

Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy Short Guide

Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy by Rumer Godden

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Characters

In many of Godden's works, two or three well-developed characters carry the story. In *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy*, Godden creates several well-rounded characters: Lise, Patrice, Vivi, Lucette, and Luigi. Emile, Patrice's brother and partner, is shadowy. While not major characters, the matrons at the prison are delineated sympathetically: They emerge as strong, kindly women who, for example, take every precaution as Lise leaves at the end of her prison term to safeguard her against Vivi's revenge.

The nuns at Bethanie, while suffering under the anonymity of sisters in general, still emerge as real, vital, helpful religious women. There is a piquancy about the origin of their coming to Bethanie. No one except the Superior knows the origin of each sister. The nuns are left to wonder who among them come from distinguished families and who are former convicts. The community of Bethanie emerges in the novel as a group of real, down-to-earth, dedicated women, offering each female convict still in prison a better life at whatever level the prisoner herself may choose — even to sharing life and work with them for good. It is especially heartening to realize as one reads that Bethanie itself exists in France, and that its members continue their saving work.



Social Concerns

The primary social concern for *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy*, the exploitation of women, is one found in many of Godden's works. Lise, the novel's protagonist, works as a procuress in a middle-class Parisian brothel. A former prostitute herself, Lise's role as a procuress means that she is, to an extent, aiding in the exploitation of other women; but, at the same time, her innate kindness leads her to look after the prostitutes and safeguard them from further exploitation. Men, particularly Patrice, one of the brothel's owners, are the primary perpetrators of violent acts against women. Eventually, Lise herself commits a violent act, murdering the evil Patrice. Patrice's cruelty makes readers sympathetic to Lise's violent act.

While imprisoned for Patrice's murder, Lise receives visits from the Dominican sisters of Bethanie, a community of nuns that welcomes ex-convicts to be converted and to join its ranks.

The forgiving nature of the nuns has a positive effect on Lise, and upon her release from prison, she joins them.

The prison matrons comprise another positive influence on Lise. Despite the virtue exemplified by many of the women in this novel, Godden certainly does not suggest that women are incapable of evil. In fact, once Lise has murdered Patrice, his lover Vivi becomes Lise's most dangerous enemy.

The special few, like Lise and Lucette, who enter Bethanie, bring to their work among women prisoners a special empathy that is the result of their own painful experiences. The community at Bethanie also includes women whose lives have always been exemplary and yet who have dedicated themselves to this work out of a superabounding love for others.

The nuns are not depicted as perfect.

At the end of each day before supper they stand in a long, semi-circle. Each sister acknowledges a fault she has committed that day — mainly, the superior tells Lise who is amazed at the proceedings, "faults against charity, impatience and the like." Later Lise discovers her own failure to accept Lucette, to whom she is role-model and exemplar, because Lise finds Lucette's doglike fidelity oppressive.



Techniques

Godden is a master of style, particularly understatement. The final scene of *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy* occurs in the chapel at Bethanie where — after her murder of Lucette — Vivi leaves a rosary near Lise's prie dieu, the same pink rosary she was holding in her hand years earlier when Lise literally picked her up unconscious out of a Paris gutter. As Lise sees it there, it is a silent reminder and subtle threat.

Godden has an interesting preoccupation with time which is evident in many of her novels. She uses flashbacks, not a dramatically original device, but she also uses flashforwards, which her critics consider a unique stylistic device. The latter technique suspends the reader above the moment at hand to look forward as well as back in a kind of godlike view unlimited by time present. Charles Dickens also uses this device in *The Christmas Carol* (1843) and Thornton Wilder in *Our Town* (1938), but in each case certain scenes are firmly planted in the future. Godden swivels back and forth. One feels "let in" on a secret or an event to be developed more fully later. Her earlier preoccupation with reincarnation — perhaps absorbed from her long residences in India — may account for this. The technique annoys some reviewers but charms others as Godden seems to take her readers into her confidence, rounding out present action by a glimpse into its consequences.

Themes

Godden explores deeply the conflict between good and evil in society: the fascination that evil has for humankind, even the attraction of brutality, which Lise experiences when she confronts Patrice. The author describes, too, the terrible deterioration in Vivi, separated from her lover and married to Luigi, a good and decent Italian truck-driver. She hates her baby and neglects him so that on one occasion Luigi hesitatingly asks Lise, "Are babies supposed to smell?" Vivi's hatred for Lise after the latter kills Patrice is undying. Although Vivi's first invasion of Bethanie to kill Lise is thwarted by Lucette's intervention and death, one feels certain she will never rest until she succeeds in killing Lise.

Godden describes community life with great accuracy. Before writing *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy* she spent time in the Bethanie Community, where she was assisted by the nuns and arrived at a deep understanding of their life and work. She writes convincingly of religious life, its difficulties and its deep joys. Godden's understanding of religious life is especially evident in her depiction of Lise's progression in her prayers to what St. Teresa of Avila calls "the prayer of quiet" where no words are needed and Lise kneels in the presence of the Lord as the beloved in the presence of the lover.



Key Questions

Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy is an account of a woman's transformation from victim and victimizer to giver and penitent. There seems to have always been at least a touch of good in Lise, something the nuns could work with, yet Vivi seems to have no such redeeming aspect. Contrasting the two characters could get at the heart of the novel by suggesting what makes one person redeemable and another not.

The evil deeds of the novel contrast starkly with the quiet, heart-tugging moments of the nuns' good works. This could make the novel seem to wander, as if unsure of what it is supposed to be. Is it a novel of redemption? Is it a novel of how even great good cannot stop the predations of great evil? This very uncertainty creates much of the plot's tension, and it adds depth to Godden's account of selflessly giving women. Such uncertainty also offers an opportunity for beginning a discussion.

Just what is it that Godden is up to?

Has she created a mishmash of contradictory ideas, or is she actually saying something?

1. Lise commits a murder. Was it justified? Did she have other, better choices? Should she be forgiven for murdering someone?
2. Is Lise's reformation from procuress to nun presented convincingly?

Why does she transform while in prison? How much of the old Lise remains in the new one?

3. What is the point of making a daily confession? How does this ritual advance the plot? What does it tell about the characters?
4. Lise is annoyed by Lucette. Should she be? Does it do anyone any good for her to confess her feelings about Lucette. What are the good aspects of Lise's character that are revealed by her attitude toward Lucette, as well as the bad aspects?
5. How does Lucette's death advance the novel's themes? Was it necessary for the plot, or is her death gratuitous — perhaps just intended to tug our hearts?
6. Why does Vivi hate her own child? What has it to do with Lise?
7. Why is it important that the nuns do not know the origins of each other?

How does this figure in the plot?

8. How do Godden's flashforwards affect the development of the plot?



What aspects of the novel — plot, characterization, themes — do the flashforwards emphasize?

9. *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy* contains many violent and sad events, yet many readers find the novel to be uplifting, even heartwarming. How do the murders and prostitution affect the tone of the novel? Are the unpleasant events redeemed by Lise's attaining "the prayer of quiet?"

10. Vivi's murder of Lucette may be symbolic. The nuns may reach out to convicts, but they can retreat back to their cloister. Vivi's act represents an invasion from the outside world, implying that whatever their origins, the world will follow the nuns wherever they go. What other symbolism does the novel present? Can Lise ever escape the consequences of her past?

Consuelo M. Aherne, S.S.J.

Literary Precedents

Godden's theme of religion and its relationship to absolute evil brings to mind works such as Francois Mauriac's *Therese* (1927), Georges Bernanos' *Under the Sun of Satan* (1949), and Graham Green's *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), and *The End of the Affair* (1951).



Related Titles

In Godden's own writings there are analogies between *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy* and *Gypsy, Gypsy* (1940), also set in France. The latter story describes an irredeemably wicked Englishwoman, Barbe de Marquemont, who has inherited her husband's estate in Normandy.

She allows a gypsy to live there with his family, but at a high price, the total loss of his personal freedom. Her cruel exploitation of the gypsy is a study of evil for evil's sake. In *In This House of Brede* (1969), Godden describes an English Benedictine monastery in depth through the eyes of Philippa Talbot, who at forty-two turns from an outstanding career and bright prospects to become a cloistered Benedictine nun.

Godden's study of monastic life over a five-year period in preparation for the novel doubtless enriched her understanding of the nuns at Bethanie.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994