

Sister Light, Sister Dark Short Guide

Sister Light, Sister Dark by Jane Yolen

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Characters

In *Sister Light, Sister Dark*, the focal character is Jenna, traced from her birth through her early teens. Her special status as a prophesied savior is reflected in the images and various names attached to her: Jo-an-nna, Annuenna, the white babe, White Goddess, and more. "And so Great Alta made the Anna, the White One, the Holy One." The charm of Jenna's story is the play between the ordinary in life and the extraordinary, the tug between a gifted girl wanting to belong and an impressionable folk isolating the heroine of its myth. "I am not the White Babe," Jenna insists for years. "I am just a girl."

But Jenna is a girl blessed from babyhood with exceptional human qualities. She is tall, superior at games and lessons, quick of hand, excellent with the bow, throwing knife, and sword.

She is inquisitive, assertive, strong, and rather rebellious against Hame social values. She dares to doubt the Alta-worship scripture, the Book of Light. She questions the absolute moral and social value supposed to obtain from the magical presence of a dark sister. "Do all loneliness and all jealousy and all anger end when your sister is called forth?"

In many ways Jenna is the heroic young character of fantasy convention, although it is crucial to the novel's conception that she is female. Jenna is engaged in a quest, forced into heroism as she confronts a duality common to fantasy, a battle for social good against anarchic evil. The Hames are imperiled by armies of evil men. Jenna is typical in her ambivalent but worthy qualities.

She escapes prophesied pitfalls of drowning, death by fire. She matures in the process, reconciles self with social duty. She sees that she is different at the core. "Did that make her a savior, an avatar, the Anna? She did not know." But "whether she believed or not," events would move on. "Sisters," Jenna capitulates, "I am the Anna."

The issues raised by Jenna's situation are reinforced by a rich cast of characters. Primary are the Hames-dwellers, warrior women, and girls. The girls demonstrate themes of maturation, alienation, and search for self. The adults reinforce the theme of women's competence, self-sufficiency, and sisterly bonding. Amalda is one of the story's several mother figures. With dark sister Sammor, she is known for kindness to her young birth-daughter Marga, nicknamed Pynt, who calls her A-ma. Amalda is the mother Jenna wishes she had had.

Jenna was named Jo-an-enna by Selna, the warrior woman and huntress who found and first nurtured her.

Selna's characterization introduces the reader to the concept of sisters, light and dark. Selna is paired by dark Marjo who was called forth at a magical maturation rite for girls. Like all the dark sisters, Marjo becomes visible in the light of moon or candle to aid and complete the self. Selna's murder relates to themes of woman's integrity through inner



strength and bonding with the group. Selna was absorbed in foster-mothering to Marjo's detriment, and was killed by a man while stealing baby Jenna from the Hame.

The novel presents two mother figures who oversee sisterhoods, the blind, mild-mannered Nill's Hame's Mother Alta, and Selden Hame's Mother Alta whom the girls nickname "old Serpent Mouth." Selden's Mother Alta is the novel's dominant mother figure, and the kind girls typically like to defy: "you will do as I say, for . . . I know what is best for you." This Mother Alta's characterization blends the wicked stepmother of fairy-tale tradition with the authority figure who may possess wisdom.

Mother Alta is a stock character, the aging woman who fears displacement.

Jenna has questioned the authority which is absolute to Mother Alta. "If I am not thy priestess," Mother Alta prays to goddess Alta, "I am nothing.

It is all my life." To Mother Alta, Jenna represents youth and change. In order to "begin the world anew," after all, "one must destroy the old."

Young characters Pynt and Petra illustrate the point of sisterly bonding, but with balance. First one girl, then the other, forges a tight-knit tie to Jenna. "I am your shadow," Pynt says.

Her male literary prototype is Don Quixote's Sancho Panza, or the hero's sidekick in many western stories.

Pynt's ejection from her "shadow" role by Jenna's romantic interest and evocation of a personal dark sister reflects themes of strength from within self, and a potential balance in relations with men.

Petra, a priestess-in-training, resembles the bard of medieval lore. She sings Jenna's praises on their travels, and illumines the way legends grow and folk heroes/heroines are made.

When doubt is cast on Jenna's place as savior or the Anna, Petra instantly composes rhymes that reinforce but subtly enhance prophetic images. The theme is reinforced that society needs such cultural services.

The novel's few notable male characters indicate that male brutishness, not men, must be rejected. This concept is evidenced by Jenna's killing of the violent, beastly man Barnoo, "The Hound" of Garunian prophecy. The possibilities for a new kind of gender relationship are reflected in the character Carum Longbow, a teenager described as reasonably good-looking and not of barbarian stock. Carum is a prince in flight from the evil Lord Kalas and his men, who include the Hound, the Bull, the Bear, and the Cat of prophecy. Unlike the prince of traditional fantasy, Carum is a sensitive scholar who seeks the heroine Jenna's help.

Social Concerns

Sister Light, Sister Dark Yolen addresses post-1960s feminist concerns by means of a narrative set in a fantasy world. Mountain clans of warrior women have established self-contained communities called Hames, in order to maintain themselves in a patriarchal Garunian age. The child protagonist Jenna resides in Selden Hame, one enclave among many. These clans arose when men rid themselves of large numbers of superfluous women, and when many female babies were abandoned to die. The women, called Altites, worship a female deity named Great Alta, and are helped by "dark sisters" who magically appear as facets of themselves. The conception is provocative in areas of women's multiple identities, self-development, mutual support, and potential for impact upon society and culture.

The nurturing of Jenna by Selden Hame foster mothers reflects the social concerns of single parenthood, child care, and the pauperization of many women. The maturation process of Jenna bears upon the issue of socialization for girls in an unstable, even threatening climate. Jenna's emergence into qualities of independence, leadership and strength underscores the call for better role models for girls, for competent heroines in literature and all avenues of mass culture.

Techniques

Sister Light, Sister Dark is a novel of fantasy constructed by cleverly interwoven and related parts. Jenna's story is accompanied by sections of myth, legend, poetry, parable, and even song, complete with musical notation. This approach enriches the storytelling, emphasizes the social and cultural value of the imagination, and illumines the way myths and legends can grow.

The topics of the songs and poetry reinforce themes pertaining to women's cause. History sections which satirize dry, misguided scholarly studies add to the novel's witty tone.

Yolen's conception of the mythic deity Great Alta is an inspired stroke relating to the complexities of women's lives. Alta's creative process displays Yolen's usage of symbolic form. Alta made light and dark sisters as mirror images from the golden and dark sides of her flowing hair, twining them as one within her intricate braids. Yolen's capacity for poetic imagery is apparent also in Alta's depiction as a goddess whose words were like "slivers of glass" which, when spoken, "reflected back the mind of the listener." Effective descriptive imagery is evident in the characterization of Nill's Hame's Mother Alta. Her fingers were "like little breezes," her hands wove "dark fantasies in the air."

Deftly wrought dialogue, attention to detail, and an easy, rhythmic style engage the reader. Character's names, such as Donya, Doey, Marna, Alinda, Brenna, are carefully chosen to enhance folkloric flavor. Yolen endows Jenna and her peers with typical little-girl and teen-age longings, enhancing believability despite the fantasy setting.

Jenna's ambivalence and alienation strike a recognizable chord. She feels a growing, "odd sense of distance from the other girls." She wants to be "ordinary." The depiction illustrates Yolen's technique of reinforcing theme through characterization.



Themes

As Jenna's life is followed from babyhood to teens, the theme of alienation and quest for identity functions on several levels. Jenna is troubled by her foster mothers' beliefs that events surrounding her birth and life identify her as the prophesied savior during the Garunian Gender Wars. The novel begins with prophecy. A virgin will give birth to a "white babe" with black eyes. Homage will be paid to her by ox, hound, bear, and cat. "Holy, holy, holiest of sisters," all will say; "who is both black and white, both dark and light, your coming is the beginning and it is the end." Three times will her mother die.

Jenna's situation explores questions about the making of myths, legends, heroes/heroines. Jenna has white hair and dark eyes. She had a mother who died at her birth, a midwife-mother figure killed while trying to find her another home, and a foster mother murdered while taking her from her Hame. Eventually Jenna defeats men named for beasts — the Hound, the Bull or Ox — thus unwittingly encouraging the Gender Wars, men's attacks on the Hames. The theme of Jenna's quest for self-identity, which often takes the form of challenge to her society's values, eventually meshes with that of social duty. Jenna seeks self through her impact upon social good.

Altitte women see this good as the preservation of their autonomous communities. Through the story of Jenna's coming-of-age, Yolen explores the theme of bonding among women through a self-contained society of diverse personalities. Each Hame is managed by a priestess, a Mother Alta.

Rituals are observed, tasks doled out.

Games for the young develop strategy, skill, self-sufficiency in demonstration of the theme of value in socialization and education, including self-defensive techniques, for girls. The thematic conception of independence, assertiveness, and competence in women is markedly apparent in this fantasy, as it is in many of Yolen's fantasies for children or adults.

Although the novel's center is the women's culture, *Sister Light, Sister Dark* points toward social redemption attainable through balanced gender relationships, a theme developed in the sequel, *White Jenna* (1989). *Sister Light, Sister Dark* establishes that not all men are like those bent upon destruction of the women's groups; women enjoy occasional dalliances with men outside the Hames. "We choose to use men but not to live with them." Jenna encounters a mild-mannered boy who kindles her awakening womanhood and love.

The themes of self-definition, alienation, women's bonding and cultural life incorporate another theme commonly found in Yolen's fictional works.

Yolen seeks to show the value to social stability of myth, folklore, and other products of the creative imagination — women's, in this case. The theme is stressed through Jenna's acquiescence in the poetry, balladry, and myth that surround her role. The



thematic concept is also developed through inserted sections of fictitious scholarly discourse on the Garunian age. Typically the studies are stuffy and askew. Dialogue includes this subtle commentary, spoken in regard to the boy Carum: "They say he is a scholar and in danger, though what danger a scholar could possibly get into, only Alta knows."



Key Questions

A significant aspect of Yolen's fiction is concern for topical questions of patriarchy and feminism. Because of this, and because of her easy, flowing style, her fiction should provoke enjoyable discussion. The novel is centered in women's lifestyles, values, child-rearing and socializing issues. Comparisons between these fictive treatments and contemporary women's problems are good lines to pursue. Also useful for discussion are questions about the state and worth of scholarly research and discourse, which should arise from the fictitious "History" sections. Yolen has been a strong advocate of fantasy as the medium for hidden truths. Her application of the genre and her techniques should constitute effective topics for discussion.

1. The novel presents a view of an exclusively women's community. What are the positive aspects of Hame life?

Are there negative aspects? Discuss in light of contemporary women's issues.

2. The Hame women claim to use men for pleasure, then casually dismiss them. What do you make of this approach to the gender relationship?

3. What happens on the ceremonial Night of Sisterhood? What do you make of the concept of dark sisters?

4. Discuss the games played by girls (the Eye-Mind game, the game of wands), and breathing exercises. What qualities do they teach that apply especially to the mature life of women? Are these preparations valuable for girls only?

5. Consider Jenna as a character. Is she really the prophesied child of Great Alta her supporters claim? Does every facet of her life coincide with prophecy?

6. What do you think of the form of the novel? Do you find the shifts from section to section, especially the shifts back and forth in time, to be an effective enhancement of the narrative, or a disruption?

7. What are some of the many plays on words used by Yolen, and what do they contribute to the tale? The Book of Light, for example, was so called because the Dalites were surprised how small the book was, and how light.

8. Follow the academic discussion in the sections entitled "The History."

How accurate are the conclusions?

How well constructed are these studies for getting to the truth as depicted in the "Story" sections? What can be said about the use of scientific methods and the search for truth in contemporary society?



9. Classic fairy tales like "Cinderella" and "Snow White," or "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" as it is known in the Disney version, portray young girls confronting mature female figures who thwart the maturation process. Is young Jenna's situation comparable?

Consider tensions in her relationship with Mother Alta, and Catrona's reasons for Mother Alta's behavior.

10. The mirror used on the Night of Sisterhood is a significant symbol. How do you interpret it?

Literary Precedents

Sister Light, Sister Dark has roots in centuries-old fantasy and folk tradition. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century antecedents can be found in the works of Andrew Lang and the Brothers Grimm, as well as J. R. R. Tolkien who wrote fantasies based upon medieval lore. The novel's break with tradition lies in reversal of the male point of view and depiction of strong female characters. The warrior women, such as Jenna's swordplay teachers Catrona and dark sister Katri, and Jenna herself, have roots in legendary male counterparts.

Yolen's depiction of a society of women has some precedent in the works of speculative-fiction writers Marion Zimmer Bradley and Anne McCaffrey. The particular concept of light and dark sisters arises from the fantasy tradition of symbolic color usage and the maturation theme. In her *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), for example, part of the "Earthsea Trilogy," author Ursula K. Le Guin has the character Ged meet his shadow, unite with it, and achieve a point of maturity.

Yolen's work belongs to a broad feminist literary trend. Yolen herself is a significant force in the fantasy and fairy-tale genre. She has expressed in print her frustration with the modern versions of Cinderella, especially Disney's, which portray a passive, obedient girl awaiting rescue by a prince.

Yolen may be best categorized among a number of post-1960s writers like Angela Carter, Roald Dahl, John Gardner, Richard Gardner, Judith Viorst, and Tanith Lee, who have written revised fairy tales or fantasies in order to subvert patriarchal values.

Related Titles

Yolen's *White Jenna*, a sequel to *Sister Light, Sister Dark*, takes up Jenna's tale from the point of her departure to warn and save the Hames. In the course of her adventures Jenna undergoes further development as a woman, and becomes a leading force in social reconstruction. Yolen's literary fairy tale "The Moon Ribbon" provides an example of a tough heroine, one who defeats a stepmother figure. The tale "The Undine" involves betrayal by men and autonomy for women.



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