Busman's Honeymoon Short Guide

Busman's Honeymoon by Dorothy L. Sayers

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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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Characters

addition to the fully developed Incharacters of Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey in Busman's Honeymoon: A Love Story with Detective Interruptions, there are a number of additions to the Sayers portrait gallery. Mr. Puffet the sweep is Sayers's version of Alfred Doolittle, George Bernard Shaw's philosophical dustman. The Rev. Simon Goodacre joins the Rev. Theodore Venables of The Nine Tailors (1934) as an exemplar of the good-hearted innocent clergy of the best high church tradition of the English Church. Miss Twitterton is a variation of Miss Climpson (who reappears briefly) but with the scrupulosity tarnished a bit by an all-too-human infatuation with the unscrupulous Frank Crutchley. Crutchley himself, although an uninteresting villain, is an all-too-believable one. Inspector Kirk's penchant for literary tags should have dispelled criticism that Sayers does not allow an intellectual life to her lowerclass characters; however, curiously, Kirk's habits had the unfortunate effect of eliciting from some critics the objection that the book is weighted down with quotations and literary allusions.

Actually, the difference here is in neither the frequency nor the intensity of the literary game playing but in the explicitness. All the novels are filled with literary quotations and allusions, but here a game is made by the characters of identifying them.

Social Concerns

While in some ways a return to less philosophical themes after The Nine Tailors and Gaudy Night (1935), Busman 's Honeymoon is at heart profoundly concerned with the partnership of man and woman. Sayers had delayed the marriage of Harriet Vane to Lord Peter in the three previous novels in which both characters appear in order to emphasize the necessary equality of the sexes. While some critics have objected that Harriet defers to Lord Peter too much and fails to assert her bold feminist personhood, such readers miss Sayers's point. At the beginning of the series in Strong Poison (1930), Harriet is precisely feminist in this rigid, man-rejecting way. But Sayers sees the importance of woman's independence as part of the larger social fabric of interaction of the sexes through mutual respect and with awareness of their different strengths and abilities. In Busman's Honeymoon Harriet and Peter discuss this issue, and she specifically points out how deadening it is to woman's nature for husbands to do things (as they often do) to please their wives that are contrary to their own desires and sometimes even to their scruples.

Of course, women should not give up meaningful work when they marry (a point Harriet had known from the beginning), but just as surely men must not give up their values and interests.

Techniques

For a novel written simultaneously with a play making use of the same material, Busman's Honeymoon is remarkably various in its technique. It has the basic structure of omniscient narration with, of course, excellent dialogue scenes but also good occasional interior monologues. It begins with an epistolary prothalamion. And the main text is varied with quotations, epigraphs, Latin tags, and snippets of French (the marriage is consummated in French).

Themes

In addition to the important presentation of the proper roles of husband and wife, the book illustrates Sayers's usual conservative picture of the class system. After the murder is solved, there is a substantial coda in which Lord Peter deals with his scruples about playing God in exposing the culprit by engaging the best lawyer possible for him and yet remaining haunted by the memory of his complicity in the death, no matter how well deserved, of another man. But even this is not the end of the book's permutations since included in the epithalamion chapters at the end is the description of a visit of the newlyweds to Lord Peter's ancestral home at Duke's Denver, where Harriet sees a family ghost and apprehends how natural such a apparition is as a tangible illustration of the Wimsey heritage to which her marriage joins her permanently.

Adaptations

Busman's Honeymoon began conceptually as a play in collaboration with Muriel St. Clare Byrne since Sayers was inexperienced as a playwright at the time, but she generated so much more material than could be used in the stage version that it was a simple matter to transcribe the novelization. The stage version is a well-made play that justifies the subtitle "A Love Story with Detective Interruptions" far better than the novel. On the other hand, there is no place in the play for Peter's emotional difficulties about the execution of the murderer. Dennis Arundell originated the role of Lord Peter on stage. Although most reviewers felt he did not look the part, Sayers herself was pleased with his interpretation.

Haunted Honeymoon, directed by Arthur B. Woods, is a 1940 film version of the work. The screenplay by Moncton Hoffe, Angus MacPhail, and Harold Goldman cheapens all the sentiments of the story and even fails to capitalize on the charm of the Wimsey character. For example, whereas in the novel, Miss Twitterton immediately established her subtle social position by getting right Harriet's new title, Lady Peter, on the first try, in the film she calls Harriet Lady Wimsey — but then the movie's Lord Peter makes the same mistake; and whereas Sayers makes an important point of the natural appropriateness of Harriet's continuing to write (under her maiden name) after her marriage, the film begins with a conventional lover's pact in which the honeymooners agree to give up their respective professions. The casting of the American actors Robert Montgomery and Constance Cummings as Lord and Lady Peter was criticized at the time, but they are adequate. The serious miscasting was of Sir Seymour Hicks as Bunter. He brings pretentiousness but no charm to the role. Robert Newton is a properly brooding presence as Frank Crutchley. Leslie Banks plays Inspector Kirk. Some significant details concerning the murder contraption are changed, making the whole solution far less probable. This badly botched job of filming was probably significant in keeping Lord Peter off the screen for the next thirty years.

Please see the entry on Clouds of Witness (1926) for more details on adaptations of the Wimsey mysteries.

Literary Precedents

Busman's Honeymoon is in the tradition of the Victorian novel with its use of mystery and a secret past as a structural frame against which the human emotions of the characters can be played out for the reader's moral edification. The novel is, however, more compressed in time than the usual Victorian work.

Related Titles

Sayers claimed that she had developed Harriet Vane as such a strong woman character in Strong Poison (1930) that she could not end the book by having her marry Lord Peter as originally intended. The Wimsey novels that followed without Harriet as a character were written in part to develop and deepen Lord Peter's character to make him worthy of her. Lord Peter, however, shows all the depth and sensitivity needed from his first appearance in Whose Body? (1923). It is, in fact, Harriet who develops and changes in the two novels in which she appears between her trial for murder in Strong Poison and her honeymoon adventure.

In Strong Poison Harriet Vane is on trial for having murdered her lover.

Miss Climpson creates a hung jury and then aids Lord Peter in uncovering the evidence that clears Harriet. Despite her notoriety, Harriet is really something of a prig in this book, refusing to be beholden to anyone, even someone who loves her in a completely disinterested way and who spends a great deal of time, energy, and money to prove her innocent of the crime of which she stands accused. Thus despite Sayers's claim that she wrote several later books to deepen Lord Peter's character, it is Harriet's character that needed to mellow.

In Have His Carcase (1932), Harriet does initiate the mellowing process, if only by beginning to wonder whether she is being fair to her admirer. The book as a whole is excellent both as a mystery and as a mainstream novel.

The mystery is as complicated as anyone could wish. While the fact that the corpse has hemophilia is likely to be apparent to modern readers fairly early on, there are many other subsidiary mysteries to unravel, and the multiple impersonations of the various villains (although admittedly fairly improbable) are ingeniously exposed layer by layer. The cipher is lucidly explained, probable in relation to the plot, and plausibly decoded (unlike the cipher in the otherwise excellent Nine Tailors, which is irrelevant to the plot, expounded tediously, and of interest only because it is based on the ringing of changes). The greatest interest of the book is, however, the wonderful interplay of the two central characters. They experience one another's company in such full human terms that this book might well have taken the subtitle A Love Story with Detective Interruptions later given to Busman's Honeymoon. The fact that the lovers still do not come to an understanding at the end of this book shows remarkable restraint on Sayers's part and brings to the love story the delicacy of human rather than storybook romance.

Gaudy Night is one of the most unusual books in the canon of detective fiction. It is in many ways a mainstream novel of intellectual life.

There is a mystery problem concerning some vicious mischief being done at Harriet's alma mater, Shrewsbury College, Oxford. That this mischief does not quite eventuate in death is a serious flaw in relation to the traditional mystery format, but the nearly

400page novel has other interests to pursue. The novel is an exploration of the nature and importance of women's work. Sayers comes out strongly in favor of the place of women in the intellectual life, but she also seems to indicate that there are many pitfalls for women who pursue the life of the mind. On the other hand, the major intellectual dishonesty discussed in the book is something done by a man. In the course of the book, Harriet comes to see that the good life of the mind is neither the sexless intellectualism of the women's college nor the sentimentality of the traditional women's world.

Once she is able to see the importance of balancing the intellect and the passions rather then setting them in opposition to one another, she is ready to accept Lord Peter's proposal of marriage. She knows she will not dwindle into a wife but extend the complete person she already is. Feminists have criticized the book because Lord Peter makes his proposal (or his significant proposal-he proposes dozens of times in the playful atmosphere of Have His Carcase, 1932) by writing the sestet to a sonnet Harriet has been unable to finish writing. For such readers, the im plication seems to be that man is taking charge where woman is incapable, but Sayers seems to have in mind more the idea that man and woman are complementary states that together work better than either works separately. Harriet has not given up the intellectual life because she is not able to finish this sonnet — or solve this case. Indeed a measure of the intellectual plane on which they intend to continue their relationship is the fact that Harriet accepts Peter's proposal in a Latin tag used by a schoolmaster to indicate that a student has been found acceptable.

The posthumous stories of Striding Folly (1972) are especially interesting for the details they provide of the later married life of Peter and Harriet. More interesting than the solution to the mystery of some stolen peaches in the latest of the stories, "Talboys," is the revelation that the three Wimsey sons are being raised very differently because of their different characters and prospects (the eldest is, after all, the heir to a substantial entailed estate).

The fragment of a novel called "Thrones, Dominations" goes beyond even Gaudy Night and "Talboys" into the mode of the novel of manners. In this fragment, Lord Peter is humanized beyond anything in the earlier books.

His vanities and peccadilloes even begin to get on his wife's nerves. While there are several characters who perhaps ought to be murdered, no detective problem at all has yet emerged in the extant 177 pages. In compensation, however, Lord Peter's problems in estate management and the sense of social upheaval caused by the death of George V give this fragment more of a sense of place in historical time than any of the complete novels.

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