Spartacus Short Guide

Spartacus by Howard Fast

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Spartacus, the Thracian slave whose personal commitment and charisma unifies and leads the rebellion, is a prototype of the leader-martyr whose example illustrates humanity's timeless yearning for freedom. Varinia, his female counterpart, matches him in heroism and strength of commitment.

Compared to Christ in his emphasis on love and brotherhood, his power to secure belief and renew hope, his suffering and death, Spartacus also demonstrates a childlike pure-heartedness and innocence. His personal warmth, loyalty, and patience are reflected in his rebellion, undertaken in the name of love rather than hatred or revenge.

The qualities Spartacus and his slave followers exhibit are those of common humanity itself in its persistence and endurance in struggle. Although Spartacus is a leader, he is not the traditional "great man." The protagonists of Spartacus are the people themselves, shaping history in their persistent movement toward a more meaningful existence.

The slaves' antagonists are represented by the shallow, effete, meanspirited young nobleman Caius and the class he represents. Unlike Spartacus, Caius is a twisted, small-minded neurotic, with no real role in history and no real purpose in his life at all, except to live in an unconscious, self-indulgent way upon the spoils of the slave system and Roman might. Instead of the tender sexuality and true affection between Spartacus and Varinia and the frank brotherhood between Spartacus and his comrades, human relations among the Romans are marked by distortion (Caius is a homosexual), betrayal, and contempt for others.

Cicero, who observes the proceedings, is a principal spokesperson for repressive Roman ideology, a political "new man," amoral, opportunistic, cold, and hollow, not unlike those Fast observed on the prosecutorial bench during the McCarthy hearings.

Social Concerns

Written when Fast was a victim of the blacklist and America itself in the grips of what David Caute has called the "Great Fear" of McCarthyism and the Cold War, this historical elegy uses Roman history to reflect contemporary social concerns. As in all his historical writing, Fast explores the contradiction between republican ideals and repressive institutions, using the Servile Wars, the uprising of Spartacus, his gladiators, and their slave followers against their Roman overlords, as a model for resistance to oppression throughout history.

The sight of over six thousand slaves crucified along the Appian Way becomes a motif for human suffering in the struggle for freedom, and as the author's epilogue to the self-published first edition: "It is a story of brave men and women who lived long ago, and whose names have never been forgotten. The heroes of this story cherished freedom and human dignity, and lived nobly and well. I wrote it so that those who read it, my children and others, may take strength for our own troubled future and that they may struggle against oppression and wrong — so that the dream of Spartacus may come to be in our own time."

The slavery which is the dominant concern is the result not only of subjugating conquered countries, but also of a society's victimization of its own people. Roman freeholders and small farmers, evicted from their lands, are sold to make way for a plantation system peopled not by citizens, but by masters and slaves. Positive action and commitment to communal goals are necessary to defend individual liberty and pursue freedom, as Spartacus and his band of gladiators evolve — from killers pitted against one another for their owners' pleasure — to brothers acting together as an historical force and with a sense of their own destiny.

On the other hand, a corrupt and dehumanized Roman upper class, made callous and frivolous by privilege and power, regards others not as humans but as tools, a metaphor for a developed world and a ruling class impervious to the humanity and aspirations of others. Although seemingly omnipotent, this group plants the seeds for its own downfall, exhibiting a cultural death wish which makes it fascinated with crucifixions and gladiatorial combat and unable to understand human yearnings for affirmation. Winning the battle through sheer technological and state power, the Romans have clearly lost the war by sacrificing their own humanity.

Techniques

Fast's historical novels are always parables in which historical meaning is invoked by dramatizing moments in history which have special significance, recurring in a spiral which leads to some teleological or transcendent goal.

The conflict of opposing forces and synthesis pointing to the future in Spartacus shows how an historical writer may unite narrative technique with historical theme, using action to create meaning. Character is the result of confrontation and choice, as individuals are moved to action which changes or forwards history, illustrating the innate goodness and capacity for positive change fundamental to the human personality or, on the other hand, the capacity of repressive institutions to resist change and the future. In Fast, meaning is always the result of observable action, never simply passive subjectivity of observation, as Fast uses his talent for the story, for dramatic narrative, as a means of creating development.

The plotting of Spartacus ironically juxtaposes Roman speakers' own views of the events and the reader's impression. Since history is always the view of the victors, neither Spartacus or any of the gladiators ever speaks himself, as the entire story is told from the perspective of Romans involved in putting down the rebellion, as they observe the "tokens of punishment," the crucified slaves, during a holiday excursion to the seacoast. Narrative irony is accomplished chiefly in the character of Batiatus, the repulsive, morally bankrupt gladiatorial promoter in whose arena the rebellion began, and Crassus, the Roman general who put down the rebellion. These characters seek to explain how the rebellion began and what caused it. Conflicting narrative perspectives and different ways listeners comprehend or do not comprehend character and motivation are key ironic points.

In addition, Fast's mixture of violent action and intense feeling to shock and move the reader contributes to his narrative success. Some of his descriptive settings, such as the Nubian gold mine from which Spartacus comes, the gladiatorial combats and the crucifixions themselves, are justly famous. He is able to portray the feelings and aspirations of large groups and movements through panoramic description of material culture, settings and milieus, using objective reality to create historical meaning.

Themes

The parallel between imperialistic technological cultures, Rome and America, is apparent in Spartacus. Resisting oppression and committing oneself to action for others, even selfsacrifice, is diametrically opposed to the self-centered, solipsistic Roman attitudes. Against the Roman slave system, rebellion brings not only unity, but also equality between people, races, and even sexes. Spartacus's gladiators, dispossessed from all corners of the Empire: Thracians, Jews, Gauls, Egyptians, Spaniards, and black Ethiopians, work together equally, women alongside the men.

The promise of redemption and transformation exists not only for groups but also for individuals, illustrating the primacy of individual responsibility, moral revelation through action, and people's capacity for change. Not only the embittered, alienated gladiators but also some Romans are transformed by the example of loving sacrifice and human endurance.

The decrepit, fat, corrupt politician Gracchus, recognizing the moral superiority of Spartacus and Varinia and the bankruptcy of his own life and the system he serves, frees Varinia, the rest of his slaves, and taking his own life, liberates himself from a corrupt society which demands total submission from Romans and slaves alike.

Another of Fast's themes is the relationship of present events to the future.

The final outcome of the slave rebellion, put down with great cruelty, will not be apparent until the future, as the community of resistance is solidified through the example of Spartacus and his band and the Roman system rendered even more bankrupt. In history, the human spirit will endure and ultimately prevail, as the descendants of Spartacus and Varinia continue their resistance among peasant villagers in the Alps. The themes of martyrdom, rebellion, conflict between opposing historical forces, and continuing human struggle against oppression help transmute social concerns into archetypal themes recurrent throughout all history.

Adaptations

Spartacus filled the bill for an epic spectacular with thoughtful overtones, and in 1960 became a phenomenally successful film, with a screenplay written by Fast and Dalton Trumbo, produced by Kirk Douglas, who played Spartacus, and directed by Stanley Kubrick. The star-studded cast included Laurence Olivier, Jean Simmons, Charles Laughton, and Peter Ustinov, who won an Academy Award for his portrayal of the repellant gladiatorial manager Batiatus, Spartacus' owner. The violence, romance, and spectacle of the action fulfilled a taste for heroic good guys and vile villains, perhaps filling as well a national need to atone for McCarthyist excesses.

However, it seems that much of Fast's historical "message" may have been lost in the spectacle.

Literary Precedents

The tale of Spartacus has long played a role in popular culture; "Spartacus' Last Address to His Men" was a forensic recitation heard at many a high school declamation. In fiction, the narrative as parable and history as a moral tale was frequent in popular writing, as evident in the works of B. Traven, a radical writer who, like Fast, wrote parables which became blockbuster entertainments, like Treasure of the Sierra Madre, a successful film in 1948. Bertolt Brecht, another defendant at the McCarthy trials, used parables for dramatic purposes, as did Arthur Miller, whose Crucible (1953) uses American sources to comment upon the trials. Classical historical settings had been popularized by Edith Hamilton in her books on mythology, and by Robert Graves, in I, Claudius (1934).

Roman themes were taken as commentaries upon the decline of Western civilization before the fascist onslaught, and many continental writers created parallels between mid-century political upheavals and ancient precedents. Rome became a metaphor for Western democratic culture. Anti-Fascist writers such as Feuchtwanger, in Der falsehe Nero, (translated title is The Pretender, 1936), mined the Roman matter for political purposes, and Lukacs speaks of a popular literature illustrating people's yearning for liberty in positive characters as part of the struggle against fascism, currents in progressive literary criticism which Fast echoes in Literature and Reality, published in 1950.

Related Titles

Spartacus brings together concerns which had marked Fast's historical writing from the beginning. Both The Last Frontier (1941) and Freedom Road (1944) share the theme of slavery or subjugation, and the struggle against oppression in a Jewish context appears in My Glorious Brothers (1948). The crucifixion of a Jewish gladiator named David, one of Spartacus' most devoted companions, is depicted in great detail in one of the novel's most striking scenes. The shape-up of slaves at the gold mine and their lives in the galleys recurs in cyclical fashion as longshoremen line up on the Embarcadero and Dan Lavette's ships go down with all hands.

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