The Neon Wilderness Short Guide

The Neon Wilderness by Nelson Algren

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Characters/Themes

Because of this minimizing environment, most denizens of The Neon Wilderness are crippled, flawed, or otherwise diminished, sometimes only emotionally, but usually physically as well. Presented frequently as beaten or crouching, they lack some human capacity for feeling or intimacy. The system offers essentially two means of escape, either through the victimization of others or victimization of the self, expressed in the motifs of physical abuse-the beaten women and the prize fighters, or addiction to liquor, drugs, or lies.

Set against this image of maimed and crippled humanity, however, is the human capacity for love and for pride.

The halfbreed prizefighter Baby overcomes his drinking and even recovers a sense of self-worth, momentarily, as a result of his marriage to Wilma.

Rocco resists offers to take a dive, no matter how badly he gets beaten. Banty Langobardi is allowed to retain his manhood even after losing his paycheck playing dice. The hard-luck woman of "Is Your Name Joe?" retains her dignity and humanity in the face of the Joe's attempts to reduce her. Selfsacrificing love can redeem the lost, as Army private Bailey, AWOL in Marseilles, is hidden and protected by an Algerian woman.

The search for manhood expressed in the quest for pride and love, however, is blocked by authority and the system, frequently expressed in a father-son relationship. Adamovitch, a father-figure in "A Bottle of Milk for Mother," seeks to instill guilt and abasement in the son. The father, representative of oppressive authority, is lost, detached, or even an abuser of the mother, provoking rebellion and rage from the son, as in "A Lot You Got to Holler."

The combination of the lost mother and the oppressive father results in a search for intimacy, bonding, and feeling on the part of both male and female characters. All seek the "other," a woman, either a gentle lover, the real mother, or a mother figure who will unconditionally protect and nurture, as does Gladys in "Poor Man's Pennies" ("It's hard to understand what some women will see in some men"). Some pursue a lost brother or a brotherhood to fulfill the need for intimacy and sharing; for example, David searches for Jesse in "The Brother's House."

Such a search, however, often ends in betrayal, as it does for Katz, and even death, as it does for the "Jew kid" in "So Help Me."

Perhaps the most complex rendition of these themes is found in "Design for Departure." Mary-severely crippled emotionally by the loss of her mother, tutelage by an "evil stepmother," and rejection by the father-seeks death in the form of an abusive relationship with an equally flawed man, blind Christy, who protects and debases her at once. Her dependence and death wish are further demonstrated in her addictions to

liquor and love. In her fantasies of redemption she perceives herself as the Virgin Mary — detaching herself from responsibility for her own dependence — and Christy as an ironic savior.

Social Concerns

According to his introduction, Algren's concern in this collection is with the relationship between fiction and society. These short stories, published since the early 1930s in such magazines as American Mercury, the Southern Review, and Harper's, all spring from "identification with those whom our civilization has discarded." These stories dramatize the distinction between "the mere academician and the writer whose task is to reveal the way things are with us." In the opening of "The Captain Has Bad Dreams," set as are the first scenes of so many Algren works in the ubiquitous station house, the tough Captain is inwardly haunted by the identification with the prisoners he both owns and denies. "A Bottle of Milk for Mother," perhaps the most well-known and representative of all these stories, begins with a favorite quotation from Whitman, "I feel I am of them — /I belong to these convicts and prostitutes myself."

All the selections show the individual as essentially innocent, the guilt that of an exploitive system: "all, all I see are innocent; . . . but the hideous fact stands guilty, the usurpation of man over man." The young woman convict in "Depend on Aunt Elly," for instance, is further victimized by the sadistic prison matron who continues to extort payments from furloughed women. A sense of a hopeless and unavoidable fate emanates from the environment and from the psyche as well, as lives are ended almost before they have begun. In "A Bottle of Milk for Mother," Algren's teen-age hero Lefty Bicek, hauled into Racine Street Station for rolling a drunk and ending up accused of murder, says to himself an Algren refrain, "I knew I'd never get to be twenty-one anyhow," as he stares at the shadowed wall. In "That's the Way It's Always Been," set in a World War II army camp, the chaplain joins with the officers to cheat enlisted men.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Algren follows in the classic tradition of earthy detail and setting highlighted by a kind of elegiac lyricism, unrelenting naturalism relieved only by pathos, humor, and a certain romantic extravagance.

As in the classic manner of Dreiser and Farrell, the urban setting is described in a manner which lends flatness and understatement. Technical details, perhaps the most noticeable in the lower-case titles that so annoyed Algren's conservative critics, underscore this. The urban jungle, here "the true jungle, the neon wilderness" of fourth-rate cabarets, is lent a jarring contemporary tone and universalized to include not only Milwaukee and New Orleans but the slums of Marseilles, Spain, and nameless southwestern cities. Ambiance comes not only from the subterranean life as it has existed for centuries, but also from the contemporary media — George Raft movies and newspaper crime reports.

The dialogue is replete with ethnic dialects and subculture jargon. Narration alternates between first person and third person. First-person narration lends individuality to such frequently under appreciated characters as Rose, the scrupulous con-man's moll in "Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone." Meanwhile, the third person narration, detached and understated, empathetically reveals the inner life of outwardly silent characters such as Lefty Bicek or Mary.

Perhaps the most noteworthy story in terms of technique is "The Face on the Barroom Floor," a saloon story in the tradition of Crane's "Blue Hotel," even down to the "no sale" sign on the cash-register, set in 1920s Chicago. The "worst brawl of all" between a goodhearted, vulnerable bartender fancy and a cunning legless man "of endless versatility and unfailing resource" shows how the man who is fully human always loses to the man who has sacrificed a portion of his humanity for survival, as Fancy is beaten into "a scarlet sponge" by the legless man when he fails to take advantage of the cripple's blind spot, as "he realized he must or be brained himself."

Related Titles

Lefty Bicek is the doomed young Pole of Never Come Morning (1942), and the Captain a prototype of Captain Bednar in The Man with the Golden Arm (1949).

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 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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