The Women's Room Short Guide

The Women's Room by Marilyn French

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

The Women's Room Short Guide....1

Contents....2

Characters....3

Social Concerns....4

Techniques/Literary Precedents....5

Themes....6

Adaptations....7

Related Titles....8

Copyright Information....9

Characters

Although Mira is the central figure — the one whose story links the threads together — the real protagonist is "women." The book's first half is devoted to the group of suburban friends and neighbors who share coffee (or wine) and support one another with fragments of conversation constantly interrupted by the demands of toddlers or the press of sudden household disaster. Bliss, Adele, Natalie, Samantha, Martha, and Lily demonstrate various problems such as alcoholism, nervous breakdown and desertion, but they are not characterized simply in terms of one problem apiece. Each is a fully rounded individual; indeed, it appears that any of the problems could have come to any one of them. The second half of the book introduces a new group — graduate students at Harvard in the late 1960s. Again, the women are memorable characters with a variety of social backgrounds, each of whom is capable of growth and change during the course of the story.

The male characters are much less fully realized: some reviewers called them stick figures. French's refusal to provide in-depth characterizations for the novel's males is, in fact, thematically significant. At mid-book the narrator, trying to describe the man Mira married, admits she knows almost nothing about him and is unable to imagine his thoughts. The gap between women and men is so great, and socialization has made their responses and outlooks so different, that no woman can grasp what actually goes on inside a man's skin. Furthermore, the white middle-class male may actually be a stick figure: a collection of postures, phrases, and attitudes imposed by the cultural demands that he suppress his individuality and feelings to maintain his social role.

Social Concerns

The Women's Room powerfully communicates the experience in society of women who have come of age since the Second World War. The central character went hopefully to college in the late 1940s, believing in her own intelligence, potential, and opportunity. In the 1950s, she and her friends settled into the suburban life of domesticity and motherhood that became a national ideal, and avoided speaking about the subtle undercurrents of dissatisfaction that Betty Friedan, in The Feminine Mystique, would characterize as "the problem that has no name." Buffeted in the 1960s by pressure and change — nervous breakdown, divorce, alcoholism, shifting social roles, sexual freedom — some emerged with the energy to seek new goals, new training, and independent professional existences, but discovered that real independence could be gained only at the cost of loneliness. The next generation of women — those who came of age in the 1960s and confidently used the opportunities open to them — learn that men have not changed in the same ways that women have, and that their drive to achieve is apparently in insoluble conflict with establishing and maintaining a loving and supportive marriage.

The overarching social concern — women, and women's space in society — is universalized through the technique of the group protagonist. The single story that is woman's story speaks through the lives of many women over the course of thirty years.

Individual problems grow from structural flaws in society. Among the issues are: poverty (even upper-middleclass married women are only one man away from welfare), birth control, the male retreat from marriage as "self" becomes socially acceptable and "duty" declines, the lack of social supports or resources to cope with a disturbed child, men who "outgrow" the women who dropped out and went to work in order to support them through law or medical school, and the constant emotional drain, diffusion of energy, and pressures which are created by total responsibility within a nuclear family and which lead women to feel inadequate as mothers.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The novel's narrative voice weaves readers into the group story. An authorial "I" speaks directly to readers as "you" and also includes them as fellow women in a conspiratorial "we." By the book's end it becomes clear that the "I" who narrates — and who walks alone on the New England beach at the beginning — has the same life history as the protagonist whose story she tells.

The blending of names suggests not only "Mira" and "Marilyn" but also, through "mirror," the reader who sees her own story in the shared women's voices.

The form of The Women's Room replicates women's experience with its circularity, repetition, and grinding accumulation of daily detail. There is no tidy plot of cause, effect and consequence; any story may be interrupted by quarreling children or a hungry husband. Friends come and go because of divorce, changes in financial circumstances, or (later) the demands of graduate work, leaving questions and loose ends. As in life, there are very few moments of climax that make change immediately visible, and no permanent solutions short of death. The shapelessness and wearing exhaustion that led to complaints from some reviewers realistically emulate the texture of women's lives.

Most of the quasi-autobiographical novels about women and marriage published under the impetus of the women's movement during the 1960s and 1970s were centered on a single individual, often using a first-person narrator. Women's fiction, however, does have a tradition of using multiple protagonists, often for the purpose of suggesting that social forces are stronger than individual acts in shaping women's destiny. Two feminist examples from the twentieth century can be found in Mary McCarthy's The Group (1963) and Marge Piercy's Small Changes (1973).

Themes

The profound aloneness of a woman walking on a deserted beach frames the book with an image of the impossibility of achieving both personal independence and loving heterosexual companionship. The central theme is not simply that women are victimized by individual men, but that the chasm of incomprehension between women and men precludes any foreseeable future for coexistence so long as patriarchy is ingrained in the economic system, in underlying values so universal they remain unperceived, in the psychology that shapes the family, and in all social institutions.

Patriarchal values also compromise women's ability to support and sustain one another. The first group of suburban women, who had nourished each other in their shared experiences, breaks up over sexual competition: shaped by the attitudes of the 1940s and 1950s, they cannot imagine fulfillment except through attachment to a man. A brief vision of peace and harmony that includes both women and men arises in the graduate-student group of the late 1960s, but their community is forced apart by institutional pressures and by the social conditioning that keeps men from perceiving their own assumptions about the conditions of marriage. It is perfectly reasonable for Ben to crave a child of his own, but he can neither understand the consequences for Mira of having another baby just when her boys have reached college age or conceive that he might, for the sake of parenthood, temporarily postpone his own career plans or take primary responsibility for child care.

Another crucial scene, from a thematic standpoint, begins when Val explains her vision of a nurturing and equalitarian community of men and women of all ages which involves changes in living space, economic systems, and education. It is informed by Val's belief that people grow human by caring for one another. At the end of this scene, Val's daughter telephones for help because she has been raped.

Val comes to understand that patriarchy also prevents women from performing adequately as mothers. Because women have no power to shape institutions, Val is unable to protect her daughter from what becomes virtually a second rape at the hands of police attitudes and a male-controlled legal system.

Adaptations

ABC's made-for-television movie adaptation of The Women's Room in September, 1980, which inevitably sweetened the book and weakened its message, featured Lee Remick as Mira, Colleen Dewhurst as Val, Patty Duke Astin as Lily and Tyne Daly as Adele.

It was nominated for an Emmy award as the season's outstanding drama special.

Related Titles

Please see separate entry on Her Mother's Daughter, (1987).

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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