A Tidewater Morning Short Guide

A Tidewater Morning by William Styron

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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".

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Characters

Several of Styron's minor characters represent types more than they do individuals, although Styron does give them individual characteristics which humanize them. Lt. Col. Timothy ("Happy") Halloran is a professional Marine who sports a handlebar mustache, a nonsafety razor, a swagger, and a style that Paul Whitehurst can only envy. Paul realizes that Halloran is a political neanderthal and that he tells rambling, pointless tales about his life in the Marines, but he still remains infatuated by his virile presence. The Dabneys are the Whitehursts' social inferiors, "poor white trash" who cuss and fulminate, keep a slovenly house, make illicit whiskey, and have no desire to aspire to bourgeois gentility.

And yet when Shadrach, the ancient slave, returns to Dabney's land to die, Dabney takes him in and sees to it that Shadrach's meager hopes are fulfilled.

Likewise an autocrat like Mr. Quigley, who runs the local store and oversees the boys' paper routes, capitulates to Paul when the boy decides he wants to quit his route. All these minor characters flesh out the stories of Paul's remembered youth.

Paul Whitehurst is a sensitive, solitary soul, dogged by his memories of death and loss, which he cannot shake.

He succumbs easily to homesickness aboard the troop ship, admires the dogged persistence of Shadrach who has come home to die and view the Dabneys' millpond one last time, and tries to avoid discord at all times, fleeing into the domain of his own troubled introspection. He devises ways to confront and avoid these darker memories and recognizes the loss of his own innocence in the process.

The Whitehursts provide the background of discord throughout these stories. Adelaide sings beautifully, but the ravages of cancer are slowly destroying her stamina and good will.

Jeff believes in traditional values, but his wife's suffering drives him to condemn the palliatives of the Presbyterian minister and his wife, who come to comfort him, and gives rise to his lacerating sense of doubt in a godless universe.

Social Concerns

Styron often explores in his fiction the loss of innocence and the discovery of knowledge, a psychological quest in the form of an overarching fable in which his main character discovers the intolerable certainties of life — death, loss, race, war, self-destruction — through a process of recollection and dramatically presented revelations. All of his major novels can be read essentially as fictionalized memoirs or meditations about the past, often beginning at the end of the story and unearthing it slowly, as in Lie Down in Darkness (1951) and The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967), or looking back on the past from a particular present moment in an effort to re-create and discover where things went wrong and how revelations of unbearable tragedy affect the writer and his characters, as in Set This House on Fire (1960) and Sophie's Choice (1979). In A Tidewater Morning Styron re-enacts this same process in three semi-autobiographical tales about the young man Paul Whitehurst that explore the palpable fascination with and horror of war in "Love Day," the death of an old black man in "Shadrach," and the death of his mother in "A Tidewater Morning."

In the three tales Styron examines the segregated mores of the Tidewater world in which he and Paul Whitehurst grew up in the 1930s, the nostalgic memories of a bright, middle-class, white boy growing up in a friendly village filled with local characters, the virile if politically suspect hierarchy of men at war, and his own despondent moods and desolate emotions. He also presents the battle between Whitehurst's parents' backgrounds and attitudes as played out within the emotionally repressive household of genteel evasion and his mother's inevitable death from cancer.

Styron explores the racially charged arguments about color and class that existed at that time and the different perspectives from the point of view of a Pennsylvania Yankee and a Tidewater southerner. At the root of all these issues lie an ineradicable grief and suffering that cannot be transcended by the platitudes of organized Protestant religion, of regional racism, and of blustering Marine camaraderie.

Techniques

Styron's three interlocked tales re-enact the process of memory and its effects on Paul Whitehurst. In each story he seeks out a moment of epiphany or revelation which encapsulates the depth of his vision of human suffering and history's victimizing powers. In states of near-trance or reverie, Paul recalls scenes from his past in the meditative or confessional mode of many contemporary and traditional Southern novels. The first-person narrator relates his emotional state to the exhausted Tidewater landscape which surrounds him. Styron's style, a slow, lapidary, and mellifluous prose, in its rhetorical power suggests the influences of such Southern writers as William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe, although these influences have receded in Styron's later work.

Themes

Several themes parallel and reflect one another in this series of interconnected stories. The most obvious may be the one in which Styron's various social concerns affect his characters.

World War II, the Great Depression, and the lingering racist legacy of slavery consistently reveal the power of historical circumstance to maim and victimize individual people. In "Love Day" on April Fool's Day, 1945, Paul Whitehurst on his troopship remembers witnessing a dogfight in the sky the day before, at the same time he learns that his Marine unit will be involved not in a real battle but in a mock amphibious attack in an attempt to draw the Japanese away from the authentic invasion. In "A Tidewater Morning" at the age of thirteen he reads the headlines in the local paper in 1938 about the approaching war. In both cases the war underscores the human discord and sense of anxious urgency that surround and envelop him.

The Tidewater of the 1930s that Styron re-creates is a veritable wasteland, having been played out by years of tobacco growing. Within this exhausted landscape the Great Depression has settled all too clearly, and his characters must do what they can in order to survive, whether it be through Paul's newspaper route, his father's job at the Newport News shipyard, or the Dabneys' making illicit whiskey at their illegal still.

In "Shadrach" an old black man returns to the Dabneys' land to die, a fugitive from slavery returning to the place from which he was sold years ago. His death ends an era in Paul's life as does the death of his mother and the interminable grief of his father. But it also reveals the clashing perspectives about color and class that persist in his parents. Adelaide Whitehurst is a Pennsylvania Yankee, a graduate of Bryn Mawr, who looks down on all the people of the Tidewater and views them from the perspective of higher and lower classes. Jeff Whitehurst maintains that the Southerners' perspective of the black is far more humane and caring than his wife's. The issue, ever present, is not so much resolved as exacerbated by their individual ways of looking at things, thus dividing them as man and wife, Yankee and Southerner, father and mother.

Within or beneath these more social concerns lies Styron's constant sense of dislocation and human discord, the never-ending and relentless pain that comes from the irrevocable feeling of loss, sorrow, homesickness, and despondency. On board the troopship Paul experiences this sense of homesickness and remembers an argument between his parents when he was eleven years old. He remembers all too well his cancer-ridden mother's stony rage and his father's sweeping sense of desolation that no amount of social concern can eradicate. Human suffering lies at the heart of Styron's vision in all its many facets, and the deaths of Adelaide Whitehurst and Shadrach only add to the continued awareness of the young Paul Whitehurst's suffering and the older narrator's years later.

Styron persists in tracing the landmark experiences of growing up — Paul's experience of war in 1945 and the memory of his parents' bickerings in 1936, his memory of the

Dabneys and Shadrach's death in 1935, and his mother's death in 1938. These epiphanies mark the end of childhood innocence and reveal the continuing sense of depression and desolation that will not leave him. Growing up becomes a hazardous course which must deal with death, loss, war, and their irrevocable effects. At the same time Paul Whitehurst remains a solitary soul, an only child (as Styron was) left to cope with the horrors that life reveals to him and his own despondent introspection.

The process of growing up uncovers a series of wounds and remembered events that will not heal.

Key Questions

Because of the kinds of issues Styron has written about, his short stories and novels easily provoke group discussions of all kinds. The relationship between the individual and historical circumstance, his analysis of western civilization and its involvement with and creation of both Nazism and racial slavery, his treatment of men and women in different historical periods, his emotionally charged use of language to try to capture the effects of the monumental issues that confront him, his peeling away at the facades of memory and recollection, his need to both reveal and re-veil or conceal the depths and often tortuous paths of his subjects, his comments upon the creation of history and fiction and how they are intimately interrelated: All of these topics can lead to stimulating and provocative discussions.

1. Can you trace any development in terms of growth and self-knowledge in Paul Whitehurst from 1935 through 1936 and 1938 to 1945? What has he learned about himself and life? Are his parents' concerns about him valid in view of what he becomes?

2. What is Styron's approach to war?

Does it seem similar to or different from the Depression? Are the two in any way linked here?

3. Styron makes the case for these three stories as representing the memories of a single place, the Virginia Tidewater of the 1930s. How does this sense of place affect his characters?

Could they have come from anywhere else?

4. What can you discern about Styron's attitude toward blacks in these stories? Does it strike you as a contemporary attitude, or is it very much a product of the period about which he is writing?

5. Compare the lives and routines of the Whitehursts and the Dabneys. How does Styron play them off against one another? Why does Paul gravitate toward the chaos of the Dabneys' household? Is there some larger issue of social hierarchy being suggested here?

6. So many of the incidents in these stories focus on death and loss. Can you locate some positive aspects that are the result of these events? Do they add up in terms of some overall vision within Styron's fictional landscape?

7. Notice how carefully the style creates mood and detail. Each word seems particularly chosen and placed.

How does this affect your reading of the stories? How does it direct you toward considering some issues as opposed to others?

8. The attitudes toward blacks as expressed by both Adelaide and Jeff Whitehurst are very different. Do these attitudes still exist today? Are each of the "combatants" fair in assessing the point of view of the other? Are such attitudes really products of geography?

9. How does the Whitehurst family function, or fail to function, here? Is this a product of the 1930s? Or do you see it as a universal dilemma?

10. Jeff Whitehurst attacks religion with a vengeance. Is his attack a valid one? Does Styron seem to agree or disagree with it? How can you square Jeff's outburst with his general belief in Christian and traditional values?

11. Styron writes about paper routes, country stores, the comfort of a country village. How does this insulate and/or support his characters? Is there too much nostalgia here in conjuring up memories of childhood and the small town? Are these characters merely products and/or victims of such a place?

Literary Precedents

Styron's confessional mode of writing novels in the first person can be traced to such diverse American writers as Herman Melville in Moby Dick, (1851), J. D. Salinger in Catcher in the Rye (1951), and Saul Bellow in The Adventures of Augie March (1953). Many contemporary novels rely upon the first-person narrator, linking the story directly to historical, semiautobiographical, and cultural events. The blend of fact and fiction became popular in the 1960s when Styron was at work on The Confessions of Nat Turner.

Related Titles

In Darkness Visible (1990) Styron confronts many of the personal experiences he fictionalizes here. The underlying depression and sense of personal desolation underscore this book and A Tidewater Morning as they do his other major novels.

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