Under the Volcano Study Guide

Under the Volcano by Malcolm Lowry

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BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

This novel takes place on the final day of Geoffrey Firmin, the British consul to Mexico's life. Moreover, it takes it is also the Day of the Dead, a holiday celebrated in Mexico.

The novel opens in the home of Monsieur Laruelle, a Frenchman living in Mexico, who shares a long past with the consul. Laruelle is also friends with the village doctor. The two of them show much concern over the consul's out of control drinking habits.

Next, the author introduces the consul. He appears to have every aspect characteristic of a drunk. He hears voices and imagines things. Also, he loses track of large portions of time. He suffers from the loss of his wife, who left him one year prior. His younger brother, Hugh, lives with him when not traveling for his job as a reporter.

Next, the reader meets Yvonne. She returns to Mexico to rescue her ex-husband. She still dreams of a happy life with him, away from the bad memories of Mexico. She spends much of her time, however, with Hugh. The two go riding in the morning, while the consul attempts to become sober. Hugh listens to her dreams of a peaceful life but fails to show confidence in them.

Upon returning to the consul's home, Hugh helps the older man get dressed for the day. Without a drink in just hours, the consul cannot steady his hand enough to safely shave. Yvonne, Hugh and the consul plan to travel to the nearby town of Parian for some entertainment. On the way out of town, they stop to visit with Laruelle. There appears to be some history between Yvonne and Laruelle, but the details remain vague.

On the bus on the way to Parian, the trio witnesses a man beaten and robbed. The Mexican law, however, prevents them from helping him. Later, the consul remarks that the man, like himself, has a right to die without interference.

In the evening, the consul begins drinking again. In a tirade, he proclaims his rights to die in any way that he likes. Then, he storms from the hotel. Yvonne and Hugh pursue him, but a riderless horse knocks Yvonne down, fatally injuring her. They never find the consul. Then, the reader learns of the consul's fate.

After some time in a bar and brothel, the local police arrest him on questionable charges. The police chief fires a shot, hitting nothing, but spooking the horse that, ironically, kills Yvonne. The consul falls into a ravine and dies.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The location is a small, Mexican town on the day of the dead in 1939. A festival is taking place in Quauhnahuac, Mexico.

In a casino, a local doctor and Monsieur Laruelle discuss the local consul, Geoffrey. As they gaze over the landscape, they remark on the results of the consul's destructive alcoholism. As he departs, the doctor encourages Laruelle to go out for the evening.

Laruelle reflects on his pending journey to the United States. He remembers his time in Quauhnahuac, including when he met Hugh, the consul's brother. With this memory fresh in his mind, he goes for a long walk through Quauhnahuac.

Even after five years in Mexico, Laruelle admits to himself that he still feels like a stranger in the region. Yet, he revels in the fact that he can admire many different types of landscapes from the highest vistas in town. He sees deserts, mountains, the distant volcanoes and the seaside.

As Laruelle continues his long walk, he remembers his boyhood. His relationship with the consul extends to boyhood. Laruelle met the consul after the consul's parents died and relatives sent him away to Great Britain to get over his shyness. On a vacation to the French seaside, the two boys, Geoffrey and Laruelle, meet and become friends.

In the time Laruelle spends with the consul's adoptive family, he observes their out-of-control drinking, which begins early in the day and continues until they pass out. However, the young Geoffrey completely avoids such vices.

After this time of reminiscence, Laruelle stops at a cantina next to a theater. People suddenly flood out of the theater due to a power outage that leaves it black and lacking in entertainment.

The bartender in the cantina returns a book to Laruelle, which he had, at one time, loaned to the consul. He flips through the collection of Elizabethan plays and feels sorry for the consul. He reflects on the consul's past, as he knows it. Geoffrey served the British government in the navy. He even successfully commanded an operation to capture a German submarine. When the officers all receive inhuman treatment, resulting in their deaths, though, the military official court-martialed Geoffrey. The resulting shame leaves him in the useless consul's job in the nowhere Mexican town.

Inside the book of plays, Laruelle finds a letter from the consul to his estranged wife, Yvonne. Laruelle, revealing some of his past with Yvonne, confesses to feelings of guilt. He crumples the letter and throws it away in the cantina.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Symbolism tells much of the story in this novel. The author spends much time describing the scenery, as it stands for the attitudes in all the characters. Laruelle describes how the vistas offer a variety of landscapes, as the characters offer many different emotions. Also, one can view hospitable and inhospitable areas of the countryside side by side.

The volcano itself personifies the demon that pursues the consul. Just as he lives in the real volcano's shadow, he lives with the shadow of alcoholism, first in his parents and older brothers, then in his own life. Its destructive power appears unavoidable.

Laruelle himself represents the persistence of the consul's past. Though they grew up in separate countries, and though the consul then moves to a remote town in Mexico, they find one another.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Yvonne, the consul's estranged wife, returns to Quauhnahuac. On her journey through town, she reflects on the possible meanings of the town's name. One theory says it means cold mountain water, or where the eagle stops.

Yvonne finds the consul alone in a bar. She asks what he has done in the year since she left. Frequently, yelling in and around the bar interrupts their conversation. Inwardly, Yvonne despairs of Geoffrey's obvious alcoholism.

The consul, seemingly impervious to Yvonne's dismay, points out two women nearby, playing dominoes. He discusses the festival set to begin in the town that night. They walk back home through the town. A man they pass makes fun of the consul's bad Spanish.

They pass Laruelle 's house, and the consul points out that he still lives there, though the consul seems ignorant of any sort of past between Yvonne and Laruelle .

Continuing on their walk to the consul's house, the consul informs her that his brother, Hugh, still lives there, though he's been working on an American cattle ranch while on assignment from the newspaper, the London Globe. Hugh has been away so frequently and for so long that he does not know of the problems in the consul's marriage.

As the consul continues to point out familiar landmarks to Yvonne, she feels peaceful to be at home, even though the consul's life lies in such apparent disarray.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Yvonne seems to bring hope to the consul's life. She returns, for no reason, after one year's absence. However, her persona, though helpful in nature, emphasizes the fatal flaw in the consul's character. Even when it seems that everyone around him wants his success, he self destructs.

The festival that takes place in town contrasts the chaos of the consul's home. While the rest of the town forgets all their troubles to participate in the day's festivities, the consul continues to struggle with his addiction.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

As the consul staggers into the house, he describes the disarray of the house and household staff to Yvonne. Most of the help that Yvonne remembers no longer works for the consul, due to his declining estate. Yvonne meets the maid, one of the few remaining members of the household staff, when she brings the consul a straight whiskey with his breakfast.

At home, the consul hears voices and defends his drinking habits, as if Yvonne were critiquing them. He reflects on how much he missed Yvonne after she left, but the voices insist that she won't mind his drinking. When the consul finally pulls his mind back to reality, he thinks to ask Yvonne how long she will be in town.

The consul remembers his long history with Yvonne, who was born in Hawaii. He remarks on her looks, and says that she looks like she is about to be beautiful. When Yvonne goes in to take a bath, the consul goes back out to buy more alcohol. His state is so precarious that he falls face-first in the street. When a man stops to make sure the consul is okay, he offers him a drink, which the consul gladly accepts.

As the consul struggles along, he knows he should give up drinking if he hopes to keep Yvonne around, but the attraction to her and the attraction to drinking remains equal to him. He feels the effects of withdrawal after only twenty-five minutes without a drink. Briefly, he considers switching to the less potent beer, which, he reasons, has some vitamin properties.

He remembers back to the night Yvonne left him. They had a date at a cantina in Mexico City, but he could not remember which one. He had a drink at each cantina he could find, but failed to track down his wife before he passed out.

Back in the present, the consul once again hallucinates, as he reflects on possible infidelity on Yvonne's part. Yvonne shakes her head and permits the consul to drink, in order to calm his nerves. The consul insists that the drink fortifies him as much as food.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Irony also plays into this novel. Usually, the author uses dramatic irony, in which the audience has more knowledge than the characters. However, when the consul falls down in the road, the reader sees an irony both situation and dramatic. The man offers the consul a drink, which the reader does not expect. What's more, the man offering the drink is not aware of the consul's drinking problem.

Moreover, the consul's drinking problem proves ironic in itself. Though he desires a happy life, apart from his out of control drinking, he can no longer function without regular doses of alcohol. Even the doctor acknowledges this.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

When Hugh arrives at the consul's property, he first sees Yvonne in the garden. He tells her of a nearly unbelievable trip from the American border, where authorities confiscated even the clothes from his back. He appears now in the gaudy outfit of a Mexican cowboy.

Together, the two walk through the countryside and discuss their various travels for the past year. Hugh confesses to his plans to work at sea once again. Also, in the course of their excursion, Hugh rents them a pair of horses. Several times while on horseback, they pass a certain goat.

They are discussing current movies when they come upon a run-down brewery. Hugh gets them each a beer, and Yvonne tries to buy a pet armadillo from the young girl that lives at the brewery. The girl refuses to sell her pet at a low price, and the deal falls through. Yvonne insists to Hugh that an armadillo would be a fine pet.

As they ride away from the brewery, Yvonne admits that, though she and the consul obtained a legal divorce, she returned to Mexico with hopes of sobering him enough to persuade him to move away with her. She dreams of a farm in Canada, which draws some ridicule from Hugh.

In regards to sobering the consul, Hugh holds little hope. He even tells Yvonne how the town doctor refuses to treat Geoffrey because of his lack of control in this area.

Their ride ends at the site of some ancient ruins. They discuss the tragic story of the conqueror Maximilian and his lover. As they admire the moon shining over the landscape, Yvonne shows her passion for astronomy.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The relationship between Yvonne and Hugh offers yet more irony. Though Yvonne returns to save her ex-husband from his destructive lifestyle, she spends nearly all of her time with Hugh. The two do not seem to have an inappropriate relationship, however.

The author uses Yvonne's love of astronomy to represent freedom to her. At her happiest moments in the novel, she admires the sky, no matter what time of day. Even in her last moments, she feels drawn to the starts.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

As he stumbles through town, the consul attempts to run from the voices in his head, which he refers to as ghosts. He remains torn between his desire to drink and his desire to impress Yvonne with his self-control.

Confused, the consul looks around to determine where in town he is, but he cannot translate the Spanish signs for his ill health. He remembers, with nostalgia, his boyhood in England. Unfortunately, his adulthood holds little of that happiness for which he dreamed.

The consul continues towards home. He stops to compose himself in a garden, and its apparent owner, Quincey, implores the consul not to vomit in the garden. The consul defends himself, however, and assures Quincey that his has given up drinking.

Quincey makes no comment on the claim, but inquires about the consul's associates, namely Yvonne, Hugh, and Laruelle. As the men chat, with Quincey doing much of the talking, the doctor approaches. The consul immediately acts paranoid, afraid he committed an offense while drunk that he now cannot remember.

The hopelessness of Geoffrey's situation stands out clearly when the doctor points out that his confusion and unsteadiness stems from a lack of drinking. He advises the consul to have a drink to calm him.

Finally, the consul returns home. He passes out. Upon waking, he remembers plans to go out of town, but cannot remember the purpose of the trip. Due to the consul's failing health, they pass up an invitation from the doctor. The consul imagines his bath filled with insects.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Like many tragic heroes, the consul suffers from voices and visions. These voices justify his actions and excuse his failures. Paranoia also plagues the consul, which continues the theme of guilt in this novel.

The author uses simile numerous times in this novel. In one example, the consul compares his nerves without alcohol to an electrical system.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

At age twenty-nine, Hugh fears his youth has gone. Ruefully, he imagines that his selfish past catches up with him; he admits to himself it is time to grow up.

Hugh reminisces through a long list of his accomplishments. His musical genius promises him much wealth and acclaim in England. To elevate his celebrity more, he takes a job well beneath his social status on the crew of a ship.

Hugh learns with disgust that his fellow seamen live a rather virtuous life and enjoy great food on board. After long months, he returns to England, hoping the press of his unusual trip bolsters the sale of his songs. Instead, he discovers that the publisher never distributed his music. Disgusted with a life in music, Hugh becomes a reporter.

A call of distress from the consul's bath draws Hugh back to the present. He shaves the consul personally while he recalls a few more memories from college.

Yvonne, Hugh and the consul leave finally, intending to visit the zoo. The consul appears to be steady on his feet after just a few drinks.

On the way to the zoo, Laruelle invites them into his house. While there, the mailman comes around. He produces a letter from Yvonne to Laruelle that dates more than one year ago.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Hugh's character shows irony when, after going through many hoops to obtain a placement on a ship, he desires only to return to England. Also, he feels cheated out of a real experience at sea because his shipmates fail to suffer as he dreamed. He hope for a life filled with vices and bad food, but finds quite the opposite on all fronts.

More than any other character, Hugh uses flashback to explain his current lifestyle and motivations. Consequently, the reader learns more about Hugh than even the consul.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

At Laruelle's home, Laruelle greets the group enthusiastically, but calls Hugh by the wrong name.

The group fails to strike a friendly chord, however. Yvonne makes excuses, by saying they must hurry, not leaving time for a drink. The consul argues, pointing out that such a refusal would be rude towards their friend. As they argue, the consul inwardly confesses that he feels as though he's in Hell.

Yvonne, appearing uncomfortable around Laruelle, insists upon leaving, by claiming she wants to see the Day of the Dead fiesta. Hugh relents to accompany her, as he shows little favor towards Laruelle, especially when the older Frenchman failed to remember Hugh's name.

However, the consul remains with Laruelle. Laruelle comments on the consul's lack of excitement about Yvonne's return. Laruelle cites the irony of this situation, because her departure caused the consul so much emotional pain over the past year.

Laruelle, however, leaves the consul alone and takes a shower. The doctor calls Laruelle's house to check on the consul, and is surprised to find the consul there in person.

Once Laruelle emerges from his toilet, he questions Yvonne's motivations for returning. Geoffrey responds with offense. The consul leaves Laruelle's home to meet Hugh and Yvonne at the bus station.

The festival overtakes the streets around him. During a brief stop at a cantina, the consul surmises that Laruelle feels jealous about Hugh's attention towards Yvonne. As the consul allows himself one drink of tequila, he wonders if his relationship with Yvonne may be beyond repair. Moreover, he admits to himself that he actually feels drunk; a rare feeling for him after so much alcohol abuse.

The consul stumbles away from the cantina alone. He ignores children begging for money; yet, when he stumbles and falls, the same children assist him in collecting his belongings. The consul collects himself and continues towards the bus stop. A widow lady, Gregorio, stops the consul to offer a prediction of his future happiness with Yvonne. The strange widow reminds Geoffrey of his mother.

As he turns to leave the widow's cantina, he nearly runs into the doctor and feels ashamed for being seen in such a place.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The relationship between the consul and Yvonne rises and falls with the consul's drinking. The author uses this to point out that the consul really has a tragic flaw, one he cannot overcome. Though the consul wants Yvonne back, he feels resentful towards her, because she disapproves of his drinking.

Any time the author tells the story from the consul's point of view, the timeline suffers. The reader must follow carefully, or become lost in the consul's rambling and talking to voices. This technique emphasizes the toll the alcohol has on the consul's mind, whether he drinks or abstains. After reading several pages of the consul's disjointed point of view, the reader feels drunk himself.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The trio boards a busy bus to Parian. The author describes the hectic atmosphere, which includes people from many different backgrounds and social status. Moreover, it includes animals both inside and out.

Each rider notices different things along the way. Yvonne notices movie posters for the very pictures that she discussed with Hugh. The consul, however, imagines that he sees the devil as they pass a park.

Hugh, though, wants to relieve the tension in their group. The author reveals that it is in Hugh's nature to try to make everyone around himself happy. Yvonne appears to be having fun; Hugh asks the consul how he feels.

As the bus makes its way out of town, it fills with both people and poultry. The full bus stops once, in the wilderness, for a bathroom break. There, the group observes a man who has obviously been mugged. No one offers help, because Mexican law could make such a person an accessory to the crime. Hugh voices his disapproval of such a law.

Back on the bus, Hugh observes Yvonne and the consul holding hands. He takes this as a hopeful sign concerning their relationship and their happiness. The consul spots a young man with items that obviously belonged to the injured man from the stop. He feels disgust not only over the man's robbery, but his lack of shame.

Chapter 8 Analysis

While describing the bus ride, the author employs personification. He attempts to describe how even the animals riding the bus feel about the cramped and uncomfortable situation. He interprets their squawks and smells as panic and discomfort, just as the humans feel.

Personification also appears when the pass the train. The author describes the train as snoring as it rests in the landscape.

In Parian, the entire group feels more peaceful than at any other time during the story. The consul uses an allusion to the Biblical story of Joshua, in which the sun stood still to aid in a military victory. The consul wishes the sun may stand still, to allow him more time in a rare, peaceful moment with his loved ones. The feeling also foreshadows somewhat towards the fateful events that end the day.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Yvonne admires the volcanoes in the distant from Parian. However, she shows distress over the men's decision to attend a bull fight. In order to avert her eyes from the sight of blood, she busies herself by powdering her nose.

The fight, however, proves most unentertaining, as the bull refuses to perform in the extreme heat. Yvonne observes that only the drunkest of the onlookers enjoy themselves. As she sits in the hot arena, Yvonne remembers her own childhood.

In her younger years, Yvonne dreamed of making a name for herself in Hollywood. This dream gives her much in common with Laruelle. Since she married Geoffrey, however, he refuses to hear of her past in acting.

This causes her to reflect upon her time away from the consul. She continues to dream of a life with the consul, away from Mexico. She feels some quiet and privacy would prove healing for him.

Unable to take the lack of action, Hugh jumps into the arena to attempt to ride the bull. Yvonne uses this time alone with the consul to bring up her plans for the two of them to move away. He quickly agrees, and the two feel happy and in love once again. Each feels some hope in regards to their relationship. After the bull fight, the three retire to a nearby inn for the evening meal.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Yvonne imagines a brief flashback to her childhood, when she remembers her mother. The death of her mother serves as a motivation to try once again for happiness in her adulthood.

She also sees the lethargic bull as a symbol of her life, in that it does not perform as expected. Such symbolism reminds the reader of the gloomy undertones during a lighthearted part of the day.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

At a restaurant in a hotel in Parian, the consul drinks mescal, a local alcoholic beverage, while Hugh and Yvonne spend time in the hotel's pool. While listening to Yvonne and Hugh talk of their travels, the consul imagines seeing people from his past. He wishes for happiness, but despairs that it will remain beyond his reach.

At dinner, Yvonne and Hugh make fun of the waiter's poor English. They seem to pass a pleasant afternoon, despite the consul's drinking and subsequent delusional states.

The consul continues drinking through dinner. He realizes that Hugh and Yvonne have become upset, but seems to fail to understand the reason behind this. The group argues for a while on local politics and world affairs. Then, they listen to a guitar player for some time.

After this lapse in conversation, the consul imagines that he talks once again, but no one else hears him. He begins a conversation mid-thought when he proclaims aloud that the man they observed from the bus has a right to die. The consul uses this to assert that no one, not even Hugh or Yvonne, possesses the right to interfere in the consul's habits, even with the best of intentions.

The consul points out the futility in such actions; another hopeless cause arises to take the place of the previous one. The world's politics mirror his own situation; interference from outsiders only results in more chaos. In this final speech, the consul makes a scene in the restaurant and storms out.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Though the elements of the plot appear muddled, the climax of the novel may be when the consul begins drinking again at dinner. This sparks the final argument, after which he storms out of the restaurant. After this, the action falls towards the tragic resolution.

Blatantly, the consul points to the man dead along the route to Parian as symbolic of his own life. He claims he possesses the right to die, even by self destruction, if he chooses. He claims to resent the interference by every other character in the novel.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Yvonne and Hugh chase the consul up the volcano. Hugh blames himself for the upset at dinner, but Yvonne disagrees. She points out that something always arises to upset Geoffrey. Yvonne and Hugh check every cantina they pass on their way up the mountain, but fail to find the consul.

Finally, Yvonne spies him in the distance, but a storm fast approaches from over the mountains. Influenced by the gloomy setting and her own drinking, Yvonne imagines that the farm house in her dreams burns down. In despair, she claims she would rather get drunk than find her ex-husband.

Yet, they continue looking. They find a receipt of the consul's, signaling that they are on the right path. Yvonne begins to feel a sense of foreboding. Along the route, Hugh buys a guitar and sings as they hike up the volcano. Slipping on the rocks, Yvonne falls. Then, a riderless horse knocks her to her death. As she falls, she feels herself drawn to the stars.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The author uses this chapter to show how the consul's drinking problem and subsequent despair spill over to harm the lives of his loved ones as well. Through no fault of their own, Hugh and Yvonne suffer from the poor choices of the consul. They appear to be punished for their attempts to help.

Yvonne's repeated feeling of foreboding as the weather turns unfavorable prove to be accurate foreshadowing. She never guesses, however, that the tragic event she senses turns out to be her own death.

Yvonne's death, in this chapter, appears random. However, in the end of the book, the situational irony reveals itself. The horse that knocks her to her death comes from the place where her ex-husband is held by local police. The policeman's stray gunfire spooks the animal. The accidental nature of her death makes it even more tragic.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

After storming out of the hotel's restaurant, the consul feels Yvonne is lost to him forever. He continues to drink as he hikes across the mountain. He stops at one point to read an old letter from Yvonne, which depresses him with memories of happiness he can never have again.

He stops in one dark alley and pays for sex with a whore, imagining her to be Yvonne. The voices in his head tell him he cannot change, that he cannot help himself.

Disoriented, the consul stumbles away from the area of the brothel. Local police follow him and demand more money for his drinks and his time with the girl. When he fails to produce, they accuse him of trying to steal a horse, which he denies.

Then, the police accuse him of being a known criminal and demand to see his papers. Moreover, they accuse him of being a communist, a very serious accusation in this time.

The consul is taken to prison. A police chief fires a shot in the consul's direction, to emphasize his threats. A riderless horse, spooked by the shot, runs off into the forest. The consul falls into a ravine, plunging to his death. The police kick the body of a dead dog in after him.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The consul's time with the whore symbolizes the nature of addiction. It robs him of real happiness and causes him to settle for a lesser substitute. Moreover, this downgrade of his morals leads to his demise.

Because the final chapter occurs from the consul's point of view, some details remain purposely vague. However, the declaration of the old woman that the police enjoy killing people signals the fact that the consul's arrest occurs unjustly.

Two ironies end this novel. First, is the nature in which Yvonne dies. Second, is that, though the alcohol kills the consul, it happens in a way the reader fails to expect. His addiction places him in the situation that leads to his death, though he does not die from alcohol induced illness itself.

Characters

Dr Arturo Duaz Vigil

Dr. Vigil serves as the town's doctor. He is also a friend of Monsieur Laruelle. Laruelle asks the doctor to help the consul with his drinking problem. The doctor feels the problem is too far gone. He only suggests that the consul engage in moderate drinking to calm his nerves, which become overwrought from withdrawal in a matter of hours.

M. Jacques Laruelle

Laruelle is a Frenchman who relocates to Mexico, only to discover a childhood playmate. Laruelle met the consul on the shores of France as a boy, soon after the death of the consul's parents. The two form a distant friendship, born only of necessity, as the only boys of their age in the area.

Laruelle remembers the consul's family as heavy drinkers, beginning early in the day and continuing until they passed out each evening. Ironically, as a youth, the consul refuses alcohol.

The author uses Laruelle to describe the consul's past, including his time in the British navy. During the First World War, the consul successful commanded a ship that captured a German submarine. When the German officers suffer a cruel death, however, the consul's reputation becomes tainted with a court-martial. Subsequently, the consul is relegated to the unimportant job of consul in Mexico.

Laruelle befriends Yvonne, as well. In fact, letters from the time before Yvonne's first departure from Mexico allude to a romance between the two. Guilt on the part of Laruelle whenever the consul is mentioned verifies this notion. However, he continues to be hospitable and friendly to everyone.

Consul

This novel centers on the final day of Geoffrey Firmin, British consul to the town of Quauhnahuac, Mexico. After leaving the British navy in disgrace, the consul takes a seemingly pointless appointment in the small, Mexican town. His younger brother, Hugh, lives with him, but travels much of the time. Also in his family is his ex-wife, Yvonne. Though she left him one year prior to the book's opening, she returns for this fateful day.

The consul, as the book refers to him much of the time, reunites with a childhood friend in Quauhnahuac, Monsieur Laruelle. The two met on the French seaside, where Laruelle grew up, shortly after the consul's parents died. They shared a brief friendship and later lose track of one another; therefore, they each show surprise at finding the

other in Mexico. Laruelle enlists the help of the town doctor, his friend, to help the consul overcome his drinking problem. Laruelle and the doctor eventually realize the futility of this effort.

The plot of the story centers on the consul's alcoholism. Though no specific thing appears as the cause, many depressing incidents in his life are described, any one of which could cause this kind of destructive behavior. The early death of his parents, his court-martial from the navy, and the desertion of his wife all cause a great deal of grief in the consul's life.

Drinking proves to be the tragic flaw from which the consul cannot escape. Though alcohol does not kill him directly, actions that result from his drinking bring not only his own demise, but that of Yvonne as well.

Yvonne

Though Yvonne does not enter the story until chapter two, Laruelle mentions her and alludes to his relationship with her in the first chapter.

Much of Yvonne's background remains a mystery. The reader learns she was born in Hawaii, and had married once before she met the consul. She appears to be younger than him, but the consul's actual age remains vague. One year prior to the beginning of this novel, Yvonne leaves the consul, presumably because of his out of control drinking. For reasons unknown to the reader, she returns to save the consul from his destructive behavior after being away for a year.

Though Yvonne returns to save the consul, she spends most of her time with his brother, Hugh. Hugh and Yvonne discuss the consul's addiction at length, as they ride through the countryside and swim in the hotel's pool in Parian. This relationship bothers the consul, and he uses this as an excuse to resume his drinking.

When the consul storms from the hotel in Parian, Yvonne and Hugh pursue him, though they sense that any help they offer will be rebuffed. Yvonne confesses to a sense of foreboding during this pursuit. This sense proves to be foreshadowing her own death, when a riderless horse knocks her down the mountain. Yvonne never knows that the horse was spooked when a local police chief fires a shot at the consul.

Yvonne's love for astronomy parallels her desire for freedom throughout the novel. It appears most clearly when, as she falls to her death, she feels drawn up into the night sky.

Hugh

Hugh, the consul's brother, lives with him in Mexico. However, as a reporter, Hugh spends much time traveling. He arrives back in town just after Yvonne. He tells her a colorful tale about his clothes being stolen or confiscated at the border between Mexico

and the United States, where he conducted research for a story about American cowboys.

Much of Hugh's past comes from his own flashbacks, while he waits for the consul to ready for their trip. He remembers a privileged upbringing, during which time he became aware of a talent for writing songs. However, the market at this time proved too competitive. To give himself an edge, he embarks on a sensational trip as a crewman for a shipping vessel. Much of England's society viewed such a job as beneath a man of Hugh's station. Though bored, young men of privilege sometimes took such actions, they always caused sensations among others of his class. Hugh dreams that such a sensation will call attention to his music, upon his return.

Hugh finds his time at sea most disappointing. The crew proves to be men of few vices. What's more, they enjoy great food on board. Such realizations dash Hugh's expectations about life at sea. It proves as boring as life in England, and soon he longs to return. After his return, Hugh finds his musical career worse than when he left; everyone seems to have forgotten him. He turns, instead, to a life as a reporter.

When Hugh appears in the novel, he fears that, at twenty-nine, his youth has passed. He feels pressure to grow up. He offers assistance to the consul, even dressing him and shaving him with little fanfare. Hugh shares Yvonne's desire to sober up the consul, but Hugh seems to know that such a change lies beyond what the consul's abilities.

In the end, even after Yvonne gives up on the consul, Hugh pursues him, if only to stop the consul from hurting himself. However, no amount of help keeps the consul from contributing to his own demise.

Sr. Bustamente

Bustamente works as the theatre manager in Quauhnahuac.

Concepta

Concepta is the consul's maid.

Juan Cerillo

Hugh mentions Cerillo as a long time friend and hero of his. Cerillo seems to have the normal and happy life that the main characters of this novel desire.

Objects/Places

Quauchnauc

Quauchnauc is the small Mexican town where Geoffrey Firmin lives as a British consul. It is a moderate sized town on the sea shore. In the distance, on sees two of Mexico's volcanoes.

Parian

When Yvonne returns, she convinces the consul and Hugh to travel by bus to the next town of Parian. There, they plan to go to the zoo. They also see a bullfight. Outside of Parian, the consul and Yvonne die. Parian represents a happy time that the main characters desire, but cannot attain.

Samaritain Ship

During the First World War, the consul captained this ship. One of his most heroic feats turns out to be his most notorious as well. His crew captures a German submarine, but when they reach port, none of the submarines officers are found on board. The crew eventually confesses to killing the German officers and putting them in the ship's stove. Such war atrocities result in a court-martial for Firmin. This eventually brings him to the hopeless appointment in Mexico.

Cantina

Much of the social life in Mexico revolves around the many cantinas. The availability of such varieties in drink may contribute to the consul's drinking problem. Every meal or social meeting occurs in a cantina, which appears to be little more than a local bar.

America

America plays a very minor role in this novel. However, Hugh comes from the United States to Mexico in chapter two.

England

Hugh and the consul both grew up in England. There, they become dissatisfied with their lives and seek adventure. The consul seeks adventure in the navy, but ultimately finds himself more depressed, after his court-martial, than before. Hugh has a similar

fate after he goes to sea, but finds another career in reporting. Though he never falls into depression like the consul, he seems less than satisfied with his life.

Yvonne's Hatbox

The stickers on Yvonne's hatbox show all the places to which she has traveled.

Cardinal

At the beginning of her visit, Yvonne spot what she insists is a cardinal, but the consul argues with her that it is a tropical bird. The bird represents the way the two of them no longer see life in the same light. Furthermore, the consul's drinking habit greatly affects his sight, both literally and metaphorically.

Volcano

The volcano near the consul's home symbolizes his own life. It lies dormant, a relic. The volcano no longer serves its purpose. Yet, much of the surrounding land relates to it. The streets and towns reflect names pertaining to the volcano.

Canada

Yvonne hopes to buy farm in Canada. While at the bull fight, she persuades the consul also. Hugh seems less confident in the plan's success.

Social Sensitivity

Under the Volcano did not belong in its postwar timeframe. When it was published, the world was still digging out of the ruins of the Second World War. Lowry, of course, had written his crucial early drafts in Mexico during the war's prelude period; the loss of the Battle of the Ebro in the Spanish Civil War is a recurring reference. The main dialectic of the novel — although certainly not its theme — is a debate between Geoffrey and his half-brother Hugh on the futility of involvement (the Consul's view) in all those people's revolutions, including the Civil War in Spain, that were so much a part of the political climate when Lowry began to write. These years — 1936 to 1938 — were times when ominous notes of exile and doom were being sounded in the works of European novelists as little known in America as Louis-Ferdinand Celine and as successful as Erich Maria Remarque. However, neither the malaise of alienation nor the spinoff of that vaguely French turn of mind that was to carry the name existentialism was yet large enough in the United States for other than melodramatic treatment in the "entertainments" of Graham Greene and the tough crime stories of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.

When Lowry's Consul emerged, he was passed over entirely in Britain and damned by the pseudo-literary praise of the Henry Luce press in the United States. Time's accolades helped make it one of the most talked about but least read fictions of the 1940s. Not even Time could shake the general reader from the notion that Geoffrey Firmin was nothing more than an already out-of-vogue kinsman of Don Birnam, the drunken hero of Charles Jackson's Lost Weekend (1943), published three years before. It is unlikely, despite Lowry's often expressed feeling that the earlier book spoiled the psychological moment for his own, that the mass of readers who made a best seller of an alcoholic's monumental binge on Third Avenue would (or could) do much with a drunken, disgraced British ex-consul staggering through the streets of a seedy Mexican town quoting Dante and Marlowe.

It is difficult to assign social concerns, as such, to a writer like Malcolm Lowry and a novel like Under the Volcano. It may be instructive to contrast Lowry, a "possessed" writer whose concerns rarely went beyond the claims of a rich, though obsessed and narcissistic, inner life, with his almost exact contemporary, George Orwell, whose early guilt over being born of privilege evolved into a concern for the ordinary man and his plight that colored every word he wrote. Both rebelled against, respectively, Eton (Orwell) and Cambridge (Lowry) but the fictive forms of their protest contrasted sharply.

Orwell entered the decade in direct opposition to the doctrine of imperialism that fostered aristocratic privilege at the expense of the poor and disadvantaged. His Burma experience as a reluctant British colonial policeman before — and his disenchanting experiences with Communist-front groups in the Spanish Civil War after — forever shaped his social consciousness in sympathy for the ordinary citizen against dictatorships from either left or right. Lowry entered the 1930s as the prodigal son of wealth. Awash in alcohol, he lived by total immersion the early plot of Under the Volcano.

Lowry's concept of the Consul evolved from his own messianic current circuited to his sense of addiction as a refuge, as Lowry once put it to explain why he drank, "from ugliness and the complete baffling sterility of existence as sold to you." When the novel closes with the Consul's murder after betrayal by Mexican fascists, he has nothing left but his messianicism and his mescal. Yet, even while dying with a whimper ("Christ, this is a dingy way to die" are his last words), the Consul still sees himself as a survivor of a sensibility that has been corrupted by the curse of the era: man's inhumanity to man.

A writer like Orwell allegorizes inhumanity as a bestiary fable in Animal Farm (1945). He then extrapolates from that inhumanity the eventual crushing out of all choice and volition in the dystopian horror of his last book, Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949).

A writer like Lowry sees himself as a self-appointed member of an Elect, as some monstrously chosen sojourner in hell from which, although he cannot emerge alive, he will, Virgil-like, chart the circles and report back.

Lowry's concerns, then, in Under the Volcano were not the recognizable ones of either the novel of social realism, which he abhorred, or of manners, for which he had little talent. He belongs in the company of Dostoevski whose Underground Man, like the Consul, probes that deepest level of consciousness which admits only those matters humans are reluctant to acknowledge — even to themselves.

Techniques

To understand how Lowry's novel evolved throughout a decade's constant and frustrating revisions from one addict's case history into what Philip Toynbee, coming on the book late in his career after missing it for fifteen years, calls "one of the great English novels of this century," it is necessary to leave aside alchemy and addiction, the Cabbala and black and white magicians. It is necessary even to forget Lowry's obsession that he was himself being written. For a decade during which the man knew all the miseries of Job, the artist prospered. Malcolm Lowry struggled with his book, but the struggle was as directive as a sculptor's and as strategic as a film cutter's. As his view of his material deepened, Lowry decided on a blocking-out technique, or something like it, as a way of discovering, exploring, developing his themes, of conveying their meaning, and, finally, of evaluating them. He also decided upon certain blocks — certain alignments of theme and motif — to serve in a contrapuntal relationship. Lowry speaks in the Cape letter of the first and last chapters as the easterly and westerly towers of a "churrigueresque Mexican cathedral," for "the doleful bells of one tower echo the doleful bells of the other, just as the hopeless letters of Yvonne the Consul finds in the last chapter answer the hopeless letter of the Consul M. Laruelle reads precisely a year later in Chapter I." This is the mosaic. A major theme, dramatized by one of Lowry's symbolic motifs, invariably recurs, usually several times, and is nearly always, as Lowry put it, "repeated with interest" in the final accounting. The toll on the reader who relies on a linear playing out of cause and effect is heavy. Yet Lowry's progress in composition is an evolvement from a profligacy to a clarity of counterpoint: his ability, after excruciating trial and error, to make recurrences serve to crystallize theme while accelerating narrative.

Dale Edmonds was the first to note that, amidst Lowry's use of devices associated with modernist experimental fiction — interior monologue, sensory impression, simultaneity — Lowry is almost Jamesian in his adherence to formalist conventions in narrative viewpoint. Each of the twelve chapters is pitched from a single viewpoint.

Five are told from the Consul's angle (III, V, VII, X, and XII); three from Yvonne's (II, IX, XI); three from Hugh's (IV, VI, VIII); and one — the opening — from Jacques'. As the paths of the characters cross, the portraits of each are compounded by the reactions and observations of the others. Thus, Edmonds observes, "we see each character from at least three external viewpoints, as well as from within the character's own consciousness. Consequently our understanding of the characters deepens as we progress through the novel."

Themes

Addiction

The story in this novel centers on the consul's alcohol addiction. It appears to be a problem he struggles with for years on end. In fact, the author insinuates that the addiction causes Yvonne to leave him one year prior to the novel's beginning. As often happens with addiction, this loss fails to motivate the consul to stop drinking. Instead, as Laruelle points out, the consul's drinking worsens.

Another point that the author makes about addiction in this novel is that it does not hurt only the one suffering from the addiction. The consul's drinking saddens everyone around him. Even the town's doctor despairs that he can no longer offer aid. His only advice is, ironically, that the consul drinks in moderation to calm his nerves, which suffer greatly from withdrawal.

More than anyone else, the addiction hurts Yvonne. It causes her to move from her home for one year. She returns in order to save her ex husband from his addiction, only to discover that, due to the consul's extensive illness, the household has slipped into disrepair.

Just at the end of the novel, the consul agrees to move away with Yvonne, and the reader has a brief moment of hope for his salvation from addiction. However, the tragic flaw wins in the end. The consul returns to drinking and, when he does, the reader will assume that drinking will kill him in the end. However, it does so in a way that is wholly unexpected. Local police arrest the consul and, though he committed no crime, he fails to command his mind enough defend himself. The resulting altercation causes not only the consul's death, but Yvonne's as well.

Guilt

Every main character n this novel struggles with guilt. The guilt serves as the emotion that holds them back from happiness and success. Guilt haunts from offenses of the past, and escalates when the offended person fails to realize the offense has been committed. For instance, Laruelle feels guilty for his relationship with Yvonne, even though the consul seems ignorant of this fact. Anything that reminds Laruelle of the consul deepens his guilt. Yet, he remains hospitable towards the family.

The consul feels guilt for the way his marriage ends. He feels motivated to stop drinking, for Yvonne's sake, but his love for her only equals his love for drinking; it fails to outweigh it. Paradoxically, the consul's guilt drives him to drinking more. The very thing that causes his guilt serves to be his solution for the unpleasant feelings.

Yvonne also feels guilty about the demise of her marriage, though she holds no obvious blame for the end of it. The author does not place blame on her extramarital relationship with Laruelle.

Hugh feels guilt about the way his life stands, with no promising future. He feels he has wasted too much time on youthful pursuits. He also harbors feelings for Yvonne that cause some guilt; perhaps he treats the consul so kindly because he has these unfaithful feelings for the consul's wife.

Ironies in Life

The author uses irony more than any other dramatic element in this novel. Often, the irony arises as dramatic irony, in that the reader realizes something ironic that the character does not know. Sometimes, though, the irony is situational, such as the novel's ironic end.

One of the largest ironies, which carry through the novel, is that of the consul's alcoholism. He continues to drink because he dislikes his life, yet his life lies in such a state largely because of his drinking. This creates a fatal downward spiral. The drinking also brings many ironies to the consul's life. When withdrawal symptoms cause him to fall in the street, a well meaning passer by offers him a drink to calm his nerves. The local doctor offers the same remedy for the shakes that often plague him when he goes without a drink.

Yvonne's presence also serves as an irony in this novel's plot. She appears to save her husband, whom she divorced one year ago. Yet, the irony continues when she not only fails to save the consul, but also dies as a result of this fateful night.

Irony appears in the life of each character. Laruelle discovers irony when he finds that both he and his childhood friend, the consul, move to the same small, Mexican village to get away from the mess their lives become back in Europe. Hugh lives much irony, starting with his first venture at sea. He discovers that the seamen do not live the wild lifestyle of which he dreamed. He quickly desires to go home. Once he returns to life at land, though, he finds himself longing for the sea. Such dissatisfaction with his life follows him throughout the novel.

Significant Topics

If Ernest Hemingway was right when he declared that what writers talk about they do not write, Malcolm Lowry's epistolary preoccupations may very well have distracted him from writing fiction. In a sense, however, readers are the beneficiaries of the fruits of Lowry's defects as a working novelist. The long letter he wrote to the English publisher Jonathan Cape on January 2, 1946, protesting a Cape reader's recommendations for cutting and altering, is so thorough an anatomization of the book's themes and techniques that Granville Hicks praised it as "the most careful exposition of the creative

imagination" he had ever encountered. Stephen Spender recommended that the letter be made the standard preface to Under the Volcano.

His novel, Lowry wrote, is "principally concerned with the guilt of man, with his remorse, with his ceaseless struggling toward the light under the weight of the past, and with his doom."

Although Under the Volcano, a novel by a possessed man writing about a possessed man, is fiction's most powerful clinic on the moment-to-moment agony of the drinker of sensibility, the Consul's alcoholism functions, thematically, as a correlative for the universal drunkenness of mankind during humanity's "binge" just after the Spanish Republic fell to Franco and just before Hitler invaded Poland.

Lowry also wrote, with characteristic diffidence, that his magnum opus "makes provision . . . for almost every kind of reader." It "can be read simply as a story . . . a kind of symphony . . .

a kind of opera — or even a horse opera. It is hot music, a poem, a song, a tragedy, a comedy, a farce, and so forth. It is superficial, profound, entertaining and boring, according to taste.

It is a prophecy, a political warning, a cryptogram, a preposterous movie, and a writing on the wall. It can even be regarded as a sort of machine; it works too, believe me, as I have found out."

No critical consensus about Under the Volcano has emerged forty years after original publication. "The numerous hiatuses and ambiguities of Lowry's multileveled, mannered, encyclopedic narrative seem positively to invite multiple interpretations," English critic Ronald Binns wrote in 1984.

Biographer Douglas Day, paying tribute to the book as "the greatest religious novel of this century," analyzed five major elements: landscape, characterization, politics, the occult, and religion. Earlier, Dale Edmonds, discussing Under the Volcano at the "immediate level," also located five major aspects, as follows: (1) "The Weight of the Past," the complex linkups — both circumstantial and psychological — between the four principal characters; (2) "Salvage Operations," the flawed (and failed) efforts of the other principals to save the Consul; (3) "A Mosaic of Doom," the Consul's involvement with antifascist elements in Mexico leading to his murder; (4) the Consul's alcoholism, its possible causes and relationship to his fate; and (5) the condition of love in the modern world as signaled throughout by words in Spanish etched on a wall, no se puede vivir sin amar ("one cannot live without loving"), written by Luis deLeon, a Spanish Renaissance poet-priest.

It is the final element in Edmonds's formulation that is crucial. The Consul's flaw is that he cannot love; therefore, in Greek-tragedy-like inevitability, he must die. For a time he has hovered between the "either" and the "or" — between the illusion of Paradise and

the reality, for him, of the abyss. The Consul never really doubts when the test comes what the result will be. He chooses addiction, destruction, death.

The two basic themes, then, are the dread efficacy of the past and its weapon — memory — in paralyzing action and promoting the Consul's demise — he is slain by Mexican fascists, ironically betrayed by his own masks — after being given the chance, but failing, to restore love to its redemptive position.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel changes by chapter. First, the reader follows the story from the view of a secondary character, Laruelle. As a character largely outside of the action of the plot, Laruelle gives a good deal of background information, mostly about the consul and Yvonne.

The point of view changes in chapter two to that of Yvonne, though still in third person. The author tells of Yvonne's trip through town, in search of her ex-husband. Though the author uses third person point of view, regardless of the character being followed, the point of view is never omniscient. The reader must judge the thoughts and emotions of the characters based largely on their words and actions.

Finally, after several chapters of introduction, the reader sees the story from the consul's eyes. Whenever the author uses this point of view, the story becomes hardest to follow. The consul's repeated voices and visions make it hard to discern between reality and fantasy. Moreover, the consul's story fails to follow in chronological order much of the time.

Setting

The novel takes place in Quauchnauc, a small town on the coast of Mexico. Outside of the town lie two dormant volcanoes, but much of the town echoes the volcano's influence. The names of businesses and streets reflect the volcano's presence.

In the novel's opening, Laruelle admires the variety of landscapes around Quauchnauc. He sees desert, plains, and seaside vistas. Though the landscape appears fertile, the volatile times make life difficult for most of Mexico's inhabitants at this time. In the course of one day, the characters spend time at both the consul's and Laruelle's home. Hugh and Yvonne go for two long walks and rides that seem to occur without much passage of time. The same could be said of Laruelle's farewell walk through Quauchnauc.

The novel ends in the nearby town of Parian, where Hugh, Yvonne and the consul travel to go to the bullfight and the zoo. A ravine in the volcano eventually becomes the resting place for the bodies of both the consul and Yvonne.

The entire time frame of the novel occurs in one day, the Day of the Dead, 1938. On this day, Mexicans mourn the loss of loved ones. They hold mock funerals throughout the city. In the evening, though, the people attend an elaborate fiesta.

The political upheaval all over the world impacts life in Quauchnauc. The consul suffers from disappointments that occurred in his life during the First World War. Furthermore,

all of the men offer differing opinions about what the political leaders of the time should do to deal with the worldwide threat of communism.

Language and Meaning

Most of the novel uses a diary-like language, cataloging the adventures of the main characters, either in the past or the present. The author follows the treks of Laruelle, Yvonne and Hugh. The language offers rich descriptions of their travels. It also includes detailed dialogue between the main characters, as well as conversations with locals that they encounter.

When the point of view switches to that of the consul, however, the language becomes much more stream of consciousness writing. The reader must follow closely to discern between reality and the visions and voices that plague the consul. In fact, the story becomes less chronological at this point. For unknown periods of time, the consul passes out, waking to resume his life as if nothing happened.

Relating to the setting, the author uses much regional language and dialect in the story. A working knowledge of Spanish adds another dimension to the plot, but is not necessary. In fact, some confusion about the conversations of the local offers a more accurate interpretation of how the English speakers in the novel feel, as they seem to know little Spanish themselves. In fact, several times, the local mock their poor Spanish.

Structure

The author tells his story in twelve chapters of roughly equal length. Each chapter offers a different point of view from the previous, and this rotates between the main characters.

When the author uses flashbacks, the structure lapses into long, rambling paragraphs. An entire page may be comprised of a single paragraph, describing, for instance, Hugh's time aboard the ship in his youth. The passages told from the consul's point of view ramble the most.

Occasionally, the author breaks the long, narrative passages with bits of dialogue. As happens in real life, sometimes the conversations themselves interrupt the flashback that character was having at the time.

This novel is told in 432 pages.

Quotes

"He had few emotions about the war, save that it was bad. Ah well! One side or the other would win. And in either case life would be hard." p. 10

"A black storm breaking out of season! That was what love was like, he thought, love which came too late." p. 10

"The word was like a breaking heart, a sudden peal of stifled bells in a gale, the last syllables of one dying of thirst in the desert. Did she remember Oaxaca?"1 p. 51

"A sense of a shared, a mountain peace seemed to fall between them; it was false, it was a lie, but for a moment it was almost as though they were returning home from marketing in days past." p 67

"...for a moment they stood on the porch without speaking, not holding hands, but with their hands just meeting, as though not quite sure they weren't dreaming this, each of them separately on their far bereaved cots, their hands but blown fragments of their memories, half afraid to commingle, yet touching over the howling sea at night.'" p. 70

"...a girl of whom people said, "She not pretty but she is going to be beautiful": at twenty they still said so, and at twenty-seven when she'd married him it was still true, according to the category through which one perceived such thing as focus: it was equally true of her now, at thirty, that she gave the impression of someone who is still going to be, perhaps just about to be, 'beautiful.'" p. 75

"Unless of course it seemed utterly impossible, one dreaded the hour of anyone's arrival unless they were bringing liquor." p. 76

"Might a soul bathe there and be clean or slake its drought?" p. 83

"And what right had Yvonne to assume it, assume either that he was not sober now, or that, far worse, in a day or two he would be sober?" p. 88

"Nothing in the world was more terrible than an empty bottle! Unless it was an empty glass." p. 90

"For man, ever man, Juan seemed to be telling him evan as Mexico, must ceaselessly struggle upward." p. 113

"'I'm sorry,' he said,'"it was just the notion of Geoff among the alfalfa, in overalls and a straw hat, soberly hoeing, that got me a moment.'" p. 124

Adaptations

Under the Volcano, on one level, is a cinematic novel written by a novelist who loved films. Some of the early enthusiasts of the novel corresponded with Lowry's widow on the prospects of a faithful movie adaptation, but soon tired of all the abortive projects of this producer or that; the promises that 4410 no less than a Richard Burton would be playing the Consul.

In summer of 1983, a production by Moritz Borman and Wieland SchulzKeil moved toward completion in and around Cuernavaca, Mexico. John Huston directed a British cast of Albert Finney as the Consul, Jacqueline Bisset, Yvonne, and Anthony Andrews, Hugh.

When, during Easter week of 1984, Schulz-Keil publicly (in London) expressed the hope that the film would garner Academy Awards for best film, lead actor, screenplay, and cinematography, delegates to a world conference on Lowry's life and works took hope.

The film, which opened later that spring in London and the U.S., proved a wan version of the great "cinematic" novel. "What we get is a realist film of an expressionist novel," wrote Ronald Binns. ". . . The dramatization of key scenes from the novel may be helpful to first-time readers grappling with Lowry's opaque and enigmatic narrative. That said, Under the Volcano is unlikely to be rated one of the finer achievements of Huston's long and varied career."

A great director with materials generated by action (The Maltese Falcon and Treasure of Sierra Madre come quickly to mind), the eightyish Huston was no match for the interiorization that Under the Volcano requires. In discarding the opening epilogic prologue and the character of Jacques Laruelle, Huston gave up the heart of the novel. Albert Finney plays an articulate lush with conviction and aplomb, but the stage drunk that viewers see is not the Consul.

The only other dramatization of Under the Volcano was a radio play written by Gerald Noxon and performed in Canada the year of the book's publication — 1947 — with the American actor Everett Sloan as the Consul.

The finest film work so far apropos of Lowry was a Canadian Broadcasting Company documentary, Volcano: An Inquiry into the Life and Death of Malcolm Lowry, co-written, directed, and produced by Donald Brittain and John Kramer. Its original broadcast was April 7, 1976. Made on location in Canada, England, and Mexico, the film interviews forty-four people about Lowry, and quotes extensively from Under the Volcano. It essentially follows the structure of Douglas Day's biography. The film conveys the maelstrom horror of Lowry's life, although it suggests, without any evidence, a homosexual involvement during Lowry's brief Bellevue Hospital period in 1935.

Richard Burton reads the words of Malcolm Lowry from the novel. The comments of friends — English, Canadian, American — are excellent. Margerie Lowry's rhapsodic image is a jarring note.

The film was nominated for an Academy Award in 1977, in the Feature Documentary category. Entered also in the 19th American Film Festival (New York, 1977), it won first prize in the feature length arts category.

Topics for Discussion

Describe the different types of irony in this novel.

In what ways is the consul a tragic hero? What is his tragic flaw?

How does each character attempt to save the consul? To what degree are they successful?

How might the story end differently if Yvonne had convinced the consul to leave Mexico?

Describe the dramatic structure of this novel. How does it differ from a typical structure?

Which character do you relate with and how?

What do you think caused the consul to become an alcoholic?

What part does the time period of the novel play in the development of the plot?

Compare and contrast the consul and Hugh, especially in the way they deal with disappointments.

What role does the setting play in this novel?

Literary Precedents

The "Lowry industry" has stimulated what the late R. P. Blackmur, speaking of Ulysses (1922), called "the whole clutter of exegesis, adulation, and diatribe." A Times Literary Supplement critic calls Under the Volcano "a masterpiece as rich and humorous as Ulysses and far more poetic." John Wain writes that "the writer with whom Lowry has most in common is James Joyce," adding: "To me, Ulysses is a great book that almost didn't come off. Under the Volcano is a great book that almost did." A University of Toronto thesis by Anthony Kilgallin finds echoes in Lowry's novel of Christ, Adam, Don Quixote, Dante, Faust, Oedipus, Lord Jim, Svidrigailov, Chichikov, Moby Dick, and of authors too numerous to list. In an ingenious attempt to demonstrate that Under the Volcano is a truly Joycean work, one of Lowry's friends, the novelist David Markson, finds a complete Homeric parallel incorporated into Chapter X. Lowry was the first to deny a Joyce connection. As if to shut off altogether the flood of Joyce talk, Lowry declared he did not read Ulysses through until 1952, five years after the publication of Under the Volcano. What Malcolm Lowry did read — and virtually memorize — was Blue Voyage (1928) by Conrad Aiken. Aiken told this writer in a 1967 interview that the reading of Ulysses changed his life, including his credo and aesthetic as a writer. That Lowry moved, especially in technique, ever closer to Ulysses may well be due to an intermediary, Aiken. At any rate, for a parallel to, a precedent for, the tragic joy of Lowry's novel — its insistent humor amidst hellish demons — one can indeed only turn to Ulysses.

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