The Wind In The Willows By Kenneth Grahame Essay, Research Paper

Kenneth Grahame?s The Wind in the Willows is a satirical reflection of the English social structure of the late nineteenth century, during a time of rapid industrialization throughout Europe. Also considered a children?s story, this novel conveys Grahame?s belief in the ability of one to live an unrestrained and leisurely life, free of the obligations of the working class, and entitled to this life through high social status and wealth. The River Bank characters, especially Toad, represent those who live this idle life of the upper class. In contrast, the stoats and weasels of the Wild Wood resemble the proletariat, and an animosity between these two classes existed. The lower classes of the time were subject to poor standards of living, as well as exploitation by the factory owners and businessmen. They developed a resentment and hostile attitude towards the upper classes. In this book, Toad most prominently exemplifies Grahame?s ideal life of leisure and freedom and subsequently has his house taken over by the rebellious working class Wild-Wooders. More importantly though, Toad exhibits many qualities, ?that make him, for most readers, the most memorable figure in this book?. Yet many of these characteristics displayed by the aristocratic Toad seem to undermine the author?s attempted, ?legitimizing of extreme disparities of wealth and social position? (Keefer).

Toad is shown to be a very rich and prominent figure in the River Bank society. He is well known in his community, and in the community of the Wild Wood, and is a dear companion to Mole, Rat, and Badger, the other three main characters. Toad displays many admirable qualities that make his figure a very memorable one. Rat describes him to Mole as being, ?always good-tempered, always glad to see you, always sorry when you go? He is indeed the best of animals. So simple, so good-natured, and so affectionate? (13). Toad is also a good friend, is a compassionate animal, and he demonstrates all of these qualities, and others, at numerous points in the story. For example, he invites Mole and Rat to come with him on his adventure (16). However, it seems that the author has made Toad?s ?negative? qualities more definitive and more memorable than his aforementioned ?positive? qualities.

Toad is a very coercive and extravagant individual, he is presumptuous and arrogant, and according to Rat again, ?perhaps he?s not very clever ? we can?t all be geniuses; and it may be that he is both boastful and conceited? (13). It is these types of qualities that seem to define the character of Toad as more memorable than the others are, and outline the typical image of those people from the upper class. His self-centeredness is blatantly displayed in the songs Toad sings to himself while returning home (117 and 121). His ignorant and judgmental attitudes are recurring. To the lady kindly giving him a ride, after she discovers his lies, he shouts, ?You common, low, fat barge-woman! Don?t you dare talk to your betters like that!? (112). He also thinks very lowly of the washerwoman in prison, who ironically saves his life (84-5). He assumes a great many things and, perhaps innocently and unknowingly, insults people whose opinions differ from his own, as is the case in speaking with Rat on page 16:

?Now, you dear good old Ratty,? said Toad imploringly, ?don?t begin to talking in that stiff and sniffy sort of way, because you know you?ve got to come. I can?t possibly manage without you, so please consider it settled and don?t argue ? it?s the one thing I can?t stand. You surely don?t mean to stick to your dull fusty old river all your life, and just live in a hole in a bank, and boat? I want to show you the world! I?m going to make an animal out of you, my boy!?

These characteristics of Toad stand out to make him the most memorable because there is some element of comic relief present while Toad remains oblivious to it himself, not attempting to be funny, but often being quite serious. These are the types of qualities, however, that seem to be at odds with the movement of Grahame?s allegory.

Grahame attempts to legitimize the extreme disparities of wealth and social position, however, he provides the reader with a main character that seems to contradict or counteract this attempt. Toad?s demeanor highlights a negative image of the upper class, leisure-loving citizens and seems to justify the resentment that the lower, working class holds for them. For example, first he deceives Badger when he promises, ?never to touch a motor car again?? in order to be set free from his lecture (63). Toad then tricks Rat into believing he is ill so that he might escape from his guard (65). Later on in the book we hear Toad apologize to his friend Rat for disregarding his advice and vowing that, ?henceforth, believe me, I will be humble and submissive, and will take no action without your kind advice and full approval!? (129). Very shortly thereafter, Toad has reverted to, ?I?m not going to be ordered about by you fellows! It?s my house we?re talking about, and I know exactly what to do, and I?ll tell you? (131). Toad?s deceitful nature shown here and the way he takes advantage or tries to manipulate one of his friends for his own betterment, as well as the other aspects that show Toad in a negative light, is not consistent with Grahame?s allegory. Although in this novel and the context of the River Bankers, Toad?s actions are harmless and comical, they are representative of the upper class, and a poor representative in that respect if the author is attempting to validate the ideas of wealth and status.

?Why should he have so much money?? is the basic question surrounding the issue of Toad?s social legitimacy in The Wind in the Willows (Keefer, 10/25/99). Toad, no doubt, is a very memorable figure because of the things that make up his character. However, when Grahame presents these qualities to the reader, it is inconsistent with his trying to justify the extreme separation and inequality of classes. The stoats and weasels resent Toad, and what he signifies, and take Toad Hall as an act of defiance or rebellion. However, in the end, it is the upper class that regains control of the house, and subdues the unruly society.