

The Winning of Barbara Worth Short Guide

The Winning of Barbara Worth by Harold Bell Wright

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Characters

The Winning of Barbara Worth could have been named as aptly, The Transformation of Willard Holmes. The young Eastern engineer comes West to work for his mentor who controls the Company. When he arrives in the West, he is the epitome of the Eastern Dandy, except there is a solid core to him. By the end of the story, not only does his physical appearance alter — sun darkened skin, his gait now indistinguishable from one who was reared in the West — but his inner self as well has changed, from a Company man to a true man of the desert, doing his work for the benefit of his fellow man.

Barbara Worth characterizes all that is great in a woman. She is kind, she is good, she ministers to the sick and poor, and she is the inspiration for Jefferson Worth's men's devotion to reclaiming the desert. Years before, while crossing the desert, Jefferson Worth's outfit was delayed by a three day sandstorm. When it was over, the men discovered a dead bay horse along the trail, and a bit further at a dry water hole, a dead woman and a little girl of about three years old who called herself Barba. Jefferson Worth raised her as his own, and she knew only that she was a child of her desert and had an almost supernatural love of it. When her true heritage is revealed at the end of the story, she does not alter her opinion of herself.

Wright again relied on actual people as the basis for his main characters.

Jefferson Worth was patterned after W. F. Holt, a rancher friend of his in the Imperial Valley. Barbara Worth represented his publisher's wife, Mrs. Barbara Reynolds.

Wright's characters, as in all his books, stand for different aspects of humanity — virtue, vice, greed, ambition, youth.

Social Concerns

Four or five years before *The Winning of Barbara Worth* was published, President Theodore Roosevelt asked Congress to allocate funds for harnessing the Colorado River, which threatened California's Imperial Valley. The flood plain was rich with fertile soil that needed irrigation to make it an oasis in the desert and needed the guarantee that it would not be devastated by the seasonal ravages of the Colorado.

Wright's epic novel centers on man's responsibility for his environment. He researched the history of the valley and the reclamation project and had five engineers read the manuscript of *The Winning of Barbara Worth* to authenticate his reclamation procedures. His King's Basin is a thinly disguised name for the Imperial Valley; the fictitious name San Felipe is actually San Diego; Rubio City is Yuma, Arizona; Barba is Holtville; Frontier is Calexico; and Republica is El Centro, where Wright lived while writing Barbara's story.

Techniques

Always keen on linguistics, Wright must have had a heyday with this novel. One character has an Irish brogue, many Mexicans with broken English are employed to work on the reclamation project, plus the difference in Western and Eastern phraseology was not overlooked. Descriptions abound in the true Wright style. His first ten descriptions of the desert are admirable works of prose. After that, however, his flamboyant style tends to detract from the book. An interesting technique Wright employed was personifying Good Business, the master passion of the race. By capitalizing the phrase and using it over and over, Wright cleverly creates an abstract character.



Themes

Wright develops his concept of ministry through work as the central theme. He pits business for the sake of money only, with no regard to how it affects people, against business which also makes money, but serves man and in a larger sense, the world. In this instance, bad business is represented by the Eastern capitalists who are willing to invest large sums to develop the desert basin, but not one penny more than is necessary to control the river through its wooden headings, spillways and gates. Although the Company is advised time and time again to replace the cheap structures with concrete and steel, they refuse, because it would mean a much greater investment without a greater return. Jefferson Worth's approach to business and his Western common sense represent the antithesis of the Company.

Once again this Harold Bell Wright novel touches on the theme of what makes a man a man, and a woman a woman. The author tackles the moral character's fight against materialism and aggrandizement.

Adaptations

The movie rights to *The Winning of Barbara Worth* were sold with eight other of Wright's books to Principal Pictures in 1922. Four years later Samuel Goldwyn paid Principal \$125,000, an enormous sum for a picture at the time, for the rights to *The Winning of Barbara Worth*. Goldwyn said he had two reasons for wanting Barbara Worth's story. First, the book had been such a big seller that it ensured a large audience for the movie. Second, he had always wanted to make a desert epic, and *The Winning of Barbara Worth* had all the elements needed for a classic movie. Filming was on location in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada. Wright was given a voice in the selection of the cast and approved the choice of newcomer Gary Cooper for the part of Abe Lee, one of Barbara Worth's adopted uncles.

Literary Precedents

In *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, as in most of his books, Wright tended to be sentimental and flowery in his descriptions. The people of the times did not care that critics scorned his style, they loved his books. Of the thirty-five books that had sold more than 50,000 copies between 1905-1934, Harold Bell Wright had written five of them: *The Shepherd of the Hills* (1907), *The Calling of Dan Matthews* (1909), *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (1911), *The Eyes of the World* (1914), and *When a Man's a Man* (1916). Only one other author had five books on the list — Gene Stratton Porter. *Her Freckles* (1904), *The Girl of the Limberlost* (1909), *The Harvester* (1911), *Laddie* (1913), and *Michael O'Halloran* (1915) were as sentimental and as descriptive as Wright's works, and were as popular. Both writers wrote about the common man, love of nature, and religious teachings, which reflect early twentieth-century tastes and ideas.



Related Titles

Another of Wright's books deals with man's responsibility for his environment. In *The Man Who Went Away* (1934), his final book, he wove the plot around preserving the giant redwood trees of northern California. Again, he researched his book carefully, relying heavily on the help of a zoologist to ensure the integrity of his work.

When a Man's a Man (1916), one of Wright's best-sellers, develops the principle of manhood. Just as the Easterner Willard Holmes found the qualities of manhood within himself through the influence of Barbara Worth and her father, Honorable Patches, an alias for a wealthy young man from the East, found the true meaning of manhood in the West among the cowboys on the ranch where he worked.

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