

“Cold Comfort Farm” Stella Gibbons

Discussion Questions

1. “Cold Comfort Farm” is set in the near future according to the note before the dedication. How does this affect the story? Do you think contemporary readers viewed the setting differently than we do today?
2. In the Forward, the author mentions that she as a journalist and that “the life of a journalist is nasty, brutish, and short. So is his style.”
 - a. Do you agree or disagree with both comments?
 - b. Her quote is a reference to Thomas Hobbes’ “Leviathan,” which promotes the idea that a strong monarch is the most effective form of government. Do you see any parallels between a strong monarch and the main character, Flora Poste?
3. The book opens with a quote from Mansfield Park by Jane Austen. Do you see similarities between Flora Poste and Jane Austen’s heroines, like Elizabeth Bennett of “Pride and Prejudice” and Emma Woodhouse of “Emma?” Are these parallels intended to satirize or honor Austen?
4. Baedeker is a German publishing house most famous in the 19th and 20th century for their travel guides. Gibbons states in the Forward that she will set off certain passages in the novel with one, two, or three asterisks in the form of Baedeker. What is the effect of these passages and did you find it distracting or did you find that it supported the story line?
5. The author was inspired to parody the “loam and lovechild” novels of authors like Mary Webb, as well as earlier works by Thomas Hardy, and claimed that: “The large agonised faces in Mary Webb’s book annoyed me ... I did not believe people were any more despairing in Herefordshire [sic] than in Camden Town.” If that is the case, why did Gibbons choose rural Sussex as the novel’s setting? Is she remarking on the view of nature? Would the novel have been as humorous if it were set entirely in an urban environment?
6. What are some examples of symbolism supporting Gibbon’s parody?
7. “One of the disadvantages of almost universal education was the fact that all kinds of persons acquired a familiarity with one’s favorite writers. It gave one a curious feeling; it was like seeing a drunken stranger wrapped in one’s dressing-gown.”
 - a. Flora’s statement is interesting since she “lives” in a parody. Do other characters in the novel remind you of other literary figures from the novels of the Brontes, Hardy, etc.? If so, which ones and why? What about the biblical characters (Judith and Amos)?
8. Some critics see the Starkadders as stock, comic characters. Do you agree, or was there more to them than first meets the eye?
9. Flora’s mother “wished people to live beautiful lives and yet be ladies and gentlemen.” How does Gibbons bring together these two satirized ideas in the novel?
10. In the introduction to the Penguin Classics edition, Lynne Truss writes that a serious issue underpins Gibbons’ comic stylings. What do you think about Truss’ idea that:

“its underlying serious point about people invoking childhood misery—‘I saw something nasty in the woodshed!’—and using it as a means to exempt them from normal life, and have power over their families. . . . Stella once wrote that she had not only created the woodshed, but was ‘practically born in the place’. But fortunately, she added, ‘The door happened to be ajar.’”
11. Several “secrets” remain unanswered by the end of the novel, such as what Aunt Ada saw in the woodshed and what wrong was done to Robert Poste, Flora’s father. Were you disappointed that these questions were never answered?

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Biography

Source: <http://web.archive.org/web/20061020185421/http://www.catharton.com/stellagibbons/index.html>
(Stella Gibbons website authored by Reggie Oliver, the author's nephew)

Stella Gibbons was born in 1902, the daughter of Telford Gibbons, a widely respected doctor in the Camden and Kentish Town area of London. Despite many admirable qualities Dr Gibbons's drinking, womanising and appetite for emotional scenes - a characteristic of the Gibbons family - made Stella's childhood a difficult one. She went to the London Collegiate school where she was a contemporary of the poet and novelist Stevie Smith.

After leaving school, and knowing that her spendthrift father would give her nothing to live on, she attended a journalism course at University College, London from 1921 to 1923. In 1924 she obtained a job with a news agency, the British United Press from she was sacked in 1926 for a miscalculation in the exchange rate which caused a temporary shiver in the financial markets. The same year she was employed by the London Evening Standard where she flourished.

It was there that she was set the task of doing a synopsis of a novel called *The Golden Arrow* by Mary Webb which was being serialised in the newspaper. She thought the book absurd, and it was to inspire her parody of the rural novel in *Cold Comfort Farm* some years later. In 1930 she was sacked from the Standard and went to work as editorial assistant on the *Lady* magazine where she wrote her first novel *Cold Comfort Farm* on trains going to and from the offices of the *Lady* and in spare moments during working hours.

By this time she had already published an acclaimed volume of poetry *The Mountain Beast* (Virginia Woolf was one of her admirers) and met her future husband, the actor and opera singer Allan Bourne Webb whom she married in 1933. They had one daughter, Laura. The success of *Cold Comfort Farm* (which won the prestigious Prix Femina Vie Heureuse) prompted her to leave the *Lady* and devote herself full time to writing and a quiet domestic existence.

Her life thereafter was comparatively uneventful though not unmarked by tragedy. She was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1951, and in 1959 her husband Allan died. She published her last novel in 1970, but continued to write for her own pleasure, and bequeathed her unpublished writings, which included two more novels, to her two grandsons, Daniel and Benjamin. Up until two years before her death she would have "open house" on the first Saturday of every month at which you could meet a wide variety of people, literary and unliterary, who were drawn by her engaging personality, kindly and wise but not without the acerbic wit which characterised her famous first novel.