Clouds of Witness Short Guide

Clouds of Witness 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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Contents

Characters

It is often the case in detective fiction that the detective, a mere observer, is more interesting and more well-rounded than any of the characters vitally concerned in the plot. Here Lord Peter Wimsey actually has a double claim on readers' attention because he is not only the detective but also the brother of one of the two chief suspects. On the one hand readers sympathize with his concern, and on the other they enjoy his enthusiastic antics in the amateur pursuit of clues. The fact that his adventures are dangerous (he is shot at by Goyles, and he falls into the bog on the way to unraveling the mystery of where his brother has been on the night Cathcart died) only adds to their interest.

Like the other Wimsey novels, Clouds of Witness is fairly long for a mystery.

Although the plot is complicated and involves events in Paris, New York, and even Egypt as well as in England, the length also allows for a fuller development of the characterization than is possible in the more traditional mystery format. Indeed, it was Sayers's purpose to provide this sort of development. Among other rounded characters are Lady Mary, Inspector Parker (a stolid character but charming both in his friendly cooperation with Lord Peter in interpreting the physical evidence and in his quiet admiration of Lady Mary), and the scatterbrained Dowager Duchess, who maintains clearheaded common sense despite her passionate disregard for the sequential details of everyday life. All these characters reappear in other novels throughout the series. Indeed, except for Lady Mary they had also appeared in the first Wimsey novel, Whose Body?

(1923). Appearing in all the Wimsey novels is Lord Peter's unflappable manservant Mervyn Bunter, whose characterization owes not a little to P. G. Wodehouse's Jeeves. This full, rich novel also finds room for a sensitive exploration of the passions ruling the Grimthorpes.

Social Concerns

With the younger son of a duke as the detective hero, Clouds of Witness, like the other Wimsey novels, creates a world of immemorial aristocratic values that might seem at first impervious to social concerns. Indeed Sayers has often been called a snob and accused of anti-Semitism and of patronizing the lower classes, and it must be conceded that she does to some extent share these values with the British reading public of the 1920s. Martin Green has rather unkindly called her the "Fanny Hill of class distinctions." While her lower-class characters have distinct mental limitations and her professional men are often without aesthetic sensibilities, she distributes moral sensibility with an even hand. Cathcart, the victim in Clouds of Witness, is a completely amoral member of the social elite, and the Duke of Denver, the accused, is a good-hearted oaf who may go in for a spot of adultery but will lie to the House of Lords while on trial for his life rather than stain a lady's honor. In fact, the social snobbishness of this book and others in the series perhaps in the final analysis suggests a metaphoric longing for a world of settled moral values. Indeed, the snobbishness of the novels is not so simple as it might at first appear. And by including a fair amount of dialogue and other material in French (and occasionally a Latin tag), Sayers requires that her readers join the world about which she writes rather than remaining merely observers of the passing scene.

Ultimately such elements of plot and technique subtly redefine social attitudes.

Techniques

The point of view of the book is the familiar standby of detective fiction, omniscient narrative with frequent use of dialogue. This basic pattern is varied with letters, floor plans, newspaper clippings, footnotes, literary quotations, and epigraphs. A coroner's inquest is transcribed verbatim, and a vital piece of information is included in a long letter written in French. It has been objected that in the early novels Lord Peter spends more time speculating about the evidence than in unearthing it, but this is true of all detective fiction, and fans of puzzle mysteries are unlikely to mind. There is a rewarding puzzle here and an unobtrusive use of coincidence.

Themes

The contrast among Lady Mary's three suitors nicely illustrates an important theme in the book concerning the importance of human life. Her official fiance Denis Cathcart is a jaded illustration of the decadence of the old order. He is seeking a marriage of convenience and wishes to marry only in order to support his mistress in a better style. He is the victim, but as his past is unfolded through detective research, he becomes increasingly less sympathetic, so it is with some relief that readers learn Lady Mary had become disillusioned by his coldness and — finally frightened — had planned to elope with someone else on the very night of Cathcart's death. George Goyles, the alternative lover, turns out, however, to be even less sympathetic than Cathcart. He is a textbook Communist, spouting slogans about the rights of the people but evincing no human understanding of the feelings of real people. Cathcart is at least willing to kill himself for love, and if he is marrying Lady Mary without loving her, he is at least doing so without pretense. But Goyles claims to love Lady Mary. Yet the problem is not simply that he is a hypocrite. A more serious problem is that the best love he is capable of allows him to abandon his intended, leaving her to discover a grisly corpse at their appointed rendezvous. When he is tracked down he is blind enough to assume incorrectly that she has given him away. The man Lady Mary finally does marry (they become engaged in Strong Poison, 1930) is Inspector Charles Parker, her brother Peter's confidant and detective colleague. Parker has traditional middle-class values that neither Cathcart nor Goyles can appreciate, but his truly distinguishing characteristic is that he works — and takes his work seriously.

He has a seriousness about life that gives him the right to make moral judgments that Goyles does not have and that Cathcart does not recognize the need for. The two rejected lovers are shown as taking too cheap a view of life. They are willing to kill (Goyles takes a shot at Lord Peter, and Cathcart is finally shown to have committed suicide), but only the traditional rules of law and religion can ever justify killing.

The fact that Cathcart is proved to have committed suicide allows this novel to end with the suggestion of the harmonious wholeness and justness of the existing fabric of society. There is, in fact, no murderer to be brought to justice. After the Duke is acquitted by the Lords, Grimthorpe does try to kill him, only to be punished by fate in the form of a passing taxi that runs him over as he tries to escape. This episode has the effect of liberating Mrs. Grimthorpe, the Duke's mistress, from bondage to her husband. She refuses the offer of financial help, and she also makes no emotional claim on the Duke.

The decision of individual characters to act on their own is what keeps the social world stable.

Adaptations

In 1973 Masterpiece Theatre produced a five-part television adaptation of Clouds of Witness starring Ian Carmichael as Wimsey with Glyn Houston as Bunter, Rachel Herbert as Lady Mary, Mark Eden as Inspector Parker, David Langton as the Duke of Denver, Georgina Cookson as the Dowager Duchess, and George Coulouris as Grimthorpe.

The dramatization was wonderfully paced and acted with charm. The layers of complication in the story lent themselves well to the serial format.

The show was justly a huge success in both Britain and America, and additional dramatizations followed in the next four years.

Murder Must Advertise in 1974, The Nine Tailors in 1975, and The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club in 1976 were all as successful as their predecessor and for much the same reasons. In addition, the picturesque settings served the television producers even better than they had Sayers originally in providing a variety of interesting locales. The complications of the drug business in Murder Must Advertise were perhaps less implausible when visualized in this production. The continuing characters were played by the actors who had played these roles in Clouds of Witness except that Derek Newmark replaced Glyn Houston as Bunter with The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club.

These players were ably supported by the actors playing additional characters in the individual productions.

In 1977, Five Red Herrings was added to the series in an unfortunately condensed form. The general pacing was bad, and the story was hard to follow from one episode to the next. But the biggest problem with this dramatization is that it failed to copy the book's greatest structural virtue, the complete working out of the five wrong solutions. When Lord Peter shows how the crime was committed, it is with an air of conjuring, but it is not replacing an interpretation that one has come to believe, so it simply falls flat. Lord Peter comes off as a silly ass rather than as someone playing at being a silly ass. That his solution to the crime is right only makes him more annoying and less ingratiating. Unfortunately, the relative failure of this dramatization was taken as indicating falling off of interest in the material rather than unhappiness with the defects of the presentation.

In 1935 Reginald Denham directed a film called The Silent Passenger that uses the Lord Peter character and is based on an idea by Sayers. John Loder and Mary Newland, playing newlyweds, have the leads. Peter Haddon plays Lord Peter; Austin Trevor, Parker; and Aubrey Mather, Bunter. Also in the cast are Donald Wolfit and Leslie Perrins. Lord Peter solves a murder discovered on the boat train to Calais in an exaggeratedly silly fashion and for his troubles gets called an "insufferable nitwit" in the curtain line.

"Greedy Night," a brilliant parody of Sayers by E. C. Bentley, is reprinted as an appendix to the collected stories in Lord Peter (1972).

Literary Precedents

Sayers always alluded to Wilkie Collins as her model for detective fiction because he combined intricate mystery plotting with the surface texture of the novel of manners, but Collins does not have the lively, bright surface charm of Sayers, and he never confronts directly the moral and ethical questions that might be raised by the details of plot. Sayers takes the events of her plots much more seriously and yet presents the surface comedy of life with a much lighter touch. She is thus both more serious than Collins and less serious, and for both facts one may be thankful.

Lord Peter Wimsey is a fairly explicit parody of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes with some of the fun of P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster added. Unlike Holmes, Wimsey is a silly ass, but unlike Wooster he is well aware of this fact and uses it to his advantage both in his investigations and in his social life. He plays at being a caricature of the aristocrat without a care in the world. But he does care. He has a precise code of scruples. And the bouts of shell shock that plague him as early as Whose Body? go a long way toward humanizing him.

Related Titles

Whose Body? has a lean mystery story to tell and was a promising first novel.

Although it is lighthearted by today's standards despite its completely amoral villain, it almost failed to get published in its day because of objections to "coarseness." The original publisher, in fact, made Sayers omit a passage in which Lord Peter proved that the nude body found in the bathtub could not be the missing Jewish financier Sir Reuben Levy because it was uncircumcised. In the published novel he has to confine his evidence to such things as bad teeth and flea bites. This novel is almost a procedural, since there is little suspense about identifying the guilty party.

Unnatural Death (1927, U.S. title The Dawson Pedigree) pursues the literary direction adopted in Clouds of Witness of elaborating complications; here they concern an ingenious method of murder. Some elements of the lesbianism motivating several of the characters are handled rather unconvincingly, but since Sayers could not discuss the subject openly, this problem is not surprising. This novel introduced a new continuing character, Alexandra Katherine Climpson. Miss Climpson works in a detective office staffed entirely by unmarried women and funded by Lord Peter, who wishes to tap the overlooked resources of this branch of humanity. She has intensely developed religious scruples but keen skill in insinuating herself into situations where she can uncover information.

Her reports are comic masterpieces.

The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club (1928) continues the series of complicated puzzle novels; this time the puzzle involves the time of death. A number of possibilities for comedy are developed, and there is some good social satire both of medical faddism and of old-fashioned clubbishness.

Five Red Herrings (1931, U.S. title Suspicious Characters) is a somewhat mechanical exercise, but the book is lavishly supplied with incident. The main interest is in the presentation of multiple solutions, as each of five detectives in turn makes out the case against his favored suspect, only to have all five possibilities proved wrong by Lord Peter's reenactment of the crime.

Murder Must Advertise (1939) is the first of the mature novels — in which Sayers intended to provide a depth to Lord Peter's character so that she could marry him off to Harriet Vane. In fact, Lord Peter shows a sensitivity and depth from the beginning, and his countryside romps in harlequin disguise hardly suggest any special sense in which he might be thought of as maturing. This is another novel of complication. Although the murderer becomes fairly obvious early on, there are many related problems to be worked out. The complications concerning the drug trade are really too absurd to be taken seriously, but the atmosphere of decadent society is effectively evoked, and the scenes in the advertising agency are satirically brilliant and full of comic resonance.

Although Edmund Wilson and others have criticized The Nine Tailors (1934) for becoming bogged down in the technicalities of bell ringing, most readers acknowledge the book to be a masterpiece. Although the murder element is introduced late, there is a genuine and intriguing puzzle, but the mystery is of secondary importance to the moral theme. It turns out that the particularly gruesome death was caused accidentally by the ringing of a peal of bells in which Lord Peter participated, making him unwittingly one of the murderers. The revelation of this dilemma gives the book its permanent interest through profound discussion of the nature of human responsibility and the paradoxes of the human experience.

There are some Wimsey stories in the collections Lord Peter Views the Body (1929), Hangman's Holiday (1933), and In the Teeth of the Evidence (1939). All the Wimsey stories, including three posthumous ones, are collected in Lord Peter. While most readers prefer the novels, some lovers of more traditional detective material find Sayers at her best in the stories because they show a simplicity of structure that is inconsistent with joining mystery and mainstream fiction in the novels.

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