The Studs Lonigan Trilogy Short Guide

The Studs Lonigan Trilogy by James T. Farrell

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Characters

Studs Lonigan, of all Farrell's characters, is perhaps the most fully alive, the most fully realized, primarily because he is a character built on internal contradictions. From the first, he demonstrates the conflict between his desire to be tough and his attraction toward the softer side of his nature. As a thirteen-year-old, hiding in the bathroom to smoke and feel tough, he thinks of Lucy Scanlon, who is already, and will remain, both his ideal of womanhood and a symbol of his aspirations. All his dreams of success include her, and many of them absolutely depend on her. But early in Young Lonigan (1932), Studs thinks of her, of a time when he had walked her home from school, and his reaction illustrates the inner war he fights, and loses: "He wanted to stand there, and think about Lucy, wondering if he would ever have days with her like that one . . . And he goddamned himself, because he was getting soft. He was Studs Lonigan, a guy who didn't have mushy feelings!"

Well, Studs does have mushy feelings, but he denies them, just as he forsook his given name, William, for the tougher-sounding Studs. Thus, even as the novel begins, Studs has already made his choice, already set his direction. In his struggle to maintain that direction, however, he reveals his basic good nature and his human weaknesses, qualities which make him a powerfully appealing creation.

Farrell uses Weary Reilly as a kind of double for Studs. Weary really is the kind of tough guy Studs tries so hard to be, and Weary is an important measure of Studs's progress. Very early in Young Lonigan, Studs and Weary square off in a verbal sparring match that is only a prelude to the fight they have the following summer. Studs loses the sparring match, but he wins the fight, establishing himself as a tough guy on the rise. From that point on, Weary is always in the background, waiting for another chance. Meanwhile, he and Studs follow similar paths through Young Lonigan, Weary with one gang and Studs with another. But in The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan (1934), Weary becomes the embodiment of the worst that this urban culture can produce. His toughness and his defiance lead him into a life of actual crime. He takes the tough-guy impulse to the extreme, thus providing a low end to the scale on which the reader measures Studs's downward progress.

By the same token, Danny O'Neill and Lucy Scanlon represent the upper end of the scale. Lucy, in particular, offers a vision of what might have been. Studs imagines constantly, and with increasing regret, what life would have been like had he and Lucy gotten together. From the first chapter of Young Lonigan, when Studs dreams of walking Lucy home, to the end of Judgment Day (1935), when Studs hallucinates that Lucy kneels at his bedside, she acts as an ideal for him. As he propels himself downward, Lucy recedes farther and farther out of reach, finishing high school, attending college, becoming part of a different world — a world Studs need not have excluded himself from — but one where, as events turned out, he is clearly out of place. As an additional measure of Studs's failure, Danny O'Neill acts as a double for Studs on the positive side, just as Weary Reilly had on the negative. From the same neighborhood, with the same background, Danny turns his back on the old gang. Instead, he stays in school,

attends the University of Chicago and becomes a writer. He opens himself to the very possibilities Studs had denied, thus Danny provides a further measure of what might have been.

Social Concerns

The saga of Studs Lonigan, if it does nothing else, demonstrates the closed nature of the supposedly open American system. Studs has dreams that are like everyone else's: He wants money, property, fame, respect, all the ingredients of the ever-elusive American dream. But Farrell writes of a world in which failure is far more likely than success. Literally every institution in Stud's life acts to bring him down: His family cannot combat the negative values he acquires in the streets, his religion is unable to provide any real hope or even any real energy in his life, romance is reduced by his environment to a series of animal-like ruttings, and the economy seems to be constructed so that a working man like Studs's father can rise just so far, but no further. Instead of acting to help people achieve their ambitions, or even remaining neutral, the socioeconomic environment resists those dreams, and whenever the Lonigans or any of the other principal characters try to get rich by making the same investments or getting into the same types of businesses as the rich people, these lowerand lower-middle-class people find that the system won't work for them as it does for their idols.

Farrell demonstrates this fault most clearly, of course, in the person of Studs Lonigan, whom readers first meet on the eve of his graduation from the eighth grade, hiding in the family's bathroom, smoking a cigarette. Studs has a great deal of energy, but no direction. He has been conned into believing that the things he wants should come easily to him. All he has to do is wait and the system will reward him.

So he waits, and in the meantime he is dragged down into dissipation and disappointment by the values he finds in force on the street. The adolescent Studs wants to be a man, and with the right vision, the right perspective, he has the raw ability to achieve much.

But he can see no farther than his own neighborhood, knows no values other than those of the tough-talking Irish immigrant culture to which he is confined by social standing, economic standing, and religion. So he tries to become a man in the only way he knows how, by being a fighter, by being a hard drinker, by cutting school, and by going to work for his father, Patrick, a painting contractor.

All these actions — one can hardly call them choices, or even decisions — lead Studs downward instead of upward. His desire to be the toughest guy in the neighborhood leads to a fight with Weary Reilly, a fight Studs wins.

But his reaction demonstrates what he had come to believe was necessary for success: "Studs told himself he had been waiting for things like this to happen a long time; now they were happening, and life was going to be a whole lot more . . . more fun . . . and he was going to be an important guy .

. . and he would be ... well, in the limelight. Maybe it would set things happening as he always knew they would; and he would keep on getting more and more important."

Studs had not tried to make anything happen; instead, he "had been waiting" for them to happen, and he felt that this event, this fight, would "set things happening." In other words, Studs was waiting, being acted upon, not acting.

This method, if one can call it that, is characteristic of the way Studs approaches his future. Instead of acting to improve his lot by attending high school, Studs tries to keep up his image in the neighborhood, and being tough was inconsistent with being educated. So Studs went along with his pals and cut school, biding his time until the inevitable happened and he was expelled. In the meantime, he has begun to study the kinds of achievements that are applauded in the pool hall. He practices his smoking so that he will look tough and natural when he does it, and he begins to drink so that he can be a regular guy. And when his poor attendance at school results in his failing, he tosses the event off lightly, feeling that he can cut a better figure by working for his father and earning a paycheck.

Studs's desire for immediate gratification, in other words, leads him to throw away his chance for an education, one way off the streets, in favor of the pursuits that ultimately result in his death. Smoking and lead-based paint damage Studs's lungs so that, at age twenty-seven, beaten to a pulp in a long-awaited rematch with Weary Reilly, Studs collapses, drunk, in the gutter on New Year's Eve, contracting a case of pneumonia from which he never fully recovers.

Farrell uses Studs to show how brutal life can be. The environment determines Studs's fate, and there seems to be little Studs or most of his doomed friends (Studs is not the first to die) can do to change their destinies. Thus, Farrell demonstrates the awesome power of the world around Studs, the way it dominates his life, the way it robs an individual of choice, of opportunity. Studs is doomed from the first moment, and throughout the three novels of this trilogy, his movement is always downward. The greatest moment of his life occurs in the summer after his graduation from the eighth grade, and his life, for all intents and purposes, stops there. He grows older, but no more mature, for nothing in his environment challenges him to grow up. Yet there are many weaknesses for an aging adolescent to fall heir to, and Studs Lonigan's life comprises a litany of them all.

Techniques

Farrell's most striking technique is an almost photographic realism. Having grown up in the milieu he describes, he knows the characters and the setting intimately, and he renders them with a realism and an objectivity that is so close to case study that the Studs Lonigan trilogy is today more often studied in sociology classes than in literature courses. This realistic approach, a characteristic of Farrell's writings, led him to develop a different sense of imagery, an urban imagery replete with patterns of light and dark, of openness and confinement, an imagery that takes advantage of the manmade structures, from the sidewalks and vacant lots to the architectural side of the city. His prose style is therefore markedly nonlyrical, in places even ugly, but it conveys the reality he is trying to recreate. Farrell consistently refuses to romanticize his characters.

They may romanticize themselves and their own lives, but Farrell refuses to grant that their dreams are anything but idle and, for the most part, futile musings.

Their dreams are futile because of Farrell's heavy use of determinism.

These characters, however they may dream about change, lack control over their lives. They may, as Danny, Helen, Studs, and Weary do, choose — or, more appropriately, drift into — a general direction, but for the most part they are acted upon, passive. They react to events in the world around them, rather than shaping those events.

As a result, the overall atmosphere of Studs Lonigan is gloomy, for the main character and most of his friends are doomed, if not to failures of the magnitude of Studs's and Weary's, then at least to mediocrity.

Themes

Perhaps the most compelling theme in the saga of Studs Lonigan is that of self-destruction, and in this theme both Studs and his culture are at fault. Studs wills himself into his tough-guy act, but it is a much-desired and much-admired role in the Prairie Avenue gang he adheres to. In making this choice, Studs must deny the softer, more sympathetic aspects of his nature, and once he chooses this general direction, the world around him ensures that he cannot turn back. He defeats Weary Reilly, and in seeking the further applause of the people who admire him for that victory, he sets his destructive course in motion.

The city serves as a subtheme underscoring the basic theme of self-destruction. Studs's field of action lies between the University of Chicago and Lake Michigan, and he is constantly struggling against the forces those two places represent. He must belittle education, turning away from the genteel world he identifies with the intellectual in favor of what he sees as the tough, manly life of the pool hall and the gin joint. He also denies the responsiveness he feels toward nature, as demonstrated in the passages when he is in the parks or near the lake. He responds to these influences, showing that he is capable of appreciating natural beauty for its own sake, but then he retreats from such feelings, labeling them "sappy" or "goofy." In this sense, Studs personifies an industrial society's struggle against nature, as if the natural world were a new frontier to be conquered and ruthlessly subdued.

Thus, Studs's world is best represented by a bleak city landscape. It is an artificial world, a manmade world, and as such it has little sympathy for the individual, little patience with those whose lives take the wrong direction. They, like Studs, are expendable, for in the city there are always many others ready to take the place of those who step out of line.

Farrell also makes it clear that he does not see the world as totally evil or totally without possibilities. He has simply chosen to portray this side of the world in this trilogy. Thus, while Studs seeks his own destruction, and other main characters — Weary Reilly and Davey Cohen, for example — end up in a condition similar to Studs, other characters manage to advance, to preserve and even to build upon their potential. Danny O'Neill, Helen Shires, Lucy, Muggsy McCarthy, and others are examples of enlightened individuals, people who stayed on course and have advanced. But these characters exist on the fringes of Studs's world, and the reader sees them briefly and infrequently. Farrell uses them to measure Studs's downward progress, for most of them started out with the same possibilities Studs had, and as they improve, Studs's downfall becomes more and more obvious, even to Studs.

Farrell uses Studs to show how bleak and empty a modern urban existence can be, but he also points out that it does not have to be that way. There are ways out of the streets, but finding them requires energy and persistence, and while Studs has energy, he lacks the persistence which allows Danny to overcome the same influences that affected Studs.

Adaptations

There have been two adaptations of the Studs Lonigan saga, one in 1960 for the screen and one in 1978 as an NBC miniseries. The film version is notable only for the fact that the money from the film rights saved Farrell from bankruptcy in the early 1960s. The cast was weak, and the story almost mercilessly truncated, to the point that the sense of realism is lost, and the film romanticizes Studs in a way that Farrell refused to do.

The television miniseries, some six hours long, could more closely recreate the books, and a much stronger cast was able to create characters that were real, not romanticized caricatures. Even so, the miniseries of necessity had to select which portion of Studs's life to focus on, for to produce a literal rendering of the novels would require more broadcasting time than any network would be willing to devote. As a result, the adaptation focuses on Studs's family, and Charles Durning's strong portrayal of Patrick Lonigan is one of the brightest points of the miniseries. Colleen Dewhurst was also impressive as Mary, Studs's mother, particularly in the climactic scenes when she and Catherine, Studs's fiancee, sit by Studs's bedside, watching him die.

Literary Precedents

Farrell himself claimed two principal literary forebears, Proust and Joyce.

Proust, whose Remembrance of Things Past (1913-1927) inspired Farrell's desire to write twenty-five novels, each a "panel of one work," provided an example of the attention to detail which Farrell evinces. Proust wrote endlessly about small events, demonstrating basically that there are no insignificant events, that each act has its impact on the individual. That realization fit in very well with Farrell's strong sense of determinism and with his penchant for filling his stories with detail, showing not just the major events in a main character's life, but seemingly every event in his characters' environment.

Joyce, on the other hand, provided a model for exploring the sub- and unconscious minds of characters, as well as an example of an author who works within an urban landscape. Joyce's imagery, his Dublin, and his Irish background all had an impact on Farrell, who attributed Studs Lonigan's dream sequence in Judgment Day to the influence of Ulysses (1922). But perhaps more important is the example Joyce sets in the area of urban imagery.

Joyce, in Ulysses (and Farrell in The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan and Judgment Day), employs an urban imagery that, in Joyce's case, is lyrical, setting a mood of unreality for Stephen and Bloom's wanderings through the streets of the city, particularly at night.

But Farrell adapts that imagery to his own ends, creating from it a heightened sense of reality, a tactile sense of the environment his characters struggle against.

Related Titles

The Studs Lonigan Trilogy includes Young Lonigan, The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan, and Judgment Day.

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