Men at Arms Short Guide

Men at Arms by Terry Pratchett

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Characters

Like Brideshead Revisited (1945), Men at Arms features a large cast of characters who are almost all effectively developed, and of whom several are based upon people Waugh knew well. Guy's father, brother-in-law and brigade commander are all drawn from identifiable models, as is explained in Christopher Sykes's biography, and so are many of Guy's fellow officers in his regiment. The many short, exquisitely detailed sketches of individuals who make a single brief appearance give Men at Arms a human richness that highlights Waugh's exceptional abilities as a portrayer of character.

Guy Crouchback himself has irritated some critics by being a basically passive and somewhat colorless person to whom many things happen, but who seldom initiates anything of import.

Although this criticism is accurate to an extent, it ignores the more important question of Guy's functions in the development of the plot. As both an empty vessel in search of meaning and an apprentice member of a complex and powerful organization, it is necessary for him to react rather than act; and if he were any more forceful or independent it would be difficult to believe in his rapid conversion to an entirely new way of life. Guy Crouchback may well be the least intrinsically interesting character in Men at Arms but he is nonetheless an essential part of its narrative strategy.

Social Concerns

The impact of World War II upon English society is both a contextual feature and an overtly expressed concern of Men at Arms. The background of the novel is a constantly changing panorama of people in motion, as city residents flee to the country, coastal dwellers are evacuated inland, and military men are shifted from training areas to potential battlegrounds. In the midst of this pattern of changing scenes, which alternates moments of complete chaos with long periods of anxious inactivity, it seems perfectly natural for the book's characters to speculate about the ultimate consequences of these developments; and if there is little consensus as to the specifics of what will result, there is general agreement regarding the greater democratization that will occur as almost every segment of society becomes involved in this life-and-death struggle between nations.

These sweeping transformations are observed in sharper focus in Men at Arms's concentration upon the military milieu, where the hallowed traditions of an established social class are being subjected to an influx of raw and not always easily assimilated recruits.

Waugh sees this as a dynamic process, with the effects of military convention upon the recruits being counterbalanced by the recruits' alteration of military convention, and he generally presents it non-judgmentally: Although some of these lapses from tradition are regrettable, many are sensible improvements upon hidebound practices. His overriding concern is to offer a detailed picture of military life considered as a microcosmic analogue of the fundamental changes coursing through society, as Men at Arms depicts a country at peace responding to the demands of modern warfare.

Techniques

Men at Arms succeeds in harmoniously integrating the various prose styles Waugh employed in Decline and Fall (1928) and Brideshead Revisited.

There are many moments of heightened humor and seriousness, but they are now blended into the flow of the plot rather than set off by radical alterations in style and mood. The lushness and overt sentimentality of the serious sections of Brideshead Revisited are nowhere in evidence, and the wild humor of Decline and Fall has been toned down to a much more realistic level. Men at Arms represents the culmination of Waugh's search for a style which would enable him to deal with the complete range of human experience, and it graphically demonstrates why even writers who dislike his religious and social views have usually expressed admiration for his mastery of literary technique.

Themes

The protagonist of Men at Arms, Guy Crouchback, has led a largely meaningless life in the years leading up to World War II. The outbreak of hostilities seems to offer an opportunity to find some individual purpose while at the same time serve his country, and he embraces it with a fervor that surprises everyone who knows him. But once in the army, Guy discovers that his new career is composed of decidedly mixed blessings: if stability and meaning are part of the structural bedrock of the military, so is an inflexible way of doing things that often leads to needless tragedy.

It is precisely these rigid dogmas of military discipline, however, which Guy comes to see as an integral part of the deep satisfactions he finds in military life. Without losing his intellectual awareness that such discipline can be stupid and even destructive, he achieves a more profound sense of the emotional loyalties evoked by the individual's commitment to the greater good of something larger than himself.

He learns that in order to find some degree of personal fulfillment, he must first accept severe limitations upon his personal freedom, and it is this apparently paradoxical message that emerges from Men at Arms's thoughtful exploration of the relationship between private needs and public duties.

Literary Precedents

Men at Arms and the Sword of Honour trilogy of which it is the first part are in many respects comparable to Ford Maddox Ford's tetralogy Parade's End (Some Do Not, 1924; No More Parades, 1925; A Man Could Stand Up, 1926; The Last Post, 1928). Both recount an English gentleman of the old school's encounter with war and its social consequences, and both take a realistic, unromantic and extremely effective approach to expressing this in literary form. The deft manner in which Guy Crouchback's Catholic concerns are woven into the narrative once again reminds one of the pioneering work of Graham Greene in making such matters interesting to the general reading public, although it should be emphasized that both Ford and Greene are general influences rather than specific models for Waugh's achievement in Men at Arms and its encompassing trilogy.

Related Titles

The two sequels to Men at Arms, Officers and Gentlemen (1955) and Unconditional Surrender (1961), take Guy Crouchback through the rest of World War II. Officers and Gentlemen finds him transferring from his old regiment, the Halberdiers, to the Commandos and culminates in the loss of the battle for Crete. In Unconditional Surrender, Guy goes on a dangerous mission to Communist partisans in Yugoslavia and is reconciled with his ex-wife, who then dies in an air raid; in an epilogue set in 1951, Guy is seen as a happily remarried father who is now at peace with himself and his social obligations. The two later books are, if anything, even more subtly and powerfully written than Men at Arms, and the Sword of Honour trilogy as a whole constitutes what is generally regarded as the finest fictional treatment of the English experience of World War II.

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