

Tropic of Capricorn Short Guide

Tropic of Capricorn by Henry Miller

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Characters

is always the case in Miller's Asauto-novels, it is the narrative consciousness and sensibility of the author that is the only real "character" in the book. However, the woman he refers to as Mara/Mona, drawn from June Edith Smith, his second wife, is the most completely examined other "person" in his work. He tells the reader almost nothing about her in *Tropic of Capricorn*, introducing her at first as a near-mythic creature, as much legendary Goddess as earthly woman, but in *Sexus and Nexus*, as he tells the story of the origin of their romance, their eventual marriage and the eventual dissolution of their relationship, Mona (as she is finally called) evolves into a fascinating, mysterious woman who the author never ceases to love in some way but is never able to really understand. The shifting emphasis on chords of power, rage and empathy as the couple's relationship progresses is never resolved into full harmony. Miller cannot fully understand either the woman who is at the center of his life, or his own psychosexual responses to her. As he begins to realize that the enormous energy generated by their relationship is crucially connected to his creative powers, he becomes increasingly desperate to achieve some kind of insight which will give him direction for action.

Social Concerns

The theme of the triad which begins with Tropic of Capricorn is the struggle to shape artistic perception into narrative consciousness; to mold and transmute personal experience into the revelation of artistic expression. Before he was able to begin Tropic of Cancer in Paris in 1930, Miller spent a decade in New York City where he gradually learned to refine his energy for creative expression from a maelstrom of physical and emotional currents surging in diverse directions. This story began with Miller's last attempt at regular employment when he took a job as the manager of a Western Union office. His description of the hilarious chaos and numbing cruelty of the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company — his metaphor for modern industrialized America — explains his final alienation from a conventional way of life. This is matched by a kind of alienation from the self as he turns to escape from his economic failures in an excess of sensory indulgence ("On the Ovarian Trolley") and an increasing reliance on the fantasy of extended interior monologues. When he meets the woman who becomes the focus of what he calls a "great tragedy of love" at the conclusion of Tropic of Capricorn, his desire for a romantic experience which would completely transcend the mundane aspects of his life carries him out of the social realm entirely and into a world of passion, awe and mental instability.

Sexus and Nexus chart his course through this new and strange landscape.

Techniques

Tropic of Capricorn has two narrative modes. The long opening section that describes Miller's experiences with the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company is written with a kind of heightened realism, combining vivid description of the woeful "messengers" Miller hired with Miller's reactions to the disasters that afflict their lives. This part is a highenergy construct in which Miller's mixture of anger and amusement is presented in a relentless series of anecdotes and incidents that gather momentum through an increasing tension built with the datalogue of failure Miller is developing. The utilization of wrath — expressed in a narrative voice that pulses with almost uncontrollable irritation — to resist the circumstances of a world devoid of personal warmth or social support is one of Miller's favorite stylistic devices.

When Miller moves from the Cosmodemonic world (that is, the external realm of economic oppression and social scorn) to an escape into rampant sensuality and/or the regions of his mental landscape, Miller alternates between descriptions of sexual activity written with a kind of erotic power that is responsible for his reputation as a writer of pornographic/obscene books and passages that also indicate a suspension of the rational faculties as images from the subconscious drift across a not entirely in focus mental screen. In this part of Capricorn, there is a degree of bitterness rarely seen in Miller's work since he is trying to show how his narrator has been damaged by cultural calamities and personal miscalculations and weaknesses. The surreal quality of the images of sensual excess and psychic disorganization emphasizes the extremes of desperation that his protagonist is experiencing.

The last part of Capricorn introduces the woman who is at the center of Miller's triad, the agent responsible for the protagonist's experience of the "rosy crucifixion," which is the subject of Capricorn, Sexus and Nexus. The effect she has on the narrator is extraordinary, and while he doesn't develop her "character" beyond her initial appearance, the impact of her introduction is designed to be overwhelming. Miller's account of his first version of June Smith is like an extended lyric poem, an inspired tribute and love letter to a woman who combines apparently human and divine attributes. It is written in a rhapsodic tone that is a testament to her qualities and to her ability to inspire the author.

And beyond this, Miller is trying to make a statement about the nation where a woman like this exists. "She is America on foot, winged and sexed," he says, likening the ethos of a vast, unruly, dynamic country metaphorically to the woman who incarnates its spirit of awesome energy and mysterious and dangerous terrain.

Literary Precedents

Miller's determination to explore the psyche is an example of one of literature's most basic and enduring archetypes. His interest in the work of Carl Jung undoubtedly influenced him in his soul-analysis and his mental voyage is patterned after the dark-night-of-the-soul ordeal. On the other hand, his erotic honesty has no parallel in American literature, although works by Remy de Gourmont, Jacques Casanova, and others are appropriate precedents.

His quest for self-discovery, however, is clearly akin to Thoreau's journals, and his concentration on the self recalls Whitman's poetry, especially the very aptly titled "Song of Myself." Miller is also, like Whitman, eternally about to set foot on the open road, and in this, he is a precursor of Jack Kerouac and other Beat writers whose work contains many elements of erotic exploration, social commentary, personal introspection and wild language — the primary components of Miller's own literary voice.

Related Titles

Tropic of Capricorn is extended and continued with the novels *Sexus* (1949) and *Nexus* (1960) (see also separate entitled *The Rosy Crucifixion*).



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