Bedford Square Short Guide

Bedford Square by Anne Perry

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Contents

Characters

Thomas Pitt is the commander of the Bow Street Station. As such, he is considered middle class, along with bank tellers, teachers, senior clerks, reporters, minor civil servants, and some shopkeepers. His salary range would have been between Â£150 and Â£200 annually, perhaps a little more since he commands a station. As Mitchell writes in Daily Life in Victorian England, at this salary, he could afford a house in a cheaper subdivision of London, commute by rail to his job, spend a small amount of money on the necessary clothes for his profession, and have one servant, a young maid-of-all-work.

His wife would do her own dressmaking and remake hand-me-down clothing for the children. If the family were small, the children would receive a board school education, similar to a public school education in the United States. Pitt has all of these things. He also has an inquiring mind, able to deduce hidden meanings, apply reasoning, and find a solution to a problem. He does this, keeping in mind his place on the social ladder, and enlisting whatever help is needed to complete his investigation. He desires to find the truth, not simply to accept what appears to be a solution.

Charlotte Pitt, a member of a family from the upper middle class, has married for love. She is bright, educated, and has a strong sense of propriety which she applies to all situations maintaining the appearance of subservience to her husband. Within her home, she sees nothing wrong with making her own decisions and looking for ways to aid her husband. She expects him to tell her everything about his investigation and to take her comments seriously.

Perry has placed Charlotte well within the parameters of an 1891 housewife with a professional husband. She shares the housework, cares for the children, and wears the hand-me-down dresses her sister gives her.

When she thinks that Pitt is not telling her everything about the investigation, she arranges to have Tellman report to her or to Gracie so they can share in the information.

Tellman and Gracie are very much working-class people. Tellman considers that he has bettered himself by becoming a police sergeant. His prejudices against the upper classes are particularly strong when he encounters upper middle-class professional people, who, in his opinion, have an unfair advantage over lower middle-class people.

He is resentful toward General Balantyne because Balantyne purchased his commission in the army. Tellman gives no credit to Balantyne's abilities or character until he begins to investigate him and finds he is liked and respected by the men who served with and under him. Gracie is a workingclass young woman, taught to read and write by Charlotte. Most children of working-class parents are uneducated because they go to work while they are young to help support the family. Gracie recognizes her opportunity to better herself and is proud of her limited education, the roof over her head

and a mistress who treats her with respect. She tells Tellman that she has to have a perfect memory since she "only just learned to write since I come 'ere."

Tellman is attracted to Gracie, against his better judgment, since "they disagree about almost everything." He gives her information about the case to pass on to Pitt, even when he feels uncomfortable doing it. Gradually, as he begins to see his prejudices for what they are, his views come closer to those of Gracie.

A member of the lower ranks of the aristocracy, Charlotte's Great Aunt Vespasia is educated, interested in the world around her, and acutely aware of the protocol necessary to approach the people who can be of help with the investigation. She refuses to abandon her instinct for determining character, especially about the people she is close to. When her goddaughter's husband, Leo Cadell, is accused of being the blackmailer after an apparent suicide, she is willing to aid Theodosia in trying to clear Leo's name.

General Brandon Balantyne and Lady Balantyne; Assistant Police Commissioner John Cornwallis; Parthenope and Sigmund Tannifer; politician Sir Guy Stanley; Theodosia and Leo Cadell; and Mr. Justice Dunraithe White, a judge, make up the group who are being blackmailed. Each understands the consequences of even a whisper of impropriety. Each understands what will happen to his family if he is involved in any sort of scandal. The reasons for this fear are explained by the Tranby Croft affair, in which an accusation of cheating at cards ruined one man and involved the Prince of Wales.

Queen Victoria was said to be beside herself with anger at the Prince. Pitt is interested because of "its reflection on the fragility of reputation, and how easily a man, any man, could be ruined by a suggestion, let alone a fact." Sir Guy Stanley's chances for a ministerial position are destroyed by suggestions of impropriety with the wife of a political radical who appears to be using inside information to further his career.

Social Concerns

Set in an era when individual honor and a person's good name were supremely important, Bedford Square is a study in consequences of a threat to that personal honor.

In this world, even a suspicion of wrongdoing could ruin a man, bringing down even the most powerful. The historical backdrop for the novel is the Tranby Croft gambling scandal, in which the Prince of Wales was required to testify in court, as if he were a commoner and not heir to the throne. The English class system was changing as the Victorian Age came to an end. The powerful upper class was losing its grip on the economic system and the social climate of the nation. The commoners were rising, becoming better educated and economically stronger.

Queen Victoria's reign began in 1837, with the British divided along class lines.

Twenty years of war with Napoleon's France had increased the wealth of the aristocracy and the woes of the common man. England was also experiencing the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Where once the common people lived on the land, farmed, and rarely visited a city, now the cities were growing, filled with people working in factories for long hours at low pay.

Slums developed when housing of poor quality was hastily constructed to accommodate the masses pouring in from the countryside. The aristocracy felt no responsibility for the condition of the poor. While the poor may not have been poorer or worse off than they had been before, the fact that they were now massed together, segregated in the city slums, changed the face of poverty from an individual concern to a group condition.

The old middle class, the bankers and established merchants, were rising to be a part of the "quality," the aristocratic class.

They bought seats in Parliament and purchased military commissions. They married into families of the lower echelons of the aristocracy. A new middle class emerged, made up of commoners who, after managing to purchase small estates, built factories on their land and gained wealth but not social position. They had no more concern for their workers than did the upper classes.

Neither they nor their workers had a voice in the government until passage of the sec ond Reform Bill in 1867, which gave the middle class and some members of the working class the vote. "The electorate doubled" giving "most middle class and the more prosperous among the working classes" the vote, wrote Sally Mitchell in Daily Life in Victorian England.

Describing the class system in place at the time, Mitchell says that the divisions in the system did not depend so much on the amount of money people had, as on their inherited place in the class hierarchy. "When the railroads designated different cars for

'first class,' 'second class,' and 'third class,' passengers knew where they were expected to ride. . . . Class was revealed in manners, speech, clothing, education, and values. . . .

Each class had its own standards," continues Mitchell. Class dictated behavioral patterns. Legally, there were two classes, the aristocracy, who inherited titles and land, and the commoners. In reality, there were three classes, with the commoners divided by the kind of work they did. The working class worked with their hands, doing the dirty, manual labor jobs. The middle class included those people not of the aristocracy.

The middle class grew during the Victorian period, from about fifteen percent of the population at the beginning of Victoria's reign to about twenty-five percent at the end. Money was not the deciding factor— the middle class included clerks and industrialists —but rather how that money was acquired. The victims of the blackmail scheme in Bedford Square belong to the upper middle class because of their occupations, a military officer, a banker, a diplomat, a judge, an assistant police commissioner, and a politician hoping for an appointment to a government ministry. The upper middle class shared a sense of pride in personal honor, hard work, education, individual responsibility, and family.

By the last years of her reign, when Bedford Square takes place, Queen Victoria had established her moral attitudes firmly in the mores of British society. The place of the woman was subordinate to her husband. Margaret Homans, writing in Victorian Studies, says that Queen Victoria: helped her nation to become powerful and prosperous by helping it to see itself as a middle-class nation, just as she smoothed the transition to a wholly symbolic monarchy that would have taken place with or without her in the nineteenth century. . . .

Her subjects wished to limit their sovereign's political powers, but not to eliminate the monarchy altogether or to find themselves, through their queen's weakness, autocratically ruled by someone else in her place.

England had qualms about having a female ruler. Consciously or unconsciously, she addressed those fears by her marriage to Albert. She then had to balance her image as his subservient wife with an image as a woman able to rule in a symbolic role as head of government, thus stabilizing "her image as queen of a middle-class nation," Homans continues.

Perry models these ideas in Charlotte's domesticity: her cooking the family's meals, caring for the children, supervising her servant, and running the household. By allowing Charlotte to take part in the investigations and by giving her higher social standing than her husband's, Perry parallels Queen Victoria, balancing subservience to her husband with her ability to make decisions. The backdrop of the gambling scandal that requires the Prince of Wales to testify in court underlines the "middle-class nation" status that Queen Victoria had so successfully established. The monarchy is no longer immune to the law. The world within the British Empire was in the process of great change.

Charlotte's marriage to Thomas Pitt, who is definitely below her on the social ladder, is an example of the established middle class being absorbed by the aristocracy. As Queen of England, Victoria was socially above Albert, though he was a prince. She managed to give her private family the trappings of any middle-class family— husband, the head of the household; children, nine of them; two family homes, purchased and renovated using tax dollars, albeit more elaborate than a typical family dwelling—while maintaining the position as the symbolic head of the government.

Pitt accepts Charlotte's ability to gather information through people socially not available to him, happy to use her family connections to help solve the mystery.

Charlotte and Gracie see nothing underhanded in their efforts to get information from Tellman, information Pitt might be reluctant to share with them. Uneducated but bright, Gracie knows exactly how to gain Tellman's confidence and the results of his investigations. She passes the information on to Pitt, as Tellman knows she will, but he is left feeling uncomfortable about the process. He feels somewhat out of control, having lost the advantage of being a man. He trusts Gracie, knowing she is honest and dependable. He wonders, privately, how she has managed to gain the upper hand.

Techniques

Perry's novels are filled with descriptions of nineteenth-century life, from the food and dress to the social conventions observed by the various segments of the population. The kitchen in a middle-class home is the center of activity. Cookstoves are in use, but refrigeration has not been invented. Food is kept in a larder off the kitchen and spoils rapidly, so there are few leftovers kept for long. Dishes, such as "bubble and squeak," a concoction made of onions and cabbage mixed with mashed potatoes and heated in a skillet enhance the setting. In winter, the kitchen would have been the warmest place in the house, since the stove burned continually. Fireplaces heat the rest of the house in winter, probably burning coal, which produces black dust and soot. In summer the windows are open, letting in the dust from the streets.

Having a maid-of-all-work is practical, since keeping the house clean, the laundry done, and the family fed is a huge job without the labor-saving devices modern homemakers are used to.

The pronunciation of words in conversations between Gracie and Charlotte emphasizes the differences in class. Gracie's accent, dropping the first and last letters on words such as "he," pronounced by Gracie as "'e," "ter" for "to," "goin"' for "going" and so on, in addition to her straightforward expression of her thoughts when talking to Tellman, denotes the working class.

Charlotte's conversation is more tactful and considered, and her pronunciation is indicative of her education and background.

Perry denotes the social position of the blackmailer when she says that the letters use "complex words" and are "grammatically correct."

Pitt uses deductive reasoning to solve the mystery. There is no technology available to lift fingerprints, track telephone calls, or do any sort of surveillance other than physically watching a suspect. Military records are available only at the correct office, with no way to copy them except by hand.

Because of the lack of technology, the world moved at a much slower pace in 1891 than it does today. Tannifer and his wife had waited months for word from her brother who was in India and involved in putting down a rebellion in Manipur. Correspondence from India would take months to reach England.

Travel about town is by foot or horse and buggy, with occasional trips by train. Mail is delivered several times a day to facilitate communication that would later be easier by telephone. News travels more slowly than today; local news would be in a paper quickly, but national or international news would take days or weeks.

Themes

Men and women in positions of trust in Victorian London took honor and personal reputation seriously. Any hint of dishonesty or cowardice would ruin that person's reputation and threaten his/her professional and social status. These were people of privilege, members of the aristocracy. The commoner valued his reputation no less.

His word was his bond. Thomas Pitt and Charlotte understand the code of honor and all that it means to the blackmail victims. Sargent Tellman represents the prejudice against members of the upper middle class held by many of the working class.

The six men who are being blackmailed seem to have nothing in common except their upper middle-class status and membership in the Jessop Club for Gentlemen, one of several such clubs to which each man belongs. Each is threatened by an event from the past, distant enough to make it difficult or impossible to disprove. A hint of impropriety is all that is needed to destroy each man's reputation, and, with it, his and his family's lives. As the men involved discover, the blackmailer will strike without warning or provocation, and the press, represented by a reporter named Remus, is only too happy to assist. This reporter seems to have no honor or scruples.

Thomas Pitt must conduct his investigation while respecting the social mores in place—mores that refuse him access to some of the people with information he needs.

Even if he could talk with these people, he would not be able to ask his questions, as this would be against the code of honor and an insult to that person. Since Lady Vespasia Cumming-Gould is Charlotte's aunt, Charlotte is able to enlist her aid on behalf of Pitt's investigation. In turn, Vespasia asks help of her friend, Theloneus Quade, who has access to the gentlemen's clubs and the confidence of the members.

As the investigation unfolds, Pitt and Tellman are more and more puzzled by the seeming lack of any connection among the six victims. People's connections to one another are developed through shared experiences. These connections can be professional, school related, social, or financial.

Financial connections can be particularly powerful, whether in 1891 in Victorian England or today anywhere in the world. When Leo Cadell dies and his widow, Theodosia, and Lady Vespasia go through his investments in search of a link to the other blackmail victims through some sort of financial gain, they find instead evidence of his scrupulous honesty. His investments "demon strated the financial life of a man who made good provision for his family, but was extraordinarily careful, erring on the side of loss, never to make a penny from his professional advantage" in the diplomatic service. This fits the image his wife and Lady Vespasia have of him, rather than the picture the blackmailer wishes to present.

The search of Cadell's personal papers and letters highlights another facet of the code of honor in force in the late 1800s.

Vespasia finds it unpleasant to read correspondence intended as private, even though there is nothing in the letters that would cause embarrassment to either Cadell or his family. Personal privacy is valued; personal honor is important enough to ensure that private acts are as honorable as public ones.

Sargent Tellman's blanket prejudice against members of the upper classes is shaken as he discovers that the threats against these men are untrue. He begins to see the blackmail victims as individuals, taking the first step toward conquering his prejudice.

Adaptations

Bedford Square has been adapted to audiocassette, read by David McCallum.

The abridged version is on two cassettes, lasting three hours.

Key Questions

Nineteenth-century British subjects were well-educated in the social mores as they applied to each class of people. The lines between these groups were firmly drawn.

Crossing those lines made everyone acutely uncomfortable, at best, and subject to dismissal from job and society, at worst. A person protected his reputation since it was his proudest possession. Class was inherited, not earned, leading to prejudices of the working class against the upper middle class, whose privileges were sometimes seen as unearned and without merit.

1. Is there a class system in America today? If so, what criteria would place a person in a particular class?

2. Can a person in today's society move from class to class? How would one accomplish this?

3. Compare the Victorian class system to the class system in America today. Do you think the British influenced the American class system?

4. Compare the middle-class values in the Victorian Age to middle-class values today.

5. Find recipes in old cookbooks. How are they different from modern ones?

6. When were women in England first allowed to vote? When were American women given the vote?

7. What changes in the class structure came about because of the changes in voting laws?

8. Why did it take so many years for a women's movement to develop?

9. What are some of the concepts directly attributed to the Victorian Age that we still find in today's society?

10. How do the changes that have taken place over the past one hundred years impact your life? Have these changes made our society stronger or weaker?

Literary Precedents

Among other authors who write series mysteries is Jonnie Jacobs, whose heroines in her first two novels have become featured characters in separate series. Author Robert Crais focuses his series on the characters Elvis Cole and his partner, Joe Pike.

Crais has also created a series set in Los Angeles featuring Carol Starkey, a character first introduced in the "Elvis" series.

Discussing his series work in Publishers Weekly, Crais notes that "you always have two totally different audiences: the old people, who have read everything that has come before, and the new people, those for whom this particular title is their first exposure to the series. The story has to be framed in such a way that both audiences get it without insulting the intelligence of the old people or confusing the new people."

Related Titles

Bedford Square is the nineteenth book featuring Thomas and Charlotte Pitt in a series that spans more than twenty years since the first book, The Cater Street Hangman, was published in 1979. Included are Callander Square, Paragon Walk, Resurrection Row, Bluegate Fields, Rutland Place, Death in the Devil's Acre, Cardington Crescent, Silence in Hanover Close, Bethlehem Road, Highgate Rise, Belgrave Square, Farriers' Lane, The Hyde Park Headsman, Traitors Gate, Pentecost Alley, Ashworth Hall, and Brunswick Square. Published after Bedford Square, The Whitechapel Conspiracy continues the Pitts' adventures.

Perry is noted for her use of authentic Victorian settings, from the way the people live and dress, to their sense of class and honor.

Perry also writes a series starring William Monk, whose first appearance is in The Face of a Stranger, when he finds he has amnesia. Nurse Hester Latterly, who will become Hester Monk later in the series, is his helper in crime solving. Also featuring Monk and Nurse Hester are A Dangerous Mourning, Defend and Betray,A Sudden Frightful Death, The Sins of the Wolf, Cain His Brother, Weighed in the Balance, The Silent Cry, A Breach of Promise, and The Twisted Root. Slaves of Obsession appeared in 2000.

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