The Bride of Lammermoor Short Guide

The Bride of Lammermoor by Walter Scott

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Contents

Characters

In a more or less customary way for Scott, the characters in The Bride of Lammermoor fall into two groups: the Master of Ravenswood and his followers or friends, chiefly Caleb Balderstone and the Marquis of A.; and the Ashton family and its adherents, principally Frank Hayston of Bucklaw, and his toadying "friend" Captain Craigengelt. These two parties, led, in the reader's interest, by Lucy Ashton and Edgar, the Master of Ravenswood, are at odds through much of the work, with the striking exception of Lucy and Edgar themselves, who fall in love.

It must be recognized that neither character is exactly "blinded" by passion, like Romeo and Juliet. Edgar knows that Lucy has traits that might be unsuitable for his personality—he sees that his proud and lofty spirit may suffer from Lucy's weak will and tendency to accept outside influence (a quality that, with Lady Ashton's forceful urging, leads to Lucy's abandonment of Edgar and her later insanity); he loves her anyway, but not blindly. Further, Edgar is not a single-minded follower of the Stuarts, as his ancestors were. Noting the weaknesses and excesses of the rule of earlier members of this Scottish and then English royal family, Edgar says, "I see little reason that, as a man or a patriot, I should draw my sword for their descendants." The Master of Ravenswood is presented as a rational man of the eighteenth century. He is also presented as a sensible one in other ways, as when he calmly disarms the hotheaded Bucklaw and spares his life in a duel which Hayston had forced on him.

Lucy, on the other hand, understands that she has been taken by the qualities in Edgar that she lacks, such as determination, pride, courage, and resistance to outward influence. She is far less intelligent than Edgar, but her sweetness and gentle ways more than make up for her weaknesses in the Master's eyes. They are weaknesses, though, that lead to tragedy, in large part.

Her susceptibility to the forceful nature of her mother and the wild expostulations of the three "witches" (most notably Annie Winnie) help to bring on her madness near the end of the story. Never did Scott create a more pathetic and mournful figure than that of the desolate bride, the once happy girl who loses her mind and stabs her new husband to death.

As usual, critics make much of characterization when dealing with Scott's novels.

In this case, however, some scholars, like Christina Keith, find the psychology in The Bride of Lammermoor to be of a high level.

It is possible that the admirable degree of realistic behavior of the characters may have derived from the fact that the novel is based on a true story about the Stair family that Scott's mother had told him years before. (By an odd coincidence, the Scott display in Edinburgh is set up in Lady Stair's house, on the Royal Mile from the Castle to Holyrood Palace). While Sir Walter changed some of the details of the events to suit his literary ends, the basic structure of the sad narrative remains the same.

The criticism leveled at Caleb Balderstone—that he is a "flat" character—came from, most notably, E. M. Forster. Forster claims that Caleb is the concept of "I must conceal, even by subterfuge, the poverty of my master's house," and he adds that Balderstone lacks any evidence of any "existence outside it, no pleasures, none of the private lusts and aches that must complicate the most consistent of servitors." Forster assumes that Caleb has any life other than the service of the family to which he has been utterly devoted for all his life. The critic seems to be asking for a "rounded" character when neither the plot nor the knowledge one gathers about the old servant requires one. If all characters were developed in such a detailed manner, the novel would be a great deal longer and unsuitably ponderous.

Another aspect of characterization that invites attention in Scott's work is the lack of analysis of the personages who inhabit the pages of the Waverley novels. In this regard, the reader may wish to consider the introductory passage in which Sir William Ashton is revealed to the audience. After a brief review of the political situation in Britain, especially as it pertained to the Ravenswood family and its downfall, the author speaks of "the very man who had now become, by purchase, proprietor of Ravenswood, and the domains of which the heir to the house now stood dispossessed." Sir William has risen by virtue of his skill in politics, as "a skillful fisher in troubled waters, and his amassing a considerable fortune." Along with additional necessary material on the state of the nation at the time—that it is, among other things, rife with corruption—Scott compares Ashton with Macbeth in terms of their ambition and unscrupulous ways of achieving success. Then Lady Ashton and her ascendency over her husband are mentioned—with a comment that their relationship was such that her husband "regarded her with respectful awe rather than confiding attachment."

Immediately, the action begins, with the funeral of Edgar's father, who has essentially been ruined by Ashton's chicanery, and Edgar's bold promise of revenge. At this key juncture, near the opening of Chapter Three, the reader is shown the appearance and the nature of the Lord Keeper (Sir William's new title): His appearance was grave and even noble, well becoming one who held an high office in the state; and it was not, save after long and intimate conversation with him upon topics of pressing and personal interest, that a stranger could have discovered something vacillating and uncertain in his resolutions; an infirmity of purpose, arising from a cautious and timid disposition, which, as he was conscious of its internal influence on his mind, he was, from pride as well as policy, most anxious to conceal from others.

It is hard to imagine what more analysis would serve the author's purpose. The basic character conflicts are established: Edgar's bold rashness versus Ashton's overly cautious planning (even to the point of using his own daughter to help placate the irate young man); the wife who almost defines the word "hubris" versus both her husband and Ravenswood; and, the lesser characters (Bucklaw, Craigengelt, the "witches," Caleb) taking the sides that seem appropriate to them.

Perhaps the most meaningful aspect of the characterization in The Bride of Lammermoor, whether "rounded" or "flat," is that these personages are memorable; they remain in the mind long after one has finished reading the novel. Sympathy for the

doomed lovers finds its way into the mind of any attentive reader, largely because the characters in the story seem real.

Social Concerns

The Bride of Lammermoor is the most tragic of Sir Walter Scott's works, and one that clearly resembles the novels of the Gothic tradition. These novels achieved enormous popularity during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, presenting a combination of social elements from both the larger political scene and the more intimate family setting. In this particular work, these entangled but artfully developed threads reveal both the unsettled situation in Britain at the time (the early eighteenth century) and the potentially damaging effects of social disruptions in a family.

In terms of social context, class structure plays a significant role in this work, as it often does in Scott's writing. The fact that Sir William Ashton is, despite his political influence and prominence, of an inferior social rank to his one-time archenemy, the Master of Ravenswood, whose family Ashton has ruined, becomes of great importance as the plot advances. Both characterization and story line are promoted by the awareness on all parts of this social inequity: Sir William, already a cautious and timid man, realizes that he must be careful when dealing with the stern Edgar of Ravenswood and with his own prideful wife, Lady Ashton.

The same type of class consciousness is evident in Sir William's relationship with the Marquis of A., a member of the opposing political party. The Marquis is also a friend and kinsman of Edgar's, and belongs to a higher social class than Ashton, thus causing the circumspect statesman to be extremely wary in his relationship with the Marquis. Sir William and the Marquis represent the two main political parties in England, the Whigs and the Tories, and both are equally unscrupulous and devious in their machinations—all of which tend, one way or another, to lead to the tragic climax of the story.

On a smaller scale, the feud between the Ravenswood family and Ashton, which the latter wins by means that are legal but largely immoral, sets the stage for a plot conflict that puts the reader in mind of Romeo and Juliet—Edgar and Lucy Ashton certainly emerge as "star-crossed" lovers, primarily because of family hostilities and a sense of caste (Lady Ashton believes that Edgar, the offshoot of a now poor family, is unworthy of marriage to her daughter).

The Shakespearean overtones of the novel are heightened by the presence of three old women (referred to as "hags" much of the time) whose chief occupation is the preparation of dead bodies for burial, an activity in which they take an eerie delight. The three women are reminiscent of the three witches from Macbeth, and some readers believe that Sir Walter had the Bard much in mind when he wrote this novel.

Social consciousness also pervades the text, even in the person of the frequently comic character of Caleb Balderstone, the faithful (excessively so, one might say) retainer of the Ravenswoods, whose loyalty takes the form of extraordinary measures to preserve the "good name" of the presently near-indigent family, to which his devotion is unrelenting. Thus, the sense of social class is felt strongly, even by those whose

masters are ruined (the only possession remaining to the Ravenswoods is the half ruined castle/fortress of Wolf's Crag).

Scott, perhaps more than any other writer of his time, was keenly aware of the vital part that the powerful social structure had played in Britain during the time depicted in The Bride of Lammermoor. It is generally agreed that Sir Walter's own social sense contributed to his emphasis on this aspect of British society in the novel.

Techniques

It has been noted that The Bride of Lammermoor is the most tragic of Scott's novels. When thinking of tragedy as a genre, whether in the Shakespearian mode or the novelistic form, one tends to categorize the work as either a tragedy of fate or of character (Romeo and Juliet is usually classed as an example of the former, while Hamlet, with the hero's indecision as the tragic flaw, as an instance of the latter). This novel, however, can be judged as a tragedy of both fate and character. It seems fated that the families of the lovers, like the Montagues and Capulets, are enemies, that the lovers should meet in a dramatic circumstance (with Edgar saving Lucy and her father from the violent attack of a wild bull), and that the persons surrounding them are torn by ambition, greed, and passions of their own—all of which leads to the unhappy conclusion of the plot.

Indeed, the plot of The Bride of Lammermoor has received much praise and is considered the most tightly woven of Sir Walter's fiction. Apart from Caleb's foolery (some of which is based on real-life events), there is nothing extraneous in the storyline: all the people and actions contribute to the effects and the gloomy outcome. Even the three old women who make dire predictions advance the plot by their badgering of Lucy, which helps to drive her to insanity.

The point of view is author omniscient, which in this case seems quite necessary— the reader must know what is going on in everyone's mind in order to understand the actions and words of each character. Also, Scott's comments on the political and social climate of the era are indispensable: here is a local, personal tragedy that takes place in the midst of a national disgrace. Thus, the setting, so important in Scott's work in general, is, in this book, set forth directly and vividly. For example, the Whig Ashton, the Tory Marquis of A., and even the Privy Council are impartially rendered by Scott in their greed for influence, power, and wealth.

Lastly, the style of this novel is marked by the use of a lesser component of the Scottish dialect, found chiefly in the conversation of lower-class characters (Caleb, Alice, the "witches"). Most of the text reads as the high form of standard English. In this novel, possibly more than in any other, the poetic strain in Scott's language emerges more strikingly. An excellent example appears near the middle of Chapter Seven, when Edgar and Bucklaw approach Wolf's Crag (which has not been seen yet in the text): The roar of the sea had long announced their approach to the cliffs, on the summit of which, like the nest of some sea-eagle, the founder of the fortalice had perched his erey. The pale moon, which had hitherto been contending with flitting clouds, now shone out, and gave them a view of the solitary and naked tower, situated on a projecting cliff that beetled on the German Ocean [the North Sea]. On three sides the rock was precipitous; on the fourth, which was that towards the land, it had been originally fenced by an artificial ditch and drawbridge, but the latter was broken down and ruinous, and the former had been in part filled up, so as to allow passage for a horseman into the narrow courtyard, encircled on two sides with low offices and stables, partly ruinous, and closed on the landward front by a low embattled wall, while the remaining side of the quadrangle was

occupied by the tower itself, which, tall and narrow, and built of a greyish stone, stood glimmering in the moonlight, like the sheeted spectre of some huge giant. A wilder, or more disconsolate dwelling, it was perhaps difficult to conceive.

All of these details are important to subsequent events, such as Caleb's refusal of entrance to a visiting party. The details also contribute to the tone of the novel, the grim atmosphere that pervades almost every page.

All things considered, The Bride of Lammermoor is, from a purely literary standpoint, one of Sir Walter's most impressive achievements.

Themes

In addition to the social implications and the political elements in this novel, the pathetic outcome, involving madness and death, appears to indicate a message about pride, extreme malleability of character (in the case of Lucy), and perhaps simply grim destiny (as suggested by the gloomy predictions that dot the text). As is usually the case in literature, the sad forebodings come true; one need only think of Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls and Pilar's deathly foresight to find an example from this century.

The old quotation from Robert Burns about the best laid plans of mice and men also springs to mind as a thematic comment about The Bride of Lammermoor. Almost everyone's plans go awry, from those of the Ashton family and Edgar Ravenswood to those of Bucklaw and Craigengelt. Everyone ends up either disappointed or dead.

Some readers are repelled by the "supernatural" aspects of the book: Blind Alice and her predictions, the wraith at the Mermaid Fountain, the dire observations of the "witches," especially Ailsie Gourlay and Annie Winnie. Scott himself had declared that a Scottish novel would not be the real thing without some Scottish superstition, a comment that has led some readers to comment that the author was simply trying to insert passages that would appeal to the popular taste for Gothic novels that prevailed in Scott's era.

A corollary to this theme is apparent in many of the primary characters, who plan too much. Sir William's active forensic mind is forever scheming ways to gain and retain political power and influence, and he also tries to keep Edgar from taking revenge for actions against his family. The Marquis of A. is ever active in attempting to advance his own ambitions. Lady Ashton lays heartless plans to have Lucy marry the man that her mother has chosen, rather than the man whom Lucy loves. And so it goes, throughout the book. As noted earlier, these plans, in the main, come to grief. Never before nor afterward did Scott pen such a grim novel.

The work is so artfully constructed that it is difficult to believe the claim that he dictated it in such pain (and under the influence of pain-killing drugs) that he could not recall a line of the text when the book was done and he had recovered.

Adaptations

the reader gains a clear vision of the situation in which the grim drama of Given the highly dramatic nature of this the plot takes place? Would a more novel, it is little wonder that it inspired one specific presentation of the governmenof the world's most popular operas: the tal phenomena be useful? frequently staged Lucia di Lammermoor, the 1835 creation of Gaetano Don Donizetti. 4. Do the scenes in which Caleb is striving, often with comic earnestness, to preserve the "honor" of the IDEAS FOR GROUP DISCUSSIONS Ravenswood family violate the tone of the novel? Although Scott, in a note, Inasmuch as history plays such a vital observes that the raid of Caleb, for inrole in this novel, attention should be paid stance, was based on a real-life episode to the historical background of Britain at of which he had learned, does the pasthe turn of the century: the revolt of 1689 sage damage the overall effect of the and the ensuing occurrences, which led to plot? Should Caleb have been eliminatthe social and political upheaval of the times. ed entirely? Or does he provide comic (Some of this history can be found dis-relief, an image of the loyal servant? cussed in worthy editions of the novel, in Does he also provide an appropriately the notes.) Also, a familiarity with Shake-pathetic note when he takes up the speare's Romeo and Juliet and Macbeth would feather from Edgar's cap, at the end, be helpful, the former for a better grasp of and puts it in his blouse? the Edgar-Lucy plot, and the latter for a 5. Even his severest critics have praised deeper understanding of the nature of La-Sir Walter for his descriptive passages. dy Ashton.

Which one or two of them seem to be 1. Does Scott's explanation of the Scot-the most striking and effective? Scott's tish tradition, of that era, of "arranged" depiction of scenery helped to gain him marriages adequately explain Lucy's the fame that he enjoyed for so many submission to her mother in abandon-years—does he display a true sense of ing Edgar and agreeing to marry an appreciation of nature, beyond what Bucklaw, or must one turn to the "weak-is traditionally found in early novelists?

ness" of the girl's mind and will in order to accept her decision? 6. Do the sections of the book that deal with the elements of superstition, such 2. Bucklaw can be viewed as a fine exam-as those involving the "witches," deple of a "rounded" character, since his tract from the realism of the plot, or do recklessness and rough ways are tem-they add to the aura of horror, the pered by an honest tendency and a real Gothic effect? (Keep in mind that many of the readers of Scott's era did believe in such superstitions.)

7. In the eighteenth century (and later), people who adjusted their actions, loyalties, and declarations to suit the prevailing power were called "trimmers" (a term founded on the nautical practice of trimming the sails of a ship to catch the wind). Sir William and the Marquis are patently such types. Are there any other trimmers in the story, someone like Craigengelt, for example?

Is Scott's array of these persons realistic? For instance, is Ashton too wishywashy to be believed?

8. How does Lady Ashton compare with Lady Macbeth? Which of the two is actually the more evil character? Is Lady Ashton's behavior credible, given her background and motivations?

9. Do the first-person interpolations (such as "I am not sure whether the pride of being found ..." as Scott proceeds to explain the possible reasons for Edgar's acceptance of the Ashton's hospitality) distract the reader from the flow of the plot, even though the device was a popular one among Scott's fellow writers?

10. Do the portents of disaster, such as those stated by Dame Gourlay and even suggested by young Henry, help to intensify the atmosphere of gloom, especially toward the close of the action?

Should they have been eliminated or, at least, muted? Or, perhaps, might they have been developed more fully, with artistic effect?

Literary Precedents

The whole collection of Gothic novels (the "tales of terror") that came out in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries could be taken as the models for this dark novel, but it exceeds all of them in substance, realism, and horrific effect.

From Mrs. Radcliffe's Romance of the Forest (rather tame compared with The Bride of Lammermoor) to Matthew "Monk" Lewis' The Monk (quite unrealistic when compared sense of fair play (as in his dealings to Scott's novel) to William Beckford's Vathek with Ravenswood). Does Sir Walter pro(an outlandish performance, especially in vide enough background to reveal how relation to Sir Walter's believable story), the the rash young man became as he is Gothic Novel inspired a number of subse-portrayed? Is he developed sufficientquent fictions, none of them as important ly, so that his demise at the end is and affective as The Bride of Lammermoor. genuinely tragic?

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