

The Shout Short Guide

The Shout by Robert Graves

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Characters

Crossley describes himself as "of middle age, and tall; his hair grey; his face never still for a moment; his eyes large and bright, sometimes yellow, sometimes brown, sometimes grey." He is an uncertain image, dreamlike. As the storyteller, he is a powerful force: "'My story is true,' he said, 'every word of it. Or, when I say that my story is 'true,' I mean at least that I am telling it in a new way. It is always the same story, but I sometimes vary the climax and even recast the characters. Variation keeps it fresh and therefore true.'" Crossley here represents himself as a storyteller, having all of a storyteller's destructive and creative powers. He can kill everything in his tale with a shout, and he shapes and reshapes the marriage of Rachel and Richard at will.

If Crossley is symbolic of the storyteller, then Rachel and Richard may be fragments of him. Rachel is inspiration; she both commands and obeys. When Crossley says to her, "At ten o'clock, Rachel, you and I sleep together," Rachel responds submissively: "Why, of course, my dear." Then she slaps Richard "with all her strength." Later she denies all this had happened and tells Richard that "it was part of his dream." The image of woman as inspiration or creative muse is common in Graves's writings; Rachel embodies the frustrations inspiration presents for the storyteller. Sometimes she gives on command, sometimes she refuses, and other times she commands the storyteller.

Richard is analytical and tries to make sense out of the mad attraction Rachel and Crossley have for each other. The relationship between the three shifts from the mundane to the impossible and back again. The destructive powers of the storyteller frighten Richard, yet as a rational man he denies that Crossley can have such powers. Terrified by Crossley, bewildered by his wife's capriciousness, Richard concludes that the irrational events he witnesses are products of his own imagination and that he is therefore mad. Unwilling to acknowledge the existence of his irrational self, he becomes self-destructive and tries to kill himself by smashing the stone that is his soul. Instead, he mistakenly smashes that of Crossley, fragmenting it into four parts, shattering the storyteller's magic save for his power to destroy.

Social Concerns

The marriage of Richard and Rachel is an open one; by mutual agreement, neither is obligated to remain faithful to the other "because they wished to feel themselves bound by love rather than ceremony." The absence of certainties in their relationship makes them ready victims for Charles Crossley, who insinuates himself into their house and divides the two.

Although the idea of "open marriage" became a social issue in the 1970s, Graves uses the possibility of sanctioned infidelity to set up a psychological study of his characters.

Morality is not at issue; rather the demonic forces that can enter relationships, causing the partners to delude each other. The elements of illusion and reality beckon the characters to make excuses for their behavior, thus allowing destructive forces the potential to propel them apart.

Techniques

"The Shout" is told within a "frame"; that is, the actual narrator retells a story he heard Crossley tell at a cricket match, which "frames" the beginning and ending of the story. It is the presence of the outside narrator that gives the story its mixture of reality and unreality. The Crossley that the narrator meets is "a man of unusual force" who knows that he is insane and in an asylum. In the narrator's world, Richard and Rachel know of Crossley only through seeing a magic act he put on at the asylum as the "Australian Illusionist"; Crossley's detailed description of Rachel and scant one of Richard may have the ordinary explanation that Crossley "looked at [Rachel] all the time" during his performance. The tale may be no more than a madman's fantasy. On the other hand, Crossley and his physician get into a pushing match when a thunderstorm breaks up the cricket game and are supposedly killed instantly by a bolt of lightning. Yet, "Crossley's body was found rigid, the doctor's was crouched in a corner, his hands over his ears. Nobody could understand this because death had been instantaneous, and the doctor was not a man to stop his ears against thunder." Thus the story is at once the merest fantasy and real; it is a shout.

Themes

Madness, superstition, and magic are mixed together in "The Shout." Charles Crossley is either a deluded madman who thinks he has magical powers or is a "devil" who can kill by shouting. The tale is an uncertain one because Crossley tells it; it is either a lunatic's fantasy or a chilling account of a battle between souls.

Dreams play an important role in "The Shout," which is itself dreamlike because it wanders in and out of everyday reality and even changes events the way a dream might. For instance, Crossley's powers seem frightening when he commands Rachel to sleep with him, yet later she says she heard no such command. Both Rachel and Richard first meet Crossley in their dreams, and the whole story may be an extension of their dreams. For instance, early on, Rachel remarks that "when I am asleep I become, perhaps, a stone with all the natural appetites and convictions of a stone." Later, "Richard went again to the sand hills, to the heap of stones, and identified the souls of the doctor and the rector." This may be no more than a fantasy evolved out of Rachel's account of her dream, or it could be as real as Crossley says it is.

Adaptations

In 1979, Columbia Pictures released an eighty-seven minute motion-picture adaptation of "The Shout." Also titled *The Shout*, the film alters the plot but succeeds in conveying the dread of the story. It stars Alan Bates and was directed by Jerzy Skolimowski.

Literary Precedents

The horror story has long been a staple of popular fiction. For instance, Edgar Allan Poe's "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" (1844) is "framed" and has a main character who recounts to the narrator a tale that may be a hallucination or real. The idea that dreams symbolize the creative side of human nature is also commonplace, as in H. P. Lovecraft's *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1939; c. 1926). The image of a woman representing inspiration dates back at least to the Ancient Greeks' Muses of the arts, and perhaps even earlier according to Graves's own *The White Goddess* (1948).

Related Titles

Graves's stories were gathered in *Collected Short Stories* in 1964. In 1978, Penguin Books brought out a paperback edition titled *The Shout: And Other Stories*. They tend to be whimsical and much shorter than "The Shout," and they reflect Graves's interest in creativity and history, sometimes combining the interests as in the Roman story "Epics Are Out of Fashion," in which it is better to be a good runner than a good poet.

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