A Crime of Passion Short Guide

A Crime of Passion by Mary Higgins Clark

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Characters

The two sleuths in this novelette are a former president of the United States and a congresswoman. A Crime of Passion is actually more about their relationship than it is about the mystery. Both are incredibly beautiful, as if they were a fairy tale prince and princess. Both are brilliant. Sandra is a rising star in the House of Representatives, while Henry has retired as one of America's most popular presidents. Sandra has an actual job to do; she is a congresswoman with committee meetings and other duties, and party elders expect her to show up where and when she is supposed to. On the other hand, her husband is completely free to pursue the mystery. Even so, Sandra holds her end up in their effort to solve the mystery of the murder of Arabella Young.

The way the two met seems indicative of how they work together as a team.

Henry "had asked if she still believed in Santa Claus." She said, "I believe in what Santa Claus represents, sir ... Don't you?" This somewhat impertinent reply to a silly question attracted Henry, thus he asked her to stay for dinner. She refused, "I'm meeting my parents. I can't disappoint them." This refusal made her stand out from other women Henry had met; most would be eager to dine with the popular president. Six weeks later they were married. She behaves as Henry's equal, disagrees with him freely, and without her insight and ability to recognize clues the mystery would not be solved. For his part, Henry has the ability to focus on the matter at hand and to think carefully. Like his wife, he can take the initiative, and he holds up his end of the team well.

Former Secretary of State Thomas Shipman, reputedly a shrewd diplomat, seems out of touch with everyday reality.

When he was smitten with Arabella, he seemed to lose his common sense. As Sandra finds out, Arabella was associated with hoodlums and preyed on men.

Eventually, Shipman decided that Arabella's laugh was annoying and that she talked too loud for comfort, and thus he found another, more aristocratic woman to interest him. He plainly missed the point about Arabella—she used him for money and for social climbing. Thus, it is not surprising that he misses the point of Lillian's behavior, too; she behaves as his equal because she believes she is, but in this tale of misunderstandings, Shipman just wishes that she knew her place. He seems like a genteel relic, unaware of the social changes in the lives of women.

Thus he is trapped, without his knowing it, between Arabella, a woman who wishes to suck him dry of his wealth, and Lillian, a woman who wishes to kill him for not respecting her.

The portraits of women in A Crime of Passion are interesting for their contrasts.

Sandra is the ideal modern American woman; she is strong minded, highly intelligent, courageous, clever, beautiful, and willing to be an equal partner in marriage to a man,

knowing full well that she would be successful even if she lived alone. At the other end the ideal woman is Countess Condazzi, an old-fashioned woman-of-the-world who is patient and understanding. In contrast to Sandra, she seems like a relic, much as Shipman does, only much more understanding of human nature than Shipman. In between are Arabella and Lillian, each a relic in the face of the new American woman.

Arabella does not seek to make her own independent way in the world, the way Sandra can; instead she chooses the oldfashioned approach of using her sex appeal to entice men to make her way in the world for her: "Arabella Young's wildly teased hair framed a boldly pretty face, and her body possessed the kind of curves found on Playboy covers." For her, Shipman is a meal ticket—someone she can milk for money and even blackmail if she wishes. The idea that a woman needs a man to survive, which is fundamental to Arabella's behavior, would be anathema to Sandra.

Then there is Lillian West, former professor of home economics. She knows how to hold a household together; she can cook, clean, and entertain— traditional female virtues. Like Shipman, she is blind to the reality of the romantic relationships around her. Her traditional womanly virtues should work; men should flock to her begging for her cooking and her household management, but they do not. In this way, she becomes a strong emblem for the change in women's attitudes toward themselves that frequently appears in Clark's fiction; she is the bitter, lost, fearful woman of the past, who has worked all her life at attaining virtues no longer valued as much are those of Sandra and the modern, selfmade, working woman. She is out of place, and she resents it mightily. Insofar as she is concerned she has done everything right all of her life and then been cheated out of her just rewards.

Social Concerns

Employers can be insensitive to those who work for them, and servants may be overlooked, like furniture. Wealth may bring with it ignorance of how other people live and what they dream. In A Crime of Passion, the misinterpretation of a rich man's words and his subsequent misreading of a servant's response lead to one murder and nearly to a second. A Crime of Passion does not lean on this point very hard, but it nonetheless draws it out clearly. Lillian West has felt neglected and unappreciated all of her life, finding teaching college unfulfilling. Without a man in her life, she becomes a housekeeper to wealthy men to prove her worth and win a man's devotion. Thomas Shipman, statesman and man of importance, fails to recognize in Lillian her motives for working for him. He much prefers his former housekeeper, who knew her place and kept out of the way.

Lillian expects to be treated like an equal!

If Shipman had for a moment before Arabella Young's death taken a few minutes to think of Lillian as though she were an equal, tragedy may have been avoided. Unfortunately for Arabella, "Poopie," he called her, Shipman only took Lillian seriously when he thought that she misunderstood his motivations for moving to Florida—too late to prevent Lillian from murdering Arabella.

Even then, he failed to perceive the whole woman before him—she was a servant and should mind her own business.

Another social issue involves the state of retiring young. What does a healthy, utterly brilliant, handsome, forty-fouryear-old ex-president do with himself? At the beginning of A Crime of Passion, his activity seems to be limited to admiring his wife and poo-pooing and tsk-tsking what he sees on television. An old political ally and friend in trouble seems to be just the tonic for him; he turns his brilliant mind to pondering the mystery of Arabella's death, even though he is hampered by the trappings of an ex-president.

For instance, wherever he goes, Henry is accompanied by agents of the Secret Service. Their doings are important to the progress of the story. They both impede and advance the efforts of Henry and Sandra to talk to witnesses and uncover clues. They impede by their very presence; where they go signals the presence of someone important, and newspeople especially are prone to follow them, creating crowds. On the other hand, the agents can move people out of the way.

When Sandra and Henry wish to speak to Shipman, the agents help move them through the throng of reporters. One cannot help but think that Henry, the most popular man in America, needs to get himself a new life. Perhaps solving crimes is it.

Techniques

"Beware the fury of a patient man," Henry says to begin the novelette. It is a source irony in the tale of a woman's revenge. This opening line adds a second layer of meaning to Sandra's remarks near the end: "It was definitely a crime of passion. It was just that we were a little slow in figuring out whose passion was the cause of the crime." This remark plays on the suspicion that focuses on Shipman, who supposedly killed Arabella when she supposedly wanted to break up with him.

It turns out that he was the one doing the breaking up, and it turns out the passion involved was that of his housekeeper.

This also plays on Henry's remark about the patient man, because the story seems to be about how the man might have done this or how the man might have done that. Instead, it was a woman doing the acting, not a man, and she is a very patient woman, indeed. She slowly poisons her victims, making it seem as though they have a cold or the flu. The opening line cries out for shift in focus from a male-centered narrative to a female one. It deftly ties the beginning and the end together and adds an undercurrent of meaning beneath the mystery plot by toying with one's perception of the gender of the person taking action.

Themes

The plight of the "invisible servant" is the main theme, although there are others. One minor theme is "the woman wronged," an old theme in literature in which a woman who has been mistreated seeks revenge against her oppressors or, instead, shows herself to be truly noble by rising above her suffering. Mark Twain's The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson (1894) has a fine example of a woman's revenge, whereas Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (1850; see separate entry) has perhaps the supreme example of a woman rising above her suffering and her tormentors. In the present case, Lillian believes herself wronged by society and takes her revenge by poisoning the men who do not appreciate her.

Another minor theme is that of lonely women. "Oh, you know how it is," the Countess Condazzi explains. "There are so many women in their fifties and sixties who are unattached, but there are so few men." An unattached, wealthy, socially prominent man is special; in Florida, says the countess, women would flock to Shipman. This is an important clue; if we are to solve the mystery, we need to understand this social context: a culture which makes an older man of interest only because he is unattached. Lillian is mad with loneliness; the countess may be lonely, too. What is a traditional homemaker to do in a world where her skills are no longer valued? The novelette does not answer this complex question, but it raises it and makes it part of the mystery.

Key Questions

A Crime of Passion is the first in a series of stories featuring Henry Parker Britland IV and Sandra O'Brien Britland; it may be a good idea to read the other stories before discussing this one. In the later stories, Clark fleshes out her main characters, which may help understand how they function in the present novelette.

The mere fact that Henry was once America's president should spark avenues for discussion. Add that he must have been America's youngest president, having retired after two terms at age fortyfour, that he was the second most popular president of the twentieth century (who was the first?), and that he met his future wife only the last week of his tenure at the White House, and questions and speculations should flow.

1. What about Sandra made her stand out from the other women Henry had asked to dinner? Is this a good basis for a romantic relationship?

2. What does "Beware the fury of a patient man" mean?

3. Is it possible to mix viruses in pills? 4. Clark plays with her title "A Crime of Passion," which is an old cliche to describe a murder between lovers. What passions are involved in the novelette?

How are they used to mislead us as we follow the story? At the end Sandra says, "It was definitely a crime of passion."

Was it?

5. Why does Sandra not like her nickname "Sunday"?

6. Is Henry too good to be true? 7. Does Clark provide a plausible way for a former president and his congresswoman wife to become involved in solving a murder mystery?

8. How mysterious is A Crime of Passion? Is it mostly a thriller, or does it keep one guessing about clues until the murderer is revealed?

9. How important is the relationship between Henry and Sandra to the appeal of the novelette? How important is it to the solving of the crime?

10. How well does Clark use foreshadowing in A Crime of Passion? For instance, the explaining that some of Shipman's drapes sound like gunshots foreshadows an important event near the climax of the novelette.

Literary Precedents

In her acknowledgments for My Gal Sunday (1996), Clark mentions her fondness for a radio show call Our Gal Sunday, which, she says, was pitched as "the story that asks the question 'Can a girl from a mining town in the West find happiness as the wife of England's richest, most handsome lord, Lord Henry Brinthrop?'"

She says, "I had a huge crush on Lord Henry and thought he and Sunday were a perfect couple." This may explain not only why Henry Parker Britland IV is named Henry and Sandra is nicknamed "Sunday," but why Henry is almost perfect in every way in "A Crime of Passion." It also helps to explain why he and Sandra live in lordly surroundings and mix with the wealthiest of the wealthy and the most powerful politicians. The former president, Henry, is lordly in that he is used to wealth and attention. Sandra has something in common with the original Sunday: humble beginnings, "Sandra's father was a motorman on the New Jersey Central Railroad." A contrast with the original Gal Sunday is that Sandra "had worked her way through both St.

Peter's College and Fordham Law School, spent seven years as a public defender, then, in a stunning upset, won the congressional seat of the longtime incumbent from Jersey City." Sandra is a self-made woman.

Wealthy husband and wife sleuths are not new. The best known are probably Nick and Nora Charles from Dashiell Hammett's The Thin Man (1932) and the several motion pictures about their adventures. Hammett's Nick and Nora mix with wealthy socialites and live the high life of the rich and unemployed. They are hard drinking and by and large indolent, using their keen minds to solve a crime seemingly because they have little else to do. This contrasts with Henry and Sandra; both seem to remain sober during "A Crime of Passion" and Sandra has a very demanding job. Henry was once the president, which means he was not idle all of his life.

Related Titles

Henry and Sandra appear in other short works, each a mixture of thrills and mystery. Their characters are gradually fleshed out in these subsequent writings, with Henry proving to be ever more incredibly talented. Not only was he the youngest president and an enormously popular one, but in They All Ran After the President's Wife (1996; see separate entry), we learn that he is qualified to fly an experimental SST airliner!

Sandra bears much in common with Clark's other heroines. Like Sandra, they tend to be very beautiful, very intelligent, and very accomplished. They also tend to have high principles and to be independent. Sandra shares in common with Kerry McGrath of Let Me Call You Sweetheart (1995; see separate entry) a history of public service as a lawyer, with Sandra being a public defender and Kerry being a prosecutor. Instead of becoming a member of congress, McGrath becomes a judge.

Copyright Information

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