signs of instability that Anne cannot — or will not — see because she needs to complete her work. Whether this is a naive blindness to the situation or simply a failure to deal with the problem because her own work consumes her is not entirely clear. Not until Anne watches Laura's indifference to a dangerous situation — the children playing on the ice — does she take action and fire Laura.

Laura seems almost a mythological shapeshifter — she can appear both physically attractive or drab at various times in the story. She exudes a freefloating, creepy sense of danger that Anne senses, but does not acknowledge. Laura becomes more sympathetic as the story of her early years unfolds.

Her cruel treatment in childhood makes her need for love understandable. She is motivated by jealousy and a desperate hunger for love and attention that drive her to suicide, an obvious act of revenge to get Anne's attention. Anne ultimately comes to terms with this terrible event at Laura's memorial, with the priest's reading of Psalm 121. Anne's ultimate recognition is that she has no power to protect her children from the terrible events of life, in a world that was "so dangerous, so treacherous."

Jane Watson, Caroline's daughter-in-law, has survived her young husband's death and gone on to live her own life.

She is a strong woman who acts as a mother to Anne and encourages her in her career aspirations. She is attractive in her old age, and successfully combines both sexuality and a healthy attitude toward religion.

The male characters in the narrative are less fully developed. Anne's husband Michael, while portrayed as a thoughtful husband and caring father, is absent throughout most of the novel.

Ed Corcoran, a minor figure, is a potential lover for Anne in her sexual need, but he is a stereotype of the faithful husband and good father.

Anne's children, Peter and Sarah, are not developed as strong characters; their personalities are reported to the reader through Anne's perceptions.

Social Concerns

This is Gordon's most tightly-focused novel, a study of the conflicting roles of contemporary motherhood. The question raised by this narrative is never answered: Can a woman be both a "good" mother and satisfy her own psychological need for a demanding career?

Gordon's protagonist Anne Foster is an art historian commissioned to write the catalog for an exhibit of turn-of-the century artist Caroline Watson, an imaginary figure resembling American expatriate artist Mary Cassatt. In order to complete her project, Anne hires a nanny, Laura Post, to care for her children. While Anne is intuitively repelled by Laura's personality, she can find no specific fault in her care of the house and children. The reader understands early in the story, however, that Laura is a religious fanatic and poses a potential danger to Anne's children.

Anne Foster's attempt to balance the demands of motherhood with those of a career is the central concern of the novel. As feminist critics have noted, contemporary society offers few models and little support for the woman who chooses these dual roles.

Techniques

The narrative is in the third person, with the author entering the consciousness of Laura and Anne in alternating chapters. Anne's thinking is complex and conflicted, while Laura's thoughts are expressed in simplistic sentences, characteristic of her single-minded pattern of thought. The suspense and the dramatic irony in the narrative come from the reader's insight into the conflicting motives of the two major characters. The reader knows that this clash of motives will result in tragedy, but cannot predict in what form.

Themes

The multiple examples of motherhood dominate the story. Anne Foster is an educated woman and a "good" mother, the reader understands. Her love for her children is fiercely physical and protective. In the absence of her husband, who is completing a project in Europe, Anne must be both mother and father to her young children. In hiring Laura, Anne begins to recognize that she is being forced into a mothering role to this young woman.

Caroline Watson, the artist whose work Anne is studying, was also a mother — and a "bad" one. Caroline left her son behind when she had to choose between completing her studies in Europe and staying home in America. Presumably because he had suffered from neglect as a child, he was an unstable person who drank himself to death in his twenties. To what degree was Caroline to blame? Her daughter-in-law says of her: "She was not a good mother but she was a splendid human being." Caroline did succeed in mothering her daughter-in-law Jane, who loved her deeply and took her as a role model for her life. Gordon develops the idea that the same woman can be a good mother to one child and a bad one to another.

Laura is the victim of a "toxic" mother, who preferred her other daughter and treated Laura cruelly.

Laura, searching for love, finds salvation in Jesus but is exploited by a series of charlatan preachers. Laura has been emotionally damaged by her mother's neglect and is perhaps insane.

The reader understands early in the story that Laura has attached herself to Anne as her emotional support — a mother figure to replace the one that failed her — and will use any weapon, including violence, to remove the children from Anne's life.

In addition to exploring a definition of motherhood, Gordon also raises questions about the nature of the religious life. Anne Foster is a loving wife and mother, but she is not a religious person. Laura represents the religious impulse gone haywire, the descent into fanaticism. The title, a reference to the passage in First Corinthians that also serves as the epigraph, suggests that Laura's desperate search for love is a perversion of the biblical text.

The two major characters, Laura and Anne, stand in conflict throughout the story. The reader understands this, but Laura and Anne do not. The tension in the narrative grows as the reader perceives the increasing danger to the children.



Key Questions

This novel, with its focus on contemporary motherhood, raises a number of disturbing questions. Although Gordon says she is a feminist, she does not fit easily into any political camp. Religious writers and critics find Gordon's work fascinating because she raises questions basic to Christian theology.

Because Gordon appeals to the reader's conscience in presenting complex moral issues about personal responsibility, her themes are likely to provoke controversy.

1. At what point in the early part of the narrative do you realize that Laura is not just disturbed, but dangerous?
2. What is your initial impression of Anne? Does she seem admirable? What are her personal strengths and weaknesses?
3. How does Gordon begin to develop some sympathy for Laura's pain early in the narrative?
4. At what point is it clear that Anne's children are in real physical danger?
5. How does Gordon develop the idea that Anne feels insecure and guilty about her decisions throughout the novel?
6. What is your reaction to Anne's attempted seduction of Ed Corcoran? Is her action understandable? Morally defensible?
7. What is your judgment of Caroline Watson's decision to pursue her career as an artist at the cost of abandoning her son?
8. Does Gordon give any hint that the tragedy will strike Laura rather than the children?
9. Could Anne have prevented Laura's suicide?
10. What is Anne's conclusion about the nature of mother love in the Epilogue? Do you find this a satisfactory conclusion?

Literary Precedents

While a number of novelists have created fictional mothers, Mary Gordon is mining unexplored territory in defining the conflict between motherhood and the need for a career. Other works that critics connect with this novel are Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* (1938), Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and Sue Miller's *The Good Mother* (1986).

Related Titles

The character of Laura inevitably calls to mind Margaret Casey of *Final Payments* (1978). Although Laura's religious background is Protestant, her misunderstanding about the nature of love and charity is akin to Margaret's perverted Catholicism. Also, both Laura and Margaret are unattractive women who crave love and attention but whose emotional hunger cannot be fulfilled. Anne, like Isabel Moore, is on a quest for personal fulfillment — a need to balance her own desires with those of others who need her.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994