

Readers' Guide

Merton of the Movies

Harry Leon Wilson

Timeline

This outline of notable events will help you put *Merton of the Movies* in context.

- 1867 Harry Leon Wilson is born in Oregon, Illinois.
- 1891 Thomas Edison creates the kinetoscope, a crude camera that photographed motion.
- 1892 Wilson begins his writing career with the humor magazine *Puck*.
- 1893 The first film production studio, Black Maria, is built in West Orange, New Jersey, on Edison's property.
- 1894 Edison's kinetoscope goes for sale on the commercial market.
- 1902 Wilson finds early success with the publication of the novel *The Spenders*.
- 1905 Opening of the first nickelodeon, a small storefront theater or dance hall where films are viewed.
- 1906 Australian Charles Tait produces the first feature-length film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang*.
- 1908 The Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), otherwise known as "Edison Trust," is formed with nine companies creating the first giant commercial movie studio.
- 1912 Wilson moves to Carmel, California.
- 1915 Wilson publishes *Ruggles of Red Gap*, his most enduring success.
- 1917 An antitrust case against the MPPC is finally settled and the monopolistic company is ordered to disband.
- 1919 *Merton of the Movies* first appears in print in the *Saturday Evening Post*.
- 1923 *Merton of the Movies* — the film—debuts starring Edward Everett Horton.
- 1927 *The Jazz Singer* debuts as the first talking motion picture.

- 1935 A remake of *Merton of the Movies* debuts starring Charles Laughton.
- 1939 Wilson dies of a brain hemorrhage in Carmel, California.
- 1947 Another remake of *Merton of the Movies* debuts starring Red Skelton and Lucille Ball.

Questions to Discuss

1. On his first trip to the studio lot, Merton naively comments on the “democracy of the cafeteria” (p. 78). How do Hollywood stereotypes complicate Merton’s democratic idea of what it takes to succeed in the business? How is Merton’s perception of democracy in Hollywood different from his perception of democracy in Simsbury?
2. How is the structure of the novel cinematic? To what extent is the plot like that of a Buckeye comedy?
3. Merton goes to Hollywood under the stage name of Clifford Armytage. In what way does the stage name reinforce the theme of appearance versus reality in the novel?
4. How does Merton’s obsession with the “worthwhile picture” express the satiric theme of the novel? Does this struggle coincide with the tensions between high and low art?
5. How successful is Merton at maintaining his innocence amidst the corruption of Hollywood? What role does the Montague girl play in guarding his innocence?
6. Throughout the novel Merton overhears an ongoing conversation between two Hollywood big shots regarding the film production of *Robinson Crusoe*. What does the progression from classic literary adventure to sensationalized romance say about the Hollywood agenda?
7. The Montague girl describes Merton as “a book where you can’t guess what’s coming in the next chapter so you keep on reading” (p. 326). How does this reflect on the Montague girl’s apparent cynicism?
8. What about Merton makes him a “tragic comedian”? Why does he embrace this characterization at the end of the novel?
9. Merton claims to possess an “uncanny gift for introspection” in the final pages of the novel. Do you think this is an accurate statement? Why or why not?
10. How does Merton’s interview in *Photo Land* compare to his fantasy interview earlier in Chapter II? How has Merton changed since his arrival in Hollywood?
11. Merton is the hero of the novel, but he is also the joke. How does this characterization comment on the profession of acting?

Suggested Reading

Brinig, Myron. *The Flutter of an Eyelid*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc, 1933.

Burroughs, Edgar Rice. *The Girl from Hollywood*. New York: Ace Books, 1950.

Hughes, Rupert. *Souls for Sale*. New York: Garland, 1949.

Schulberg, Budd. *What Makes Sammy Run?* New York: Bantam Books, 1968.

Van Vechten, Carl. *Spider Boy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928.

West, Nathanael. *Miss Lonelyhearts, and The Day of the Locust*. Norfolk, CN: J. Laughlin, 1962.

Wilson, Harry Leon. *Ruggles of Red Gap*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1915.

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