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# Appeasement and *Black Bethlehem*

Submitted by: Andrew Poggioli

Both during and after WWII the issue of appeasement was a topic on many peoples' minds as they tried to understand how such a war had come about. In Britain particularly appeasement was a contentious topic since it was Britain's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain who in 1938 appeased Hitler by giving in to his demand to annex the Sudetenland. As noted in Robert Beck's "Munich's Lessons Reconsidered" (1989), critics of Chamberlain's diplomacy before and during the war included "chauvinistic anti-German realists...social patriots of the Labour Party...and anti- Nazi idealists ranging from advocates of collective security to Socialists and Communists," (Beck 163). So the concern with appeasement spanned the British political spectrum and society.

Among the many literary works that deal with the subject is Lettice Cooper's *Black Bethlehem* (1947), which can be interpreted as an anti-appeasement work meant to both criticize and analyze that famous appeasement that led to the Second World War. Cooper illustrates the terrible consequences of this appeasement in her book through the protagonist Lucy Meadows' descriptions of London life during the Blitz and through Marta Kral's story. Later developments in the romantic relationships of these characters connect appeasement with such traits as blind optimism and naiveté. While Cooper shares the basic concepts of the anti-appeasement stance with her fellow citizens, she actually goes

deeper into the issue in *Black Bethlehem* by presenting a more realistic and complex portrait of appeasers and appeasement that was not fully accepted by many historians until much later than 1947. Lucy Meadows' experience at the end of *Black Bethlehem* makes a statement about the possibilities of appeasement, optimism, and naiveté working in the real world. Lastly, along with discussing appeasement Cooper presents a solution in the form of the character Ann.

*Black Bethlehem* wastes no time in illustrating the horrible consequences of appeasement. The book goes right into the horrors of wartime London during the Blitz as the state of the city is explained by Meadows in her diary. Meadows' descriptions of nightly air raids, bombings, fires, and the general destruction create an atmosphere of fear and tension. The story of her guest Marta Kral, a refugee from Czechoslovakia, provides an even more direct condemnation of appeasement because she actually lives in Czechoslovakia when the Nazis invade. As a German woman married to a Czech doctor, Kral loses her husband and witnesses the conquest of her adopted country by Nazi Germany. With German soldiers everywhere and friends disappearing, Kral explains that she and her husband "never felt safe for a minute," (Cooper 154). The whole experience is summed up as "all the agony of living under German occupation, of seeing everything that they were

building up destroyed” (Cooper 154-55). Her ensuing journey to England ends with her safe arrival but also the death of her young son Karel. As Kral relates this story to Meadows on her arrival in London, the horrors of WWII are laid bare. The rapid collapse of Kral’s old life combines with the utter devastation of the London Blitz to produce a vivid and effective portrait of the Second World War on the Continent and in England. Since that war was made possible by Chamberlain’s appeasement, these experiences of Kral and Meadows constitute Cooper’s strongest and most moving indictment of appeasement in *Black Bethlehem*.

People who followed the anti-appeasement philosophy, especially historians, also tended to form a general description of who the appeasers were and what their concessions meant. The basic assertion was that appeasement was unintelligent and naïve, and therefore appeasers like Chamberlain were the same. Winston Churchill’s *The Gathering Storm* (1948) makes this point right from the beginning by stating that the “Theme of the Volume” is “How the English-speaking peoples through their unwisdom, carelessness, and good nature allowed the wicked to rearm,” (Churchill 1). Churchill’s use of words like unwisdom and carelessness reveal how many thought appeasement an unintelligent and irresponsible strategy. The fact that he also references English-speakers’ good nature as another of the reasons shows how naïveté was also cited as one of the problems. Churchill also does not limit his critique to just the policy itself. Like many others, he extends the negative view when he says that for him, Chamberlain and his supporters represented the “quintessence of defeatism” and “peace at any price” (Churchill 301). A similar point is made in Martin Gilbert’s and Richard Gott’s book *The Appeasers* (1963) when Chamberlain is satisfied with Hitler’s assurance that he will not start a

war because Hitler “hated the thought of little babies being killed by gas bombs,” (Gilbert and Gott 179). Here one can see how stupidity was easily associated with appeasers along with irresponsibility and naïveté.

Although Lucy Meadows does not directly appease anyone in *Black Bethlehem*, she can be likened to Chamberlain because she begins the story with a noticeable innocence and trusting nature that is later changed when she is betrayed by her boyfriend Piers and Kral. From the beginning of the book Meadows reveals she had a happy childhood and a successful and interesting career as a costume designer before the onset of war. Meadows actually fears that she may develop hatred for the Germans and explains about Kral “I’m glad that she is German. If I can show her real friendship, then everything that I have believed means something, and is not quite dead!” (Cooper 147). What Meadows means by “everything that I have believed” is her overly optimistic trust in human nature and the inherent goodness of people. Many of the early critics of Chamberlain would assign him these same qualities and deride them as weaknesses and faults that produced an unrealistic and naive foreign policy. Cooper’s book seems to go in the same direction when Meadows discovers that Kral and Piers are having an affair. This betrayal by her lover and the woman she helped so much seems to shatter her old beliefs and leave Meadows hopeless. This state is best seen when she declares “I felt as though I was raw all over and didn’t want to be touched. Also I felt apathetic as though nothing was worth taking trouble about. Some living current inside me that used to make me feel always ready to go on to the next thing had dried up,” (Cooper 240).

But what is important about this state is that it is temporary. Meadows regains a modified sense of hope and trust, as seen when she forgives Piers and expresses real remorse at

having hated Kral. This suggests that her former beliefs were not mere foolishness and naiveté but instead constituted a moral philosophy that was only a little unsuited to reality. It only has to be changed to adapt to wartime. All of the tragedies of the war and her relationships with Piers and Kral assault Meadows' morality and outlook. In the end she learns that her former defense, an almost blind trust in civilization and human decency, was founded on nothing real. It was merely her comfortable life, up till the war, that created this false sense of security. She concludes that this type of certainty "Is one of the many securities that have vanished this winter. But I began to think they never were really there," (Cooper 271). Her change of lamps symbolizes this improvement, because the starry ornamental lamp representing her old fantasy life is replaced by a plainer, more functional one. Cooper thus uses Meadows' transformation to argue that appeasement is not necessarily something to be totally discounted. It is actually an enlightened and humanistic approach that just has to be fitted to present conditions.

The lessons Meadows learns can be applied to Chamberlain's situation because many revisionists saw Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler as "A triumph for all that was best and most enlightened in British life," (Taylor 184). Indeed, immediately after the Munich Agreement Chamberlain came home to cheering British crowds, making the infamous and at that moment believable statement "I believe it is peace for our time," (Taylor 186). For many people at the time it seemed as if an unnecessary war had been averted. In fact appeasement as a policy came from "The minds of Englishmen who believed that World War I need never have come," (Eubank 89). The Munich Agreement was no doubt a comfort to many Europeans who still remembered the nightmare of that First World War. Chamberlain's appeasement and

the initial celebration of it can be likened to Meadows' poor judgment of Piers, Kral and herself. What appears to be a great and appropriate outlook on life for her collapses when put to the test. In Meadows' case that test is the combination of the war and betrayal. Similarly, Chamberlain's seemingly appropriate and successful policy of appeasement collapsed when Hitler put it to the test by invading the rest of Czechoslovakia and then Poland. But although it failed, the principles of appeasement do not have to be considered failures too. Just as Meadows does not completely throw out her personal philosophy about human nature, so too do many revisionist historians avoid condemning every aspect of Chamberlain's policy. Many acknowledge how it failed for the particular situation, but they cannot deny that it was a noble, logical, and nonviolent solution based on negotiation instead of force.

The character Ann in *Black Bethlehem* represents Cooper's solution to the appeasement problem. This is because Ann, Meadows' friend, combines a strong and determined opposition to war with an equally intense concern for her fellow citizens suffering under the Blitz. She is an ideal combination of strength and goodwill. In these ways Ann manages to have Meadows' trusting, optimistic nature without taking it to an extreme or basing it on a too sheltered and comfortable life. In fact Meadows herself says that Ann seems "Fundamentally used to the idea of war," (Cooper 191). Her previous experience as a nurse in Spain during the Spanish Civil War makes it clear she comes from a far less idyllic background than Meadows. Further evidence of Ann's good nature and humanitarianism includes her constant housing and feeding of bombed out friends in her small apartment. All of this is then combined with the kind of resolution and activism needed to confront a man like Hitler, as revealed when Lucy says

“Ann is a firm believer in protests and joint action... ready to march up to any Bastille, and confident that a lot of people will go with her,” (Cooper 196). In creating Ann, Cooper offers an ideal character who, if put in Chamberlain’s place, might be expected to confront the dictator while still retaining the enlightened values that Chamberlain held.

In all of these ways Lettice Cooper’s *Black Bethlehem* is an anti-appeasement book that explores the motivations, consequences, and overall nature of appeasement and appeasers with fairness and insight. This is significant because in 1947, when *Black Bethlehem* was published, most historians took a more derogatory attitude toward Chamberlain and appeasement. The experiences of Lucy Meadows provide commentary on how appeasement is connected to enlightened morals that many claim Chamberlain held and acted on when he conceded to Hitler’s demands for the Sudetenland. Lastly, Ann represents the perfect mixing of altruism and tenacity that provides an answer to the question of appeasement and its role in world affairs.

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