

Critical Analysis of the ‘Cold Comfort Farm’

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Stella Gibbons and the Literary Context of Cold Comfort Farm

Stella Gibbons (1902-1989) was a journalist turned novelist in the era of 1920s. Her work of literature was highly proclaimed when she first published her debut novel “*Cold Comfort Farm*”. The most celebrated line of her novel ‘I saw something nasty in the woodshed,’ has become a catchline to date. Her highly famous novel was later converted into a star-studded film as well. Throughout her life, she remained true to English literature and published about twenty-three novels and a bunch of poetic pieces and short stories (Hammill, 2001). Gibbons has used the “distancing effect” in her novel as the background of her writing narrative. The distancing effect in the literature is known to prevent the audiences to completely diminishing their consciousness and blindly following the storyline wherever it takes. It rather allows them to critically evaluate the characters and the various circumstances presented in the scenes and make a compos mentis decision (“Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative | Mieke Bal | download,” n.d.). This is also true for the story characters as well, where the author evaluates the characters and carves their personas individually as the storyline progresses.

Gibbons uses several modernist themes and tropes in her work of art novel *Cold Comfort Farm*. An example of this could be seen in the parodic mentioning of the fictitious Anglo-Nicaraguan War of 1946 in the novel. The narrative text that she uses in her novel is future-oriented in the way that the imaginary and fictional world that she creates is not perfect but quite different from the real world that we live in. The reader of the book finds himself indulged in the unreal, imaginary bubble created by the author yet at the same time finds himself comparing and contrasting it to the real practical world. The concept of futurism is seen in this book when Flora visits the rural area where her relatives live and realizes how backwards their lives are. Therefore, she decides to give them a wake-up call and introduce them to a futuristic world. Moreover, Gibbon’s effort to mock countryside romantic novels is an example of a modernistic approach in her book. She utilizes imitating and parodying as a tool for mocking the unconventional social values and customs; henceforth, hilarity, as much as futurism, becomes a distancing play throughout the plot of the story.

The book also tackles the genre of suspense quite interestingly. For example, the evergreen dialogue of Aunt Ada Doom’s ‘I saw something nasty in the woodshed’ creates leverage across the whole storyline as the suspense behind what she saw confines the whole family into the rural village for years and years. As a result of this stretched suspense, the protagonist of the book tries to upturn this edgy scene using her humour and creating a space of futuristic probability. In addition to this, Gibbons also uses extremely playful vocabulary and metaphors that keep her audiences hooked to

the fullest. For example, when Gibbons writes, 'Seth and Reuben too, send gumboots' – on discovering that one had landed in a rather muddy and bucolic place. This shows how realistic yet creative she is with her words throughout the whole novel (Simmers, 2019).

Parody, Rural Melodrama, and the Novel's Comic Method

The conventional novel *Cold Comfort Farm*, penned by Stella Gibbons and published in 1963, is a burlesque of dejected novels of the time that, although tried hard to make a name for themselves, failed miserably. Gibbons served as a ray of hope for rejuvenating the dying genre of comics in the literary world and produced a masterpiece called *Cold Comfort Farm* that comically portrays the lace curtain life of a noble community in London. However, at the same time, she derides the whole point of the rural literature genre when the protagonist of the story tries to lighten up the gloomy lives of different characters in the story (*Cold Comfort Farm*, n.d.). Gibbons provides comic relief to her audience as she parodies the writing style of Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence, whose novels are much less appreciated in front of Gibbons. Her narrative style mainly focuses on the lighter side of the tale where the protagonist, the 19-year-old Flora Poste, constantly tries to cheer up the blatant and grumpy relatives of hers whom she has visited after the death of her parents. However, ironically the core values of Poste still lie in the high-class lot of London as she molds the lifestyle of her old-fashioned relatives towards a more modernistic manner.

As England transitioned from a farmland country to a capitalist, the genre of regional literature gained its popularity and writers started to use this contrast in depicting the discernable disparity. Gibbons jeers and tributes at such topical English literature which is typically the mainframe of Thomas Hardy, [Emily Bronte](#), and H. D. Lawrence's literary novels. Their work of literary typically focuses on the old times of London and its deep-embedded secrets, but at the same time, they do not contain their literary horizon within the same country that is ancient England. Their piece of writing always shows a contradiction between the lifestyles of the country and the town. This is the reason why, in regional novels, the importance of location is important as it lays down the basis of dissimilitude with something that is completely opposite of it.

Gibbons has used the same narrative style of contradictory regional style in her novel *Cold Comfort Farm*. The protagonist of her novel, Flora Poste, portrays the urban culture of modern London. With the city lifestyle, the upper-class sophistication, and the aristocratic mindset of country life in London, she has to, unfortunately, get settled in the unusual and backward lifestyle of her relatives, the Starkadders of the Cold Comfort Farm. This leads to the contrasting side of the picture in her book, the relatives of Flora Poste. They represent the uncivilized, unrefined, and uncultured rural lifestyle who do not care about how the world has been upgraded. They are rough and tough farmers who are so indulged in their own lives that they are oblivious of how impolite and unusual their behaviour is to the world outside. Gibbons tackles such conflicting aspects in her regional novel whilst staying true to

her comical genre and providing a good laugh to her audiences (Ariail, 1978).

Flora Poste and the Development of Character and Narrative Control

The character development in the novel is interesting and engaging for the readers. The proponent of the storyline, Flora Pose, is shown as a reader as well as the *dramatis personae* in Gibbons's narrative. This can be clearly seen as she remarks on the different characters of the story and relates her situation to the various accords of the books she has read. Pose initially lived a very happy and luxurious life with her parents. Later when she became orphaned and had only a hundred pounds per year of stipend, she decided to change her living preferences and opted to live with her relatives from Sussex. In addition to this, Pose was determined to write a novel for which she was inspired by her favourite novelist Jane Auston. Gibbons, keeping the distancing technique in mind, takes note of her character in that even though she starts living in an entirely alienated place, she is excited and aspires to use this opportunity to make notes for her book. When she says, "highly sexed young men living on farms are always called Seth or Reuben, [...] and my cousin's name, remember, *is* Judith. That in itself is most ominous. Her husband is almost certain to be called Amos, and if he is, it will be a typical farm," portrays her excitement. As the book progresses forward and as Pose learns more about the unusual beliefs of Aunt Ada Doom and the haunted farm, she decides to change their thinking and way of living for the better (Ariail, 1978).

Flora Pose's Starkadder prominent relatives in the story included Aunt Ada Doom, Judith Starkadder, and Reuben Starkadder. Gibbons parodies the 'dominant Grandmother Theme' as she is the reason why the misconceptions about the farm started in the first place. Pose recognizes the grandmother as the character that is 'found in all typical novels of agricultural life.' She claims to see something horrifying in the field years ago and blames it for her madness and controlling nature. Her fits increase in intensity when anyone from the family talks about leaving the farm and moving to the city. Judith, Flora's cousin, considers himself blameworthy for loving his non-loyal son unconditionally as he is not given the respect that he deserves from him. Characters other than Flora are described as rude, rough, and resistive. The frequent use of humour by Gibbons in the form of the perception of Flora balances that roughness. Moreover, the novels that Gibbons is parodying are dark and sombre because of which they have not been recognized as much. As Gibbons adds a spice of humour to them, it not only lightens up the mood of the whole scene but also intrigues the reader to stick to the story till the end ("Comfort reading," 2013).

This novel is better understood and appreciated only if the reader reads it with the perception in mind that it is a parody of countryside literature and that it contains prototypes of other roles mentioned in various rural literature (*Cold Comfort Farm Summary*, n.d.). The work of Stella Gibbons in the *Cold Comfort Farm* is mostly borrowed from the works of other authors of the time, the intertextual references of which could be found throughout the novel. For example, the overwhelming love of

Judith for her son Seth is the same concept that is found in the work of Gertrude Morel in *Sons and Lovers*. Similarly, the two names of Gibbon's characters were borrowed from the novel *Grey Agony*. It is imperative to mention here that many critiques and reviewers have animosity toward her parody work in the form of the Cold Comfort Farm as the authors' works she has borrowed and made references to are the ones that are less read by the audiences. For example, the picturesque meadows and the landscapes that are beautifully portrayed by Stella Gibbons are relative to the descriptions of Mary Webb's landscapes, as most of her books were set in Shropshire, UK. Gibbons has nevertheless made her way to become one of the best novelists in the eyes of the audiences, yet she has introduced us to the literary world of other lesser-known authors that are not much appreciated.

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