

Rediscovering the Swiss Alps with Heidi – A Book Review

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Novel : *Heidi*

Novelist : Johanna Spyri

Visiting every family through the television, Heidi became a household name even in Indian houses. Watching the innocence of a five-year-old orphan, who wins the heart of her cold grandfather and later, most of the characters of the novel, Heidi turns out to be a blessing in disguise. The title is deliberate in revealing the title character as the protagonist of this novel that is set in the lush ever green Alm mountain of Switzerland.

The tale of Heidi begins as Heidi, a five-year-old girl(who looks like three, because of her small stature) and her aunt rush to the house of the Alm Uncle, who is also known as her grandfather. He is, in fact, her paternal grandfather. Her parents die soon after her birth, due to some unfortunate circumstances and she is taken into custody by her maternal grandmother and aunt. As her grandmother dies, her aunt wants to move to Frankfurt for better prospects and leave Heidi back with Alm Uncle. That provides enough reason for the rush. On reaching the house of the Alm Uncle, Heidi is left off with a hasty wave.

Heidi gets the attention of her grandfather and wins his love, compassion, and care from their very first conversation. The scene of setting her bed and him watching her at night to make sure she is sound asleep win the heart of every reader. Their life crowds with Peter, an eight-year-old shepherd boy, his mother Brigitta, and his grandmother. As the mountain is green with all colours of flowering plants and shrubs, goats also share this lush spot as their habitat. Heidi's Grandfather owns two goats

namely, the little Swan and the little Bear. They become Heidi's favourite companions along with Peter. The love that these animal show towards her are without expectation and they seem to cherish her company above everything else. The companionship of these children and their pets is matchlessly described kindling in the reader the desire to yearn for the same.

On one hand, three years pass by as Heidi grows into a healthy yet innocent child who loves nature and wild life. The description of her stature now reveals her perfect health and it is often reflected with bright colours with picturesque narrative vividly. The author mears this novel with colourful paints in the imagination of the readers, who are used to viewing things at ease without giving much thought to details especially through imagination. On the other hand, she is kept unaware of the eye-opening world of education and civilization. Her smooth and steady sail comes to a crash when her aunt from Frankfurt returns to take her with her. Despising the Alm Uncle and his (ir)responsibility towards the child, she literally plucks Heidi from her comfort zone.

After a long tedious journey, they reach Frankfurt and Heidi is left in Sesemann's house under the supervision of Fraulein Rottenmeier. Being repelled by the very sight of Heidi, she despises and scorns her till the end of the story. Luckily, she is befriended by Clara, the twelve-year-old invalid of the household and other servants. Fighting suppression, hatred directed at her, and homesickness as days pass off into unending successive months, Heidi loses her control at one point. The transition that happens in her physique deliberately reveals her repressed emotions and longings. Sleep walking, which she inherits from her mother, overtakes her and Herr Sesemann, as per the advice of the Doctor, sends her back to her grandfather.

Her return surprises the people at Dorfli and gives an unexpected point of view about the grandfather. As Heidi brings comfort and peace to Peter's grandmother and her own grandmother, she also unites the lonely grandfather with the crowded society of Dorfli. Life soon changes for the better for all of them around Alm while the Sesemann family misses Heidi the most. Clara's failing health restricts her movements and destroys her desire to climb the Alm Mountain to meet Heidi. To distract his restless heart in losing his only child, the Doctor agrees to visit Heidi. His short trip rejuvenates him and

he encourages the Sesemann household to undertake a journey themselves to witness the miracle present in the air of the mountain. On their visit, Clara and her grandmother are surprised to find her cured of her illness and walk on her legs. This surprise enchants Clara's father. In due respect to return Heidi and her grandfather's favour, the Doctor and Herr Sesemann promise the Alm Uncle to take care of her Heidi all her life.

Despite being the symbol of innocence and peace in her own story, she faces unrest and existential or rather atheistic feelings while she resides at Clara's house. If not for the intervention of Clara's grandmother, Heidi would have lost herself and the peace that was destined and bestowed for her from God. Heidi's love for the parable of the Prodigal Son is thematically touching and moving. In fact, it brings her grandfather, Peter's grandmother, and the depressed Doctor back to her. The child has served as God's messenger in their lives and she thanks God for her bitter life at Frankfurt, without which she would have never found Him and his solace. It is here the narrative sounds way mature for a book belonging to the shelf of children's literature.

As William Blake marvels at the tiger and does not forget the lamb asks, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee (Tiger)?", Heidi's innocence stands out from the wickedness of the world. The little heart of Peter was corrupted by jealousy and Clara seemed to long for everything that Heidi had despite having the best version of everything in life. Heidi, on the contrary, learnt to be contented with whatever she had and makes supplication for others. The need to cling onto God adds beauty and meaning to life. Faith heals many mental ailments that science tries hard to explain and cure. Having said so much, I invite you to read the novel for yourself and explore the therapeutic nature of nature reflected in the narrative. The hymn that she reads out for Peter's grandmother resonates hope not only to that old lady, but also to every listening reader. It will not be an exaggeration to close this wonderful novel's review with those lines from her favourite hymn,

**The morning breaks,
And warm and bright
The earth lies still
In the golden light--
For Dawn has scattered the clouds of night.**

God's handiwork
Is seen around,
Things great and small
To His praise abound--
Where are the signs of His love not found?

All things must pass,
But God shall still
With steadfast power
His will fulfil--
Sure and unshaken is His will.

His saving grace
Will never fail,
Though grief and fear
The heart assail--
O'er life's wild seas He will prevail.

Joy shall be ours
In that garden blest,
Where after storm
We find our rest--
I wait in peace--God's time is best.
