

Is flora a force for good in cold comfort farm



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Cold Comfort Farm by Stella Gibbons is a 20th century novel following the move of an urban socialite, called Flora, from London to the countryside where she stays with her new-found relatives. The plot develops as Flora slowly befriends the wild country folk that she is living with and begins to change them to suit her common sense view of life. Through these changes many of the characters lose their individual characteristics and mannerisms and some abandon the farm - whether this is positive or not is subject to further analysis. One character on whose life Flora has a definite effect is Elfine (the granddaughter of Aunt Ada).

We witness a process by which she is distinctively changed. She is described near the beginning of the novel as being at one with the earth, saying that she hates houses and further adding 'out here on the hills I am alone with my dreams'. Her whole image and aura is that similar to a wood nymph with her 'green cloak' and 'golden, unbrushed' hair, further described as a 'mane' drawing a stronger association and connection to animals and wildlife. The free spirit of Elfine and her love of poetry seem 'deplorable' to Flora and are completely in opposition to Flora's modern, urban, commonsensical beliefs. After talking about the upper middle class man that Elfine is in love with to Flora, Flora immediately takes upon a type of project changing Elfine and helping her to win the heart of her love- Dick Hawk-Monitor and the approval of his parents. Together with Flora's aid Elfine is remodelled to fit the part of a normal middle- class housewife making her a perfect match for Dick Hawk-Monitor.

Through their engagement Elfine is freed from having to marry Urk 'the foxy-looking man who kept staring at her ankles or else spitting into the

well'. The characteristics described here show Urk as rude and low class - ankles being a part of the body not too often seen, the obvious rudeness of spitting; also as wild and attackingly rural in his parallel to a fox - he is the opposite to Dick and also the opposite of what Flora stands for. Another thing gained for farm community due to Elfine's change and marriage is the move of Adam and the four cows to go and live at Hautcouture Hall with the Hawk-Monitors where there is undoubtedly more space and money. Furthermore Elfine has been given a higher social status and improved materialistically. However one may argue that she has lost more than she has gained.

Through the transformation Elfine has lost much of her originality, a symbol of this is her haircut. She is described as having it short and neat which is 'fashionable' and completely representative of Flora's 'wish to tidy up Cold Comfort'. As earlier shown, Elfine's hair was a symbol of her wildness which is now changed to suit the normal modern 'Flora' way of life. Also when introduced to fashion and new clothes, Elfine exclaims: 'It's better than poetry' - another direct symbolism conveying Elfine's broken link with the bohemian soul that resided in her. So even though she may seem 'very happy' one can not be sure whether that is simply because Elfine has been taught by Flora that this is what happiness in life is - a charming, acceptable husband and a large family estate. Another character who is deeply affected by Flora's visit is the head of the household - Aunt Ada.

There is a feeling of rivalry throughout the novel between Aunt Ada and Flora. This is particularly evident in the style of writing. The reader sees the events in the novel mainly through Flora's eyes, she has a very distinct voice: practical, pneumatic, not using too many adjectives or florid

metaphors, and she comes through in nearly all parts of the book – even the forward. However we never hear Flora’s voice in the scenes found in the beginning and middle of the novel in which Aunt Ada has crazed monologues recalling the time that she saw something ‘ nasty in the woodshed’. After a few visits up to her room we see that Flora has changed Aunt Ada. At the wedding just after Aunt Ada’s reappearance after her conversion, she is described ‘ smiling pleasantly’ and uttering such phrases as: ‘ Well, well. surely.

.. ‘ and ‘ It sounds like the finale of the first act in a musical comedy’. This is typical Flora language and it seems there is no longer friction in styles of writing and register between the Ada scenes and the others from the book. The final phrase mentioned again shows how Flora has managed to induce a stronger sense of class and culture into the Starkadders in a typically urban way, going to musical comedies being a somewhat more refined activity than any the reader has witnessed at Cold Comfort Farm. As well as alerting Ada Starkadder to the joys of foreign countries and culture, Flora has modernised Aunt Ada in terms of her dress sense.

She is described as being ‘ dressed head to foot in the smartest flying kit of black leather ... and trousers’. The change in Ada was beneficial not only for herself, but also for the other rural characters in the novel (especially the female ones).

Having transformed Ada from a ‘ mad’ old woman to a pleasant one she is never again heard to say: ‘ None of you shall ever go away there have

always been Starkadders at Cold Comfort Farm' and now answers pleas to leave with: '... by all means.

- she no longer felt that she needed to prevent any other Starkadders from leaving the farm. This allows for Elfine and Seth to feel that they have left with no guilt behind them. Also with less Starkadders, other characters especially female ones such as Nancy and Rennet become more prominent. With Ada no longer there, Reuben is also free to control the farm and carry through openly his plans of mechanisation, improvement and profit. Flora has been able to win the power struggle with Ada through helping her and those around her.

Finally, Seth has his future completely altered due to Flora's interference. From the first few incidents in which the reader sees Seth during the novel he possesses the 'animal quality' associated with all of the Starkadders in the novel; known to be 'always busiest in the spring' and his infamous widespread 'mollucking'. His constantly mud splattered trousers help to show a bond between him and the earth, and he is often compared to powerful attacking animals such as the panther and the bull. We are often reminded of his two passions - 'mollucking', and 'the talkies' Flora helps him to find his happiness in the latter, however one must imagine, if she were not around Seth would have no way of getting involved with movies whilst living in such a place as Howling and would probably have based his life on the former of his passions. However, one must consider both the negative as well as the positive sides of the argument.

Whilst Seth says on p83 that he like the talkies ' more than anything in the whoal world', it seems that, like many of the other characters, he has had to give away a part of himself so that he can follow this dream that Flora has conveniently set out for him: ' Seth would never have a chance now of becoming a nice, normal young man. He would become a world-famous swollen mask. ' Although, presented as having ' fierce joy that surged deep within him', Seth was on his way to be exploited by Hollywood and Mr. Neck :
'..

. as if Seth was his dinner (and indeed he was for some years to come)' and was also leaving behind a suffering and obsessed mother: ' My darling. You mustn't leave me . I shall go mad. I can't bear it!.

.. there's the harvest... tes man's work.

.. you mustn't go! ' Here it appears that Flora may have helped Seth in the short term but one could not be sure of his future or of the mother he leaves without a son and the baby he leaves behind without a father. The changes which Flora induces in the novel are ones of forcing modernity and urbanisation onto a old fashioned rural family.

The solving of problems with use of mechanisation (Ford van for Amos, the aeroplanes that Seth, Elfine, Ada fly off in); new exciting methods of medicine, such as psychotherapy and contraception; interest in other countries which are quite modernised - America and Europe, all contribute to the idea of distinguishing an old, wild, rural England which is symbolised in the Starkadder characters. Decision of whether this is positive or not is personal as it addresses the question of whether one prefers modernisation

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and urbanisation or keeping to rural roots. When it comes to deciding for each separate character whether the circumstances were in their favour it is easy to come to different conclusions for each. However either way, in terms of characters and historical relevance the loss of the wilderness and individuality for each is a shame as now everyone and everything seems to sticks Flora's method of 'tidyness'.