

Thornyhold Short Guide

Thornyhold by Mary Stewart

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.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Thornyhold Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Key Questions.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	8
Related Titles.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10

Characters

Gilly is the central character of Thornyhold, and her growth and maturing is the core of the novel. As she blossoms from a shy, sad girl into a lovely and loving young woman, we see the events through her eyes. All the other characters are minor and shadowy. The mischievous, seductive Mrs. Trapp, the handsome recluse writer Christopher John, and the retarded, brutish but somewhat pitiful Jessamy are almost stereotyped in their roles as the evil witch, the prince charming, and the monster. The fairy-tale parallels are prominent. Gillian is the sleeping beauty. When she arrives at Thornyhold, she is shy and insecure, and her personality and emotions have not been allowed to grow — she is truly in a sleep. It takes a fairy godmother to counteract the spell that her harsh and uncaring mother has thrown over Gilly's life. At the magical place of Thornyhold, she is awakened by her love for Christopher John. Since it is her story, she is the only character who grows and changes and reveals depth.

The others remain flat personalities whose role is simply to promote Gilly's growth. Even Christopher John, her Prince Charming, is seen only through her eyes and is not a rounded character. This does not detract from the enjoyment of the novel, since the reader identifies and knows Gilly intimately, and thus is able to share her emotional flowering.

Social Concerns

A lonely, harsh childhood has left Gilly Ramsey with low self-esteem and a joyless life. The only special moments she has experienced are due to the occasional appearance of her Cousin Geillis who introduces Gilly to the beauty around her. Wherever cousin Geillis is, there is magic, and magic becomes intertwined with reality when she leaves Gilly her house at Thornyhold. The shy, timid young girl discovers powers and insights she never knew she had, but she also encounters a darker side of magic — witchcraft.

Like *Sleeping Beauty*, she is awakened to the magic of life and eventually to love. Thus the novel traces the growth and personality of a young woman to the full flowering of love and self-esteem. The topic of maturing and growing up has always been of interest to readers, and the romantic fulfillment of love is a popular element of romance fiction. Mary Stewart has created a number of young, self-reliant heroines who reflect both the desire of independence, and a need for a close, personal relationship. In true romantic style, they achieve the best of both worlds.

They are modern women, but "the knight on the white charger" still arrives to carry them off into the sunset of love.



Techniques

From the beginning, there is a strong hint of the supernatural, starting with the mysterious Cousin Geillis. She appears and disappears unexpectedly, always bringing laughter, joy, and a sense of wonder to lonely Gilly. The mystery is strengthened with the seemingly uncanny prediction Geillis makes of her own death, and her promise that she would always be there for Gilly.

When white doves bring Gilly messages from her dead relative, it seems as if Cousin Geillis was really a witch, although a benign one. Yet Stewart always provides a logical explanation for the miracles — the doves were really sent by Christopher John at the request of Cousin Geillis before her death, and the mysterious experiences of Gilly during her midnight journey to the gathering of the witches turns out to be an illusion created by Mrs. Trapp's potions. Stewart leads the reader deep into a fairy tale, and then returns him with a laugh to reality, but a very pleasant and romantic reality.

And yet, in the final conclusion when all seems clear and logical, there is the comical result of a magic love potion, and we are left with the question, do Mrs. Trapp, Gilly, and her aunt really possess magic powers?

As in most of her novels, Stewart's strength lies in her ability to create a place and atmosphere, but unlike *My Brother Michael* (1959, which is set in modern Greece, and *Airs Above the Ground* (1965), which takes place in Austria, *Thornyhold* does not have a geographically accurate setting. Instead, it is simply a green place in the English countryside, surrounded by thick woods and a huge thorn hedge.

There are gothic elements, romance, suspense, and a pleasing and entertaining melange that is difficult to classify.

Although quite different from Shakespeare's play, there is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c.1600) quality to the setting and the events. Magic is pervasive, although not always taken seriously, and in the end, magic and setting are one, when Gillian's granddaughter says: "I sometimes think that Grandmother could have been a witch if she had wanted to."



Themes

Mary Stewart uses an almost fairytale-like setting and theme to illustrate the various elements of magic. There is the magic of beauty that Gilly discovers in the old house and gardens, a setting that is reminiscent of the castle of Sleeping Beauty with its surrounding hedge of thorn bushes, and as in Sleeping Beauty, there is also evil magic of the uninvited bad fairy. Here she is Mrs. Trapp, a neighbor, who dabbles in darker secrets, opiates and dream-inducing states. But her evil is not taken too seriously and has an almost comic side. Mrs. Trapp is a witch, but a fairly inept one who cannot always predict the outcome of her "spells," and in the end becomes a victim of her own sorcery. Gilly, on the other hand, seems to have some real powers that she does not understand, and her mysterious cousin Geillis was known to the neighbors as a witch, albeit a good one. Yet this is a lighthearted novel, and the conflict between good and evil magic takes on a humorous aspect as Gilly and Mrs. Trapp compete for the favors of an eligible man, the writer Christopher John. Like Shakespeare's early comedies, the forest world of Thornyhold is one of humor, sometimes bordering on the ridiculous. There are lovers' quarrels, misunderstandings, misplaced love potions, and the ending is in the true fairy tale style — "they lived happily ever after."



Key Questions

Mary Stewart's *Thornyhold* is a romance. Romances and romantic ideas date, historically, to the Middle Ages where popular stories, told for a courtly audience, spun yarns of noble knights who saved damsels in distress and suffered incredibly for the sake of love. They dealt with a never-never world, and even during the Middle Ages were far removed from a harsh reality. Today, romances no longer tell about knights and supernatural adventures, but the basic elements are still there — the noble rescuer, the young woman in distress, and the "they lived happily ever after" ending. Often looked down upon as escapist literature, they form a very enduring type of writing. The reasons for their popularity, and the elements they embody, could serve as stimulating basis for discussions on the literary merit of the romances, the reasons why they have retained their popularity through the centuries, and the light they shed on the wishes and of modern society.

1. Mary Stewart deliberately creates mystery that hints at the supernatural, yet finds a perfectly rational explanation. How does she manage to make the reader believe?
2. Does Stewart say that there is magic? Does she say there is not? Does the reader know where she stands? If not, what effect is she creating?
3. There is some real evil in the events surrounding the intended sacrifice of the dog Rags. Yet Stewart turns it into a positive experience. Why? The true fairy tale does not shy away from villains and monsters and dark magic.

Yet in this novel, these are only hinted at and turn out to be relatively harmless. Is this a weakness of the novel?

4. Gilly is much less of a modern independent heroine than the young women in other Stewart novels. Why?

Does the reason have something to do with the romantic fairy tale character of this story? Are young, independent, self-assured women unsuitable for true romantic heroines? Does Stewart reach back for older female stereotypes?

5. What techniques does Stewart use to build up suspense? Does the rational solution of the seemingly magical events make the reader feel let down?

Why or why not?

6. What is the true magic in this story?

Literary Precedents

Unlike Stewart's earlier mystery/romance novels, Thornyhold does not have any references to contemporary places and events. It has the character of a modern fairy tale, an updated Sleeping Beauty. Many fairy tale stereotypes are used — the fairy godmother who mysteriously appears and always seems to know what Gillian is thinking, the animals that bring messages, even Gillian's bleak early childhood that echoes the trials of Cinderella and other suffering fairy tale heroines.

The woods and landscapes surrounding Thornyhold are romantic settings, peopled by benign rustic characters.

The lovers, rustics and fairies of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c.1591-1596) would have been right at home in the forest surrounding the old house of Thornyhold.

Related Titles

Although Thornyhold shares certain aspects of mystery and romance with Mary Stewart's earlier novels, it is an independent work. Unlike such novels as *My Brother Michael* or *Airs Above the Ground*, it lacks elements of realism, international intrigue, and reference to contemporary events.



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 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994