A Place to Come To Short Guide

A Place to Come To by Robert Penn Warren

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Characters/Techniques

Warren's use of a quiet and controlled autobiographical narrative technique seems to be a deliberate effort to avoid the contrived plots and histrionics of some of his earlier fiction, such as World Enough and Time (1950). The convention of the autobiographical novel is used with an appearance of artless mastery in A Place to Come To, and Warren's command of language has seldom been as sure in his fiction as in this novel.

The characterizations of A Place to Come To attain varying degrees of success. Jed Tewksbury, the narrator and protagonist, is a believable personality, whether as a youth escaping his Alabama origins or as a successful academic. Unlike some of his predecessors in Warren's fiction, he is neither excessively idealistic nor annoyingly wiseacre in his narrative style.

Nearly all the other characters are secondary to Tewksbury, and some of them are treated very sketchily. Tewksbury's friends and comrades in the Second World War remain rather shadowy figures, and his estranged wife, Dauphine, never becomes wholly memorable or credible. But his mentor at the University of Chicago, Dr. Stahlmann, is a strong presence, obsessed by his complex and ambivalent relationship toward Germany. And Tewksbury's passionate partner in the major love affair of his life, his adulterous liaison with Rozelle Carrington, is one of the novel's triumphs. Rozelle is a clever and remarkably well drawn character, whose fascination with Jed Tewksbury combines with her need for romantic passion, a love of fine literature, and an irresistible feeling of attraction to the working class intellectual — a kind of "nostalgia for the gutter" to use the English translation of a well known French phrase. Curiously enough, Rozelle's love for Jed provides the most intense episode in the novel, yet when the affair wears itself out, it is extinguished without regrets on parting, and never resumed, although the two meet later in life.

It is one of the final ironies of Tewksbury's life that his success as a scholar is due as much to the favor of others as to his own talent. The aid of Dr. Stahlmann, and later his other mentor at the University of Chicago, helps him land more than one favorable appointment in the academic world, and Rozelle's unsuspecting husband helps him considerably during Tewksbury's affair with Rozelle during his time at Nashville.

Social Concerns/Themes

A Place to Come To, Warren's final novel, provides an apologia and a valedictory comment on his career.

Abandoning the baroque plots and the complex narrative devices of his middle period, Warren here tells a relatively uncluttered tale of a Southern writer from an obscure Alabama town.

Jed Tewksbury's autobiographical narrative describes his career from his humiliating origin as the son of a roistering "redneck" in Dugton, Alabama, through a career as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, and then as a distinguished medievalist at a number of universities. Throughout the chronicle of Tewksbury's experience, however, Warren's focus is on his character's difficult effort to come to terms with his poor Southern background, and especially his father's status as a laughingstock in the undistinguished world of Dugton.

Clearly Tewksbury's drive toward intellectual success is motivated by his compulsion to put to rest the ghosts of his humble origin. Even Tewksbury's love affairs and failed marriage are dominated by his uneasy relationship with his widowed mother and his boyhood home, which he refuses to visit until his mother's death near the end of his career.

Warren's novel reflects the social theme of the struggle of the impoverished Southern white class — which is seldom at the center of Faulkner's work — to escape the stigma of poverty and social degradation and to find success in the prosperity of America in its post-World War II years. Even more significantly, Warren describes through Tewksbury the difficulty faced by the members of this rising class of poor whites in coming to terms with their own undistinguished origins. Aside from the social concerns of a class, the novel also reflects the struggles felt by many successful American writers in accepting themselves and their success.

Warren's Jed Tewksbury is not only a mask for Warren himself, but a character whose saga recalls the tragic lives of other writers, especially Southern writers like Thomas Wolfe, and their bitter conflicts, even their inability to establish a satisfactory relationship with the places they once called home.

When Tewksbury finally makes his pilgrimage to Dugton, at the close of the novel, following his mother's death, he learns how foolish his fears of the past have been, since few even remember him or the notorious episode of his father's death in a drunken fall from a wagon. Moreover, he comes to realize that his greatest folly has been his failure to return to visit his mother, who, despite keeping up a correspondence with him, had been too proud to ask him to return to see her. Finally, Warren's protagonist is able to accept not only his place of origin but his father's life when he realizes that Buck Tewksbury's only real fault had been that "he was born out of phase. If he had been born in 1840, he would have been just ripe for sergeant in a troop of

Alabama cavalry." His hero's final acceptance of his past and his place of origin provides a satisfying conclusion to one of Warren's best novels.

Literary Precedents

Warren's indebtedness to the tradiDion of the autobiographical novel is obvious. His own earlier fiction had dealt with the search for the father, which comprises the major theme of Tewksbury's life. And the fiction of other American writers, with their quarrel with their native towns and regions, looms large in A Place to Come To. Among Southern writers, Thomas Wolfe is a major precedent for this novel, for both the title and the story itself appear to be in part a commentary on Wolfe's You Can't Go Home Again (1940).

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