Spring Moon Short Guide

Spring Moon by Bette Bao Lord

BOOKRAGS

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Characters

Among the strengths of Spring Moon are the incredibly distinctive men and women who animate its pages and whose lives embroider the rich tapestry of the novel. Embodied in the Chang family and in its servants and friends are the people of twentieth-century China, the architects and victims of a changing culture. Lord has created incisively drawn, unsentimental yet sympathetic portraits: the elderly clan patriarch; the devoted Golden Virtue who retreats into total seclusion at the death of her husband; the gentle armchair revolutionary Bold Talent and Noble Talent, his soldier brother; the loyal family retainers; the idealistic young couple who endure the Long March with Mao Zedong; the shrewd August Winds — poor relation turned businessman — who can prosper in any political climate through his judicious use of bribery; the desperate slave girl who chooses death rather than becoming an elderly scholar's concubine. Each of these characters is so fully realized, so thoroughly human, so appealingly portrayed that even in the-ideological conflicts between them the reader is often unable to decide who is right and who is wrong.

At the center of the novel, providing the narrative with its major thread, is its title character, a woman in whom the public forces of history and the private life of an individual become intertwined. Spring Moon, an intriguing addition to the growing ranks of strongly-realized literary heroines, is both the embodiment of traditional Chinese female virtue and a representative of Chinese womanhood in transition. During Spring Moon's long and eventful life, she watches as her world is destroyed, but she remains apolitical, committed only to the old ways, yielding and enduring while many of those whose lives intersect with hers are ruined by their confrontations with the implacable forces of change. Her two children become symbols of the new Chinese: Lustrous Jade, the humorless party member and teacher of the masses, who is eventually driven to suicide by the betrayal of her beloved Party; and Enduring Promise, the expatriate who prospers in his new life in exile in America. Strengthened by a prophecy made at her birth, that she will live to see five generations of Changs gathered together, Spring Moon endures until the prophecy is fulfilled when Enduring Promise, visiting China on official business for the American government, helps her to gather the scattered family members together at the ancestral graveyard.

Social Concerns

As one might expect from a novel based on the collapse of the Chinese feudal system and the subsequent Communist takeover, Spring Moon successfully presents the inevitable clash between two value systems, in this case the old Confucian ideals symbolized by the ancient philosophy of yielding and the modern ideals born of Western thought and communism and epitomized by confrontation. As an aid to the average reader (who is more likely than not to have little knowledge of Chinese history) Bette Bao Lord provides in an appendix a useful chronology of significant events in China from around 1990 B.C. to A.D. 1981.

Through the drama of the rising and falling fortunes of the House of Chang, a mandarin clan of landowning scholars, Lord chronicles the crucial period of the evolution of China through the long chaotic years of political turmoil and social unrest, beginning with the dissolution of the Manchu Empire and the unsuccessful revolutionary attempts to found a Chinese republic, through the two wars with the Japanese, to the Kuomintang's doomed struggle with the Communist forces.

The author is particularly adept as delineating the problems encountered by Western-educated Chinese who, in their attempts to reconcile their traditional Chinese upbringing with their training (often in America), discover that not only has their education destroyed in them the ability to bend and yield to circumstances and thus to endure, but they also are beset with inner contradictions and confusions. A particularly noteworthy element of Spring Moon is the diversity of political orientations displayed by its several protagonists, all in some way connected with the House of Chang, either by blood or by the ancient ties of loyalty. In the inevitable ideological conflicts — between mother and daughter, uncle and nephew, ward and protector, aristocrat and peasant, young and old — Lord creates a compelling portrait of an evolving society that by its changing threatens the very stability of its most basic unit — the family — which has long been responsible for its strength.

In this account of the violent demise of the ancient Chinese feudal society, many of the key players are forced to question their roles in the unstable emerging social order. Raised and educated within a familial structure — one that recognized patriarchal authority as supreme, that acknowledged the importance of good women even while relegating them to the inner courts to do needlework and gossip, that regularly observed filial rituals honoring long-dead ancestors — these traditional Chinese are suddenly thrust into a society built upon the needs of the masses, a society that advocates the education and military training of women, that raises to prominence the unlettered scions of peasant families, that recognizes no authority save that of the state and its appointed leaders, that denigrates family ties and reverence for ancestors and substitutes only loyalties to political ideologies.

These crucial dichotomies are reiterated in the "Author's Afterword" that ends the novel. Speaking of the trip to China that inspired her to write Spring Moon, Lord remarks that her long absence and her maturity enabled her to experience her homecoming from

dual perspectives, ". . . as mother and daughter, as Chinese and American, as younger and elder, as one person and a member of a clan . . ." In these dualities are outlined the social conflicts that inform Lord's book, that provide its universality and timelessness, that appeal to readers of different cultures.

Techniques

Lord has recreated the feeling of the traditional Chinese novel through her understated style, by her use of poetic titles for each section, and by her incorporation of clan tales and passages from Chinese history or poetry as introductions to the chapters. Spanning eight decades and five generations of the House of Chang, the novel is built on the framework of Spring Moon's life from her pampered girlhood to her anonymous and impoverished old age.

Another technique that imbues the novel with its strongly Chinese ambiance is Lord's use of symbols to tie together the multiple strands of her narrative. One example — the game of chess — should illustrate. The Chang chess set, bestowed on the founding ancestor by a grateful emperor, first appears as Bold Talent is packing his possessions to leave Yale and return to China to succeed his dead father as clan patriarch. As events conspire to make life difficult for the Changs, the chess set — safe in its cloisonne box — serves as a constant reminder to Bold Talent of his father's words, ". . . do not become too enamored of the process; remember the goal," words which he hears in his head later as he is dying from an assassin's bullet, having participated only in the process leading to his goal of a unified China. Ultimately, the set is buried in the ancestral courtyards, never to be reclaimed, even by the gathered clan members at the end. For Spring Moon, the game of chess has special significance: when her husband leaves to join the revolution he says farewell to her by setting up their chess set and moving his soldier into battle. He never returns, and thereafter, Spring Moon treasures the ivory soldier along with his Yale ring as reminders of a life past.

Readers who devour historical novels for their lurid depictions of love and death will discover in Spring Moon an elegiac restraint instead. Certainly there is simple material for sensationalism, but Lord never ruins her story by succumbing to the popular taste for sex and gore. When Spring Moon's slave girl hangs herself, the tragic deed is recorded with concentrated economy in two sentences. Only hinted at are Bold Talent's covert machinations to save Spring Moon from an unwanted marriage. Even more restrained is the revelation of the incestuous affair between Bold Talent and Spring Moon — uncle and niece — a relationship poetically outlined with distance and reticence, evoking compassion for two people, fated by circumstances and their strong sense of honor to give up the one happiness they have left in a life already marred by loss and separation.

Themes

Clearly the clash between the old way of life and the new is the dominant theme of Spring Moon. At the heart of the conflict is the ancient patriarchal way of life that takes its cues from the Confucian ideals of filial piety, humility and submissiveness in women, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, the virtue of yielding gracefully rather than breaking, the importance of preserving the family's good name at whatever cost to its individual members. Spring Moon, the central character, who has grown up sheltered and pampered in the richly appointed Chang courts, epitomizes the old China. Although educated like a man by a doting uncle, she nevertheless subscribes wholeheartedly to the tenets of Confucian conformity and to the importance of upholding familial honor even at the expense of personal needs and desires. In one of the most compelling ironies of the novel, Lustrous Jade, Spring Moon's only daughter, represents new China with its spirit of confrontation and revolution. Trained by Western missionaries who have instilled in her an idealism at odds with her practical Chinese heritage, Lustrous Jade enthusiastically embraces the doctrines of communism in her belief that it offers the solution to China's social and political problems.

The most painful rift in the novel — and certainly the most emblematic of its theme — is that between Spring Moon and Lustrous Jade, between mother and daughter, between old and new.

Related to and illuminating the novel's most pervasive theme are a number of secondary concerns: the toll taken by the revolution on China's scholarly class, the importance of a sense of honor, the many forms of loyalty and obligation, nostalgia for a vanished way of life. At the end when the ninety-year-old Spring Moon is discovered (by her illegitimate son who believes he is her brother) living forgotten in a hovel where the old Chang compound once stood, she is still the indomitable woman whose life story forms the framework of the novel; and when she gathers the scattered members of the clan together at the ancestral graveyard to honor their departed kin, it is clear that the old Chinese ways are not dead — they have yielded with the changing times, altered in form perhaps, but they have survived.

Key Questions

Spring Moon is a novel about clashes.

It deals with the clash of different generations, with the clash of different ideologies, with clash of different religions and with the clash of different cultures. It has a timeless quality because it deals with these larger than life themes. It invites readers to compare their own lives to the lives of the characters in the book. It invites readers to learn more about a different culture and by examining that "other" culture, to learn more about their own.

1. Why does the suicide of Plum Blossom bring dishonor on the house of Chang? What does it foreshadow?

2. When he explains about Plum Blossom, the grandfather tells Spring Moon that "only the gods can alter fate" and she must "simply yield."

What does he mean? Does Spring Moon agree? How can you tell?

3. On the journey back to China from America, Bold Talent tries to become Chinese as soon as possible. He separates himself from the rest of the passengers, puts on robes, and eats rice. Although he thinks he is successful, when he returns home, people point at him because he has no quene.

Although he has let his hair grow, it is still not long enough. He thinks he needs a haircut and the Chinese think his hair is too short. What does this say about Bold Talent? Can he ever really be the same man who left China for America?

4. Bold Talent puts on mourning garb for his father. What color is the cloth? Colors have different significance for different cultures. Discuss the meaning of different colors.

5. When Bold Talent begins to teach Spring Moon to read and write, the family is opposed because it is dangerous for a girl and spoils her chances for a good marriage. They believe that the educated females are the malcontents who disturb the virtuous harmony of the household. Why do they feel this way? Are they correct? What happens to women who learn to read in this novel?

6. When Bold Talent tries to make a difference, he gives money to build a hospital, repairs a pump, and tries to make people less superstitious. Initially good things happen and then things sour. What happens and how does Bold Talent react? What do you think Lord is saying?

7. Different cultures have different wedding and marriage customs. Describe Spring Moon's wedding. What do the symbols mean? Can you think of some from other cultures?

8. Spring Moon feels that her husband and her father were very different and yet they surrendered to the same fatal sickness. What does she mean?

9. Spring Moon experiences many different things. If you had been Spring Moon how would you have reacted to learning how to read? To being married? To a mother-in-law?

10. Lustrous Jade becomes a revolutionary after rejecting Christianity.

Other revolutionaries admit that they do not "love" the people — the people are often stupid, dull, or dirty and yet they continue their revolutionary activity. Lord presents portraits of revolutionaries that are not always complimentary. Is this a realistic portrait of revolutionaries? What makes a person a revolutionary?

Literary Precedents

A novel chronicling the fortunes of a Chinese family inevitably invites comparison with Pearl Buck's The Good Earth (1931); and to the extent that Lord's novel deals with generational conflict and relationships, the two books are similar. They differ in that Buck's characters are peasants whose troubles are mainly brought on by natural catastrophes, whereas Lord depicts aristocrats displaced by social cataclysm.

There are echoes also of Chinese writer Pa Chin who, in the 1930s, wrote of the demise of the patriarchal Chinese family system along with the Confucian ideals on which that system had been built. Unlike Pa Chin, however, whose chronicles of the end of an era reveal a deep-rooted disapproval of the old ways, Lord is more ambivalent in her sympathetic portrayal of the two ways of life, and of the very human characters caught in the conflict. Underlying Spring Moon is an unvoiced lament for the old gracious way of life, nostalgia made bittersweet by the novel's unvarnished account of life for those not privileged to be of the mandarin class.

Readers may discern in Spring Moon a decided parallel to two other historical novels — Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind (1936) and Boris Pasternak's Dr. Zhivago (1958) — both dealing with civil strife and political unrest and their effects on the aristocracy. In all three novels the narrative follows the fortunes of members of the privileged classes, who grow up in luxury and reach adulthood only to watch a social cataclysm destroy the very society in which their upbringings have prepared them to live; in all three the characters are tested in extreme circumstances involving the conflict between tradition and change — circumstances that reveal in the lives of these people the amazing resilience of the human spirit under duress.

Related Titles

Although not a sequel to Spring Moon, The Middle Heart (1996) is strikingly similar in its vivid portrayal of Chinese history. The novel opens in 1932, when the Japanese have captured Manchuria. Three children united in their antagonism for the Japanese begin a lifelong friendship. As the loyalty, love and patriotism of the three friends are tested, the play of history on their loves is made clear.

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