Little Women Essay, Research Paper

Lost Horizon is the story of four people who, while being evacuated from a war-torn city in Asia, were kidnaped and taken to a mystical and mysterious valley in the Tibetan mountains named Shangri-La. Shangri-La was a uncommonly strange place. It was isolated, it wasn’t on any map and no one had heard of it before. Shangri-La was also unusually peaceful. Everyone was polite and moderate in everything they did so that there were no disputes amongst the inhabitants and thus, no need for police officers, courts, or jails. The aging process in Shangri-La was prolonged; most people lived well beyond one-hundred years. This was due to the lack of stress and anxiety in Shangri-La, and also due to a special herb that grew there.

The four people who were kidnapped, Hugh Conway, Charles Mallison, Roberta Brinklow, and Henry Barnard, were initially anxious to return to “civilization.” But after spending a few days in Shangri-La, they had no problem when they were told that they wouldn’t be able to leave for at least two months. The only one out of the four who was angered by this was Mallison. He wanted to return to England as soon as possible and be rejoined with his family. He didn’t believe anything that Chang, their guide and host at Shangri-La, said and was suspicious of him for not giving straight answers and being so serene. Conway, on the other hand, was the one who most enjoyed staying at Shangri-La, and was actually told by the ruler of the valley, the High Lama, that he was to inherit the position of High Lama. Conway and Mallison were excellent friends and thus, their differing opinions about Shangri-La created a dilemma for Conway. Not only did he have a dissension with Mallison but he was also dealing with an internal conflict.

Mallison wanted to leave Shangri-La, but he didn’t want to traverse the treacherous mountains by himself. Conway wouldn’t go with Mallison because he enjoyed staying in Shangri-La, and he didn’t want to deal with the pressures of modern society. Therefore, Mallison had to somehow prove to Conway that everything they had been told was false and that Shangri-La was a hoax. Mallison seduced Lo-Tsen, a woman who lived in Shangri-La, to leave with them and to tell Conway that everything Chang said was a lie. She also said that the people in the village think that Chang and the other lamas are abusive manipulators. Chang had told Conway that Lo-Tsen had wandered into the valley in 1884 and is about seventy years old. She looks like she’s in her twenties, Chang said, because of the slow aging process in Shangri-La. Mallison told Conway that the only reason he believed this and other stories is because he wanted to believe them. Mallison then asks Conway if he can prove anything that they’ve been told. When Conway realizes that he has seen no proof, he is confronted with the possibility that everything might have been a lie. In his disillusionment, Conway agrees to go with them and leaves.

The rest of the book is narrated by the unnamed neurologist who also narrated the prologue. We are told that Conway returned to Asia, presumably to re-find Shangri-La, but we are not told if he ever arrived there. We are told though, that Conway was brought to a mission hospital by a woman who looked unbelievably old. We are to assume that it was Lo-Tsen who brought Conway, as Chang had said, once the aging process is prolonged, a person who leaves Shangri-La will return to their natural age, and die within two weeks. This proves that the wonders of the Valley of Blue Moons were not lies. Thus, we are also to assume that Conway saw Lo-Tsen transform before his very eyes, and that he will do everything within his power to return to Shangri-La.

Hugh Conway is the central character in Lost Horizon. We mostly see the other characters through his eyes. Conway is a very relaxed and indifferent person. He has suffered great emotional trauma in World War I and has no family or friends back in England. Because of this he is passionless, and thus perfectly suited to remain in Shangri-La and become the High Lama. He is patient and a good observer. An example of this is the fact that Conway didn’t reveal his knowledge of Chinese in order to allow people to speak freely in front of him and learn more about the valley. An example of his passionlessness is his love for Lo- Tsen. He falls in love with her quietly and thus does not rush to “snatch her first,” nor does he even expose his ability to speak Chinese in order to communicate with Lo-Tsen.

Miss Brinklow was a missionary working in various places in the east. Thus, she is used to being in foreign places and adapts easily to Shangri-La. Her only passion is to show people the ways of Jesus Christ, so as soon as she arrives she begins to teach the natives in the village “the ways of the lord.” She has nothing to miss anywhere else and will therefore have no problem remaining in Shangri-La.

Henry Barnard had been running from the law, which is why he was in Baskul at the beginning of the novel. Shangri-La offers him protection and the ability to be unconcerned with the substantial things in modern life. Shangri-La also offers him an abundance of gold, which he thinks might one day may help him to make an economic and personal comeback. The potential for his financial resurrection is what will keep him in Shangri-La, but we are to assume that he will not leave.

Charles Mallison is a hasty twenty-three year old who has always looked up to Conway and followed what he said. He is very inexperienced and has to look to Conway for leadership and decision making. He is unsure, unstable and spontaneous and does not use rational judgement, as opposed to Conway who is patient, objective and takes the time he needs to make his decisions. The only decision that Mallison makes for himself is to leave Shangri-La with the porters and he can’t even carry that out without Conway. He has parents and a fiance waiting for him in England and thus is eager to get home. Unlike the other characters, Mallison is anxious and full of passion. He acts irrationally and eventually his behavior leads to his demise.

“As the figures moved down the valley they revealed themselves to be a party of a dozen or more, carrying with them a hooded chair.” (Hilton 56) This passage raises a question in my mind: Wouldn’t the people carrying the chair (commoners) say to themselves “why are we giving this man special treatment?” This is a flaw that occurs in many utopian novels. Here, Hilton makes it seem as if the natives of Shangri-La don’t mind giving others special treatment, and don’t mind living in mud-huts while the lamas and the “lamas-in-training (i.e. Chang)” live in a palace.

“‘Extraordinary,’ Chang said, when he heard that Conway had seen the High Lama again.” (Hilton 176) This is another quote in which we should see human nature (i.e. jealousy) acting upon a situation. In this case Chang is saying that it is odd that Conway has been called into see the High Lama again. Chang is saying that it is marvelous, but human nature dictates hate an envy. The most intriguing thing is the fact that a riot didn’t break out when Conway was named the next High Lama. I think that if I were Chang and I was studying for eighty years just to enter lama-hood, when all of a sudden some thirty-five year old British diplomat comes to Shangri-La for a week and a half and is declared the next High Lama, my reaction might be a bit hasty (i.e. I’d lynch Conway).

“He was only partly unhappy, but he was infinitely and rather sadly perplexed. He did not know whether he had been mad and was now sane, or had been sane and was now mad again.” (Hilton 216) This passage is useful in illustrating to us how confused Conway was when he agreed to leave Shangri-La. Firstly, Father Perrault had just told Conway that he would inherit the position of High Lama and then died in front of him. He was disoriented and lost when Mallison approached him. On top of that, Mallison crushed Conway by telling him that he and Lo-Tsen were in love. And then Mallison made Conway realize that he had seen no real proof to what he had been believing, and the possibility that it was all just nonsense arose. This disillusionment that Conway felt, not knowing what was reality and what was a lie, is what caused him to agree to leave with Mallison and Lo-Tsen.

Lost Horizon is a book that is well written and is interesting to read. It has an intriguing plot and a creative setting, but in terms of communist propaganda, it is very naive. There are to many flaws; to wide a margin for human error. It is more of a social commentary and a hope for the future, than it is propagandist. The novel does not provide any answers for the future, it just has an underlying hope that one day mankind will be at peace. The only answer it does provide is moderation, and that is to broad of an answer and not realistic.