

The Shepherd of the Hills Short Guide

The Shepherd of the Hills by Harold Bell Wright

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Contents

The Shepherd of the Hills Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Adaptations.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	8
Related Titles.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10

Characters

Luckily for Wright, at the time he wrote laws did not require the disclaimer that all characters were fictitious and any resemblance to people, living or dead, was purely coincidental. Many of his characters were based on living people; many of those people were friends. And many times, he was one of his own characters. In *The Shepherd of the Hills*, he is the shepherd, the preacher who has gone to find peace in the healing powers of the woods and hills and streams, just as Wright returned, time and time again, to nature for spiritual and physical renewal.

Wright's characters may have been based on actual people, but they were bigger than life and he was criticized for his artificiality in characterization.

Young Matt is a giant of a man, a perfect physical specimen, intelligent, fearless, frank, kind, gentle and honest.

Sammy Lane is even more splendid, for she strives to become a better person through learning the finer graces of life, but never forgets that inner qualities alone determine whether or not a woman is a lady. Through these and lesser characters, Wright develops the principle of manhood and womanhood, that being a man or lady comes from quality of character. Both should be thoughtful, sympathetic, fun-loving and always desire to help others.

Wright characterizes Sammy as "not to be described." Although he details her womanly appearance, it can not capture the real woman. He lets another character reveal her magnificence: "That gal o' Jim Lane's jest plumb fills th' whole house. What! An' when she comes a-ridin' up t' th' office on that brown pony o' hern, I'll be dad-burned if she don't pretty nigh fill th' whole outdoors, ba thundas!"

It is not difficult to see the color of the hats in Wright's novel. The "bad guys" are drunken, slovenly, dirty, sweaty, rude and boastful. The "good guys" are always concerned for the other person. They may be dusty and grimy from working in the field, but they always have clear eyes and walk with a sure step.



Social Concerns

Not only did Wright record life as it happened, he passed judgment on it. In *The Shepherd of the Hills* he contrasted, in his slanted way, city dwellers with the hill people of the Ozarks, and the hill people come out the winners. Although one may attain the mask of city sophistication, Wright believed, if one is a ruffian, it will be apparent and, on the other hand, if one is a true lady or gentleman, even illiterate speech will not conceal it.

Wright stressed the importance of nature as "God's other book." Too often in the hurry and busyness of city life, greed and hypocrisy take over, but if one takes the time to commune with nature, the healing spirit will help him see the important things of life.

Wright also criticized churches. At this time in history, social consciousness was being raised, and many leaders asserted that the poor were not always to blame for their condition. If one looked to the church for help, the church would look the other way.

Wright believed that too often organized religion produced folly and hypocrisy, fulfilling the pretense of religion, but not addressing the actual social abuses around it.



Techniques

Wright's tale is told in the third person with occasional lapses when, as author, he speaks to the reader. During these times he moralizes and touches on the preachy tone his early critics noted. He begins this book talking to the reader with an allegory about the two trails of life — one leading to the higher, sunlit fields — and one leading to lower ground. Always, not just in *The Shepherd of the Hills*, there is a guiding element for mankind in Wright's writing.

Wright's use of dialect is very accurate, for he listened to the people of the Ozarks and recorded it faithfully. He uses it to distinguish the various characters and insert local color. He also used it to discern the various levels of book learning. When Sammy begins her studies from the "character-forming" books, her speech pattern changes as she assimilates knowledge. When her boyfriend Ollie returns from the city, his vocabulary and speech patterns also have improved.

While description is a useful tool to a writer, leading the reader to visualize the setting and understand characters' reactions, Wright is guilty of overusing description. His flowery pictures of events, people, and the Ozarks themselves bog down the narrative and leave the reader skimming ahead to pick up the plot once more.

Themes

It must be remembered that Wright saw his writing as a ministry to the people and all his works have a moralistic overtone. The Shepherd of the Hills, although no exception, is his most plotted story, based on an old legend about a city dweller who came to the hills and seduced, then deserted a young woman, who died shortly after her child was born. While this relationship was viewed as a crime, the overriding theme is one of renewing faith in God and man.

A stranger who comes to the Ozarks is the father of the city dweller, but conceals this fact and also the fact that he was a preacher at a big city church.

Instead, he becomes the Shepherd in Mutton Hollow, tending the sheep as he once tended his congregation, but gaining strength and peace in his solitude, instead of false pride and shallow egotism. The internal struggle of the Shepherd, to rediscover the God he has lost, dominates the book, but other characters face internal conflicts as well. Young Matt, the young mountain man, struggles to overcome the animal side of himself and become a real man, and Sammy Lane, the young mountain woman, searches within herself for a lady's heart. Through this moralistic story Wright builds up faith in man to show his readers that there is always hope for a finer life.

Adaptations

The Shepherd of the Hills was first made into a movie in 1919. Remakes were filmed in 1928, 1941, 1951, and 1963. The 1941 Paramount Pictures Technicolor filming starred the rising young actor, John Wayne, as young Matt.

Several stage versions of The Shepherd of the Hills have been performed through the years. Prior to 1931, Wright produced the play, at his own expense, with all proceeds to go to charity. In 1960 a group in Branson, Missouri formed The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society. They built an outdoor theater and staged the novel, declaring eighty-five percent of the dialogue was from the book. The play, produced from May to October each year, complete with live horses and a burning cabin, has an average annual attendance of a quarter of a million people. The Institute of Outdoor Drama in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, has recognized it as America's most attended outdoor theater.

Literary Precedents

There were others before Wright who wrote in the evangelical mode.

Edward Payson Roe was also a minister who turned to print. His books followed the pattern of a religious hero's or heroine's efforts to convince a doubter (usually of the opposite sex) to become a Christian. The hero was always successful with the help of a great catastrophe as a climax.

Wright more directly followed the work of Charles M. Sheldon, also a preacher, who had written a series of essays that he read to his congregation and developed into *In His Steps* (1896), which predicted how Jesus would live if he lived today. Wright acknowledged Sheldon's influence in his first work, *That Printer of Udell's*, but even the critics agreed that Wright's work was better. Neither Sheldon nor Roe matched the prolific writings of Harold Bell Wright.



Related Titles

Although *The Shepherd of the Hills* has a more intriguing and interwoven plot than any of his other books, it contains the same criticism of the church manifested in his first book, *That Printer of Udell's* and in his two other books featuring Dan Matthews, *The Calling of Dan Matthews* (1909) and *God and the Groceryman* (1927).

The Calling of Dan Matthews was Wright's third book and followed *The Shepherd of the Hills* in the prescribed two year interval. Wright attacks the institutional church where Dan Matthews has become minister and the closed-minded elders, who by their constant interference, make it impossible for him to minister to the people.

Finally Dan decides he cannot work under such control and returns to the Ozarks to enter another sort of ministry in his work as a businessman.

In *God and the Groceryman*, Dan Matthews feels he has not attained a true ministry through his work in developing the Old Baldy Mine. His efforts to achieve a ministry through his business that serves mankind is the central theme. Through Dan Matthews, Wright calls on the church to accept more social responsibility toward those less fortunate. He also lectures Christians against bowing to the doctrines of denominations instead of striving for a true life of service to others.

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