

Reader's Guide for The Home Place by Wright Morris

Biography:

Wright Morris was born January 6, 1910, at Central City, Nebraska, to Will and Grace (Osborne) Morris. He spent the first 9 years of his life in Central City and considered that town his boyhood community.

Six days after his birth his mother died. She is buried, along with his brother Fayette and later Wright Morris himself, in the Chapman, Nebraska, cemetery. Morris' father worked for the Union Pacific as a depot agent, and later he drifted from place to place and job to job.

Wright Morris died on April 25, 1998, at Mill Valley, California.

A more complete biography and a bibliography of his works appears elsewhere on this website. (www.wrightmorris.org)

Photo-text:

Wright Morris popularized the genre of the photo-text. The concept of photo-text is to supplement the words, but not necessarily illustrate the narrative. So, the reader will find that Wright Morris' photos in The Home Place will enhance understanding of time and place; they will not tell the story.

Nature of photos and writings:

Morris approached his writing and his photography with the same philosophical eye. Charles Baxter, in his introduction to Morris' Plains Song, wrote, "In one of his books of photographs, he wrote that it was his aim 'to salvage what I considered threatened, and to hold fast to what was vanishing.' In some sense, he was the novelist as collector, a preservationist, a person on whom very little would ever be lost"

Time, Place, and Character:

Wright Morris began The Home Place with the following quote from Henry James.

"To be at all critically, or as we have been fond of calling it, analytically, minded--over and beyond an inherent love of the general many-colored picture of things--is to be subject to the superstitions that objects and places, coherently grouped, disposed for human use and addressed to it, must have a sense of their own, a mystic meaning proper to themselves to give out: to give out, that is, to the participant at once so interested and so detached as to be moved to a report of the matter."

Morris spent much of his life traveling and collecting those ideas and images which moved him to report (and preserve) those matters.

Time--The Home Place was first published in 1948. It is a reflection of the difficulties and triumphs of the depression years.

Place--The setting is named Lone Tree, Nebraska. Lone Tree was the original name for Central City, Nebraska. However, the inspiration for the descriptions is Battle Creek, Nebraska, where Morris spent time with extended family during the summer.

Character and Narrative--The Home Place is the story of a young family from New York City trying to find a place to live after having lost their home. The father thinks to move his wife and children to the family farm in Nebraska. The characters are three generations of family. Each

generation has its own sets of knowledge, ideals, and understandings. The “collision” of these characters, separated by time and space, creates the story.

Questions:

1. How does the croquet event set the stage for the interaction among the characters?
2. How does the time span of one day create a dramatic tone in the story? What is that tone?
3. How are the family references timeless and universal? (pp. 37-47 among others)
4. How do the photographs affect the readers’ sympathy toward the characters?
5. How does the story reflect the “you can’t go home again” philosophy?
6. What of the vocabulary seems outdated? Are the words not recognizable or not generally used in the 21st Century?
7. How is Wright Morris’ sense of humor revealed through the characters and the action?
8. How does the “explanation of lives,” shown in the last two paragraphs of the novel, give the readers a sense of well-being for the characters?

Note: In 1949 Wright Morris published a sequel to The Home Place entitled The World in the Attic. Clyde Muncy continues his trip back home, this time to Junction. He shows his family the places he remembers from his youth.