Whistlejacket Short Guide

Whistlejacket by John Hawkes

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Characters

Michael the photographer and Stubbs the painter are parallel characters. Both render beautiful portraits.

Stubbs literally dissects a woman to learn how to accurately portray female anatomy. Michael's long discussions of the female body show how he uses his photography to dissect women into their component parts, focusing on their breasts, buttocks, and other aspects of physical form. Although Stubbs seemed to capture the essence of Whistlejacket in his portrait of the horse, his paintings of women are shallow, never reaching into the women to show their true selves. In fact, the women of his patrons are mere adjuncts to their men; Stubbs actually paints over women in his pictures in order to emphasize the males. Similarly, Michael is enthralled by women's physical natures, but shows no understanding of their personalities. For Alex and Virgie, he is a plaything; he has no understanding of them as human beings and is therefore unaware of what they think and feel, leaving him vulnerable to their manipulation. This is probably why he does not show the police the plain photographic evidence of their murder of Hal. Alex and Virgie confuse his emotions so that he cannot sort out right from wrong, truth from lies.

In his passionate love for his work, Michael differs from Stubbs, who sets about his art in a detached, dispassionate manner. For Stubbs, painting is more of a science than an art. It is a matter of getting the right anatomical features in the right places. On the other hand, Michael's great redeeming feature is his enthusiasm for his photography. He pours his heart into it; he is rapturous over capturing a female breast in just the right light and just the right setting, or over capturing a beautiful back or pair of lips. He loves what he does, a fact that sets him apart from the idle rich he lives among.

Social Concerns

W histlejacket paints a bleak picture of the wasted lives of the leisure class. They are depicted as lost in a pointless, highly ritualized pursuit of sex and other amusements. In Hawkes's novel, horses serve as symbols of the characters' foolish cruelty and obsession with appearances.

Hawkes uses a famous horse of long ago, Whistlejacket, to symbolize rampant manhood; it was aggressive, hard to control, and possibly mad. Years after its death, men admire George Stubbs's painting of Whistlejacket, noting how the artist captured the horse's strong, muscular quality. A major character in the novel is Hal, who owns Marcabru, a horse he believes to be a direct descendant of Whistlejacket. It is uncontrollable by anyone but himself.

Hal is a sexual predator who lives with both a wife and a mistress, and frequently brings home other young female bed partners. Marcabru is an expression of his mad sexual energy, which corrupts and degrades the women in his life. Because of Marcabru's wayward reputation, few are surprised when, one night, he stomps Hal to death.

In the course of the novel Michael, a photographer and friend of Hal, discovers that Hal's death was no accident. Just as Hal seemed to be a sexual madman around women, Marcabru is driven into a wild frenzy by mares.

Hal's wife and daughter lead a mare to Marcabru's stall while Hal is inside; they take photographs of Hal's horrible death as Marcabru goes wild trying to reach the mare. Later, they have Marcabru gelded — symbolic of the castration of the predatory men around them. The male sexual attraction to the female becomes destructive; at novel's end, an old fox hunter rides himself to death in pursuit of a beautiful but treacherous girl.

The rituals of fox hunting parallel the bizarre rituals of Hal's household.

Everything is pretense and designed for show; the rituals hide the ugliness underlying the lives of the leisure class. In their personal lives, the ugliness is how they waste themselves; in the hunt, the ugliness is the horrible killing of foxes imported especially to be victims of the lust for amusement.

Alex's usurpation of the traditional male role of Master of the Hunt comes as something of a shock to the partici pants in the novel's climactic fox hunt.

Like Marcabru's gelding, it represents women's new liberated role in the society of the novel. Virgie casually beds Michael for the same reason. The women have become the predators, and they are no more compassionate about their sexual relationships than the predatory males.

Techniques

Throughout his career, Hawkes has experimented with narrative techniques. Many critics consider this a weakness, proclaiming that Hawkes sacrifices characterization and plot to his experiments, rendering his novels shallow. Some recent literary critics think that his experimentation belongs to a dead literary tradition — the early Modernism of the 1930s — during which many prominent writers experimented with fictional form and techniques. For these critics, Hawkes's recent novels seem old fashioned and no longer significant to a literary community that has moved away from technical experimentation.

A different complaint about Whistlejacket comes from reviewers who note that the portrayal of the painter George Stubbs is historically inaccurate. Stubbs is a real-life figure whose paintings of animals are still held in high regard by art historians. Hawkes takes liberties with Stubbs's life. He switches around events, changes names and places, and alters the identities of the people in some of his paintings, as well as the circumstances under which the paintings were done. Reviewers note that Hawkes gives no indication of his having fictionalized the life of Stubbs, and they worry that some readers may be misled about Stubbs's true character and art.

The narrative of Whistlejacket has three aspects: Michael's first-person account of his work and of the events surrounding the death of Hal; an objective third-person narrative of Michael's interaction with his adoptive family; and a third-person discussion of how Stubbs went about his work. The shifts from first person to third person in Michael's story may be at first disconcerting, but once the pattern has been established it becomes an interesting way of examining a life from both Michael's inner perspective and from a dispassionate outer perspective. Those readers who want tidy plots may find the interruption of the main story line for the narrative of Stubbs's early career irritating, but the novel's strength is not in its plot. For instance, the murder is hardly a mystery at all; Michael uncovers the fact of the murder and the identity of the killers at the same time.

There is no detection or suspense. The novel focuses on the aesthetic aspect of fiction rather than on storytelling.

The juggling of the novel's narrative structure calls attention to that structure. It echoes Michael's rapture over manipulating female figures so that they shine not only as fashion models but as expressions of aesthetically satisfying beauty. For Michael, the female body is a grand adventure, full of mystery, surprises, and deep satisfaction of the human need for aesthetic beauty. So too, the manipulation of the novel's structure emphasizes how the techniques of fiction can satisfy a reader's desire for beauty. Michael's rapturous accounts of his work present beautiful images and an artist's pride in craftsmanship that may echo Hawkes's own. The shifting perspectives show how a novel may speak to its audience, providing both highly charged emotions which the reader may vicariously experience and a detached view of life which invites the reader

to use his mind to observe the human condition — both its triumphant and debased aspects, as well as its mixture of enriching beauty and degrading cruelty.

Perhaps Whistlejacket's principal claim to literary merit is its demonstration of how fiction can pull together disparate strands of human experience and thereby reveal something essential about the human condition. The shift to the past in the Stubbs narrative and then back to the present emphasizes how some qualities of human behavior are universal, as well as how the present echoes the lives of a multitude of generations of the past.

All of this complexity is held together not only by the consistency of the imagery of horses and women, but by a fine prose style that makes the book flow smoothly from one point of view to another. Hawkes's keenly observant and flowing prose style makes the book exceptionally good reading.

Whistlejacket's demands on the reader are rewarded by Hawkes's ability to draw the reader into his narrative.

Themes

Whistlejacket is a study in human cruelty and how people rationalize it.

The novel sets out in the manner of a domestic romance. Michael, now a fashion photographer, had been taken in and raised by Harold (Hal) Van Fleet, the wealthy owner of Steepleton, a horse breeding farm that stages fox hunts. The novel begins with a description of Michael's sexual awakening, with hints that he and Hal's daughter, Virgie, will become lovers. This seemingly gentle movement toward romance is shaken when Hal's widow asks Michael to create a photographic biography of her deceased husband.

Michael discovers that the fine, upright man he had admired as a father was also a cruel manipulator of women.

Buse, who Michael believed had been befriended by the Van Fleets as he had been, is revealed to have been Hal's mistress. Three years after his marriage to Alex, Hal informed her that Buse was moving in with them as his mistress. Alex could either leave or accept the sexual arrangement; he would divide his time between them. This bitterly cruel situation was made even more unpleasant by Hal's bringing home various young women to share his bed and forcing Alex and Buse to meet them. Buse, blindly in love with Hal, left her husband to become his mistress. She excused his every cruelty, happy that she could share any part of his sex life. Alex bitterly accepted the arrangement. Hal blithely excused his cruelty by asserting that satyriasis ran in his family.

Michael's discoveries make him conscious of cruelties he had been blind to, such as fox hunting. After her husband's death, Alex must import foxes for the hunt, keeping them in cages, because the foxes on her lands had long ago been exterminated. With much pomp and circumstance, with priestly blessings and a show of social graces, well-heeled people ride their finely bred steeds in the hunt. The sport is shown as a cruel amusement for idle people; all the social ritual is merely a cover for the cruelty of their activity. Michael is only a half-hearted participant in the hunt, rooting for the foxes, not the hunters.

Throughout Whistlejacket Hawkes uses animals symbolically. Whistlejacket was a famous eighteenth-century Thoroughbred, whose portrait was done by the painter George Stubbs. In order to create lifelike portraits of animals, Stubbs dissected dogs, cats, and eventually a horse. His intense study of their anatomy is horrific; the horse dies an awful death. At one point Lord Nelthorpe angrily confronts Stubbs outside the barn where Stubbs is dissecting one of his horses, bit by bit, day after day. '"Not one of mine, Stubbs!' he shouts, and points with the handle of his crop toward the windowless outbuilding. 'Not one of mine!"'

Stubbs only cares about how horses look, not how they feel. Thus he is surprised when Whistlejacket attempts to stomp his own full-sized portrait; it has not occurred to him that the horse might have emotions.

Hawkes draws a parallel between horses and humans by giving an account of Stubbs's dissection of a woman who died in her eighth month of pregnancy. A physician needs illustrations for a book on midwifery, and he commissions Stubbs to provide drawings based on the dead woman.

Slowly, at night, after spending much of the day on a portrait of Lord Nelthorpe's son, Stubbs dissects the woman, providing meticulous illustrations of her insides. He treats her with the same coldness with which he treats animals. He is assisted by his commonlaw wife Mary Spencer, who can hardly bear the smell of the woman, slowly decaying in the winter cold. She is forced to endure the horrors of Stubbs's dissections, just as Alex is forced to endure the cruelties inflicted by Hal's disregard for her feelings. In each case a man ruthlessly pursues an obsession: Stubbs with anatomy, Hal with sex.

The cruelty Alex and Mary Spencer endure is compounded by their own participation in the infliction of their misery. Mary can refuse to help Stubbs, but if she does so, she loses him. Alex also participates in her victimization.

She must accept the sexual arrangement or lose Hal. She chooses to stay with him, enduring the sight of his mistress every day of her life. She agrees to pleasantly welcome each of his young sexual partners. Both Mary and Alex rationalize their situation by asserting that they love the man who abuses them.

The way Alex and Virgie kill Hal is also cruel. While Hal is in the stall with his favorite horse, Marcabru, they approach with a mare in heat. When Alex and Virgie bring by Lady Di, Marcabru kicks wildly, stomping Hal to death. Alex's account of her motive is bizarre; unwilling to accept her own role in her victimization, she claims that she decided to murder Hal when he told her that he had been wrong in his treatment of her and that he would now be faithful to her. This, she asserts, offended her because it suggested that her years of sacrifice had been pointless. Virgie's motives are more straightforward. As a little girl she had adored her father, but, disliking little girls, he did not return her affection. Virgie acted in revenge for years of neglect. To compound their cruelty, Alex and Virgie have Marcabru castrated to eliminate the kind of behavior that could reveal that Hal had not died in an accident. Symbolically, this castration is what they would like to inflict on all men. Furthermore, Alex upsets tradition at the fox hunt by assuming the position of Master of Foxhounds, a role reserved for men.

Additionally, Virgie demands and receives sex from Michael, treating him casually and trivializing his sexual desire.

Reviewers have noted that eroticism is found throughout the novel. Michael declares himself a lover of beauty, and beauty, he says, means woman. His fashion photography is a relentless pursuit of the beauty of every woman.

He has no stereotype of female beauty, intently photographing all types of women: the fat, the skinny, the short, the unattractive. He seems unaware of how much of the feminine beauty he treasures is manufactured. For instance, if a woman has an

unattractive face, he covers it with makeup until it is transformed. Michael rapturously describes his photographing of lips, buttocks, and other female anatomy.

He objectifies women by fragmenting them rather than seeing them as whole.

Key Questions

Whistlejacket is densely written, with complex themes and a narrative that moves back-and-forth through time.

This could put off some readers, but the novel is so beautifully written that most readers will be stirred by it. Discussion leaders should be prepared for members declaring that they very much liked the book and yet have almost no idea of what it was about.

Perhaps a good way to begin discussing the novel would be to sort out its different narrative strands, identifying those that have to do with the murder mystery, those to do with Whistlejacket, those to do with Stubbs, and those to do the emptiness of the upper-class lives of some of the characters. After that, one probably should examine the narrator and explain how his naivete shapes the plot and our impressions of events. Then there are the themes, probably the most intimidating aspect of the novel. A successful discussion probably should emphasize Hawkes's observations about art and artists, noting in particular their sometimes childlike enthusiasm for matters that may seem trivial to others (the beauties of female behinds, for instance). What statement does Whistlejacket make about art and artists?

1. What does the horse Whistlejacket symbolize? Does it have different meanings for different characters?

2. Why choose a photographer to narrate much of the book?

3. How does male sexuality affect the women in Whistlejacket?

4. What are the rituals of Hal's household?

5. What does Marcabru symbolize? 6. What do animals, especially horses, in general symbolize in the episodes of the novel?

7. How credible are the domestic arrangements of Hal's household? How could Michael live in that household and have no idea of what was going on?

8. What forms does cruelty take in Whistlejacket? Do they add up to a coherent statement on cruelty?

9. Are there any healthy sexual relationships in Whistlejacket?

10. Does Michael truly understand women's beauty? As an artist, is he as limited in his understanding of his subjects as Stubbs is in his?

11. Are the characterizations in the novel overly intellectualized?

12. Are people universally doomed to understand each other only in fragments — never in whole — as Whistlejacket may imply, or is Whistlejacket itself an examination of only a fragment of the human condition?

Literary Precedents

Horses have been used as potent social and literary symbols since the dawn of literature. For the Ancient Greeks, the horse symbolized Poseidon, God of the Sea, and in the Iliad, the horse symbolized Troy and Troy's bond to Poseidon. The infamous Trojan horse, because it gained the invaders entry to Troy, was symbolic of the breaking of that bond. Greek dramatists also used horses as symbols, most notably Aeschylus, who in his plays used horses to represent characters and social concepts. In cultures, such as that of medieval Europe, that depend heavily on the horse for traveling and the transportation of goods, horses would naturally show up in their literature as representative of power and freedom — the ability to escape from the restraints of civilization. No knight errant would be complete without his mighty steed. The medieval English poet Chaucer uses horses somewhat as Hawkes does in Whistlejacket, with the personalities of the storytellers in The Canterbury Tales reflected in the descriptions of their horses, although Chaucer does not develop the connection as strongly as Hawkes does between Hal and Marcabru.

It seems that most of the time, horses have represented positive values; for instance, in American westerns horses long have represented not only freedom, but independence of spirit and even hope for salvation, as when the cavalry rides to the rescue.

The sensuousness of horses, particular as they race along, appears in literature in positive ways. For instance, in National Velvet, the speeding horse not only represents the overcoming of adversity but the advance of a girl into young womanhood; the sensual connection suggests a strong womanhood, without the taint of prurience. But as society has moved away from dependence on the horse for travel and commerce, the horse in literature has also undergone change. For instance, in Alice Munro's short story "Boys and Girls," a horse represents a girl's aspirations for freedom in a man's world, and its capture represents her being confined by external social forces to the role of being "just a girl." In the complex short story "The Rocking-Horse Winner," by D. H. Lawrence, horses seem to represent the failures of antiquated upper social classes to cope with a changing society and to represent the destructiveness of the lust for money and materialism on individual character. In the story, the father is a failure to his family because he does not earn enough money to maintain their large home; the mother's character seems almost inhumanly warped by her desire to be able to make money by having "luck"; and the son gives his life to horse racing, an apparently purely money-driven pastime, and the belief that being "lucky" is what is most valued in a person. He rides his rocking horse to a vision of the victor of a horse race, wins a great deal of money for his mother, and dies — horse racing, and symbolically the lust for money, having annihilated his spirit. In its presentation of the horse as symbol of a valueless upper class and of the debasing of the human spirit, "The Rocking-Horse Winner" shares much in common with Whistlejacket, in which horses represent divisive issues, symbolic of excessive wealth and excessive leisure time, and the fox hunt in particular is a potent symbol of elitism, cruelty, and wastefulness.

Further, both Lawrence's short story and Hawkes's novel take their cues from modern society, in which the horse represents a luxury that divides the wealthy from other people.

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