The French Powder Mystery Short Guide

The French Powder Mystery by Ellery Queen

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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

The most important personality in all of the Queen works is, of course, Ellery Queen, amateur detective. In The French Powder Mystery and the other early formal detective works, Queen is presented as an almost pure logician, relentlessly examining pieces of evidence, from the small traces of powder on a bookend to the large details of complex social interactions. A descendant of Foe's Dupin and Conan Doyle's Holmes, he is something of an eccentric, has a unique appearance, and is in possession of a vast and esoteric body of knowledge. In the preface to The French Powder Mystery, the reader learns that Ellery, along with his wife, son, and father, Inspector Richard Queen, retired member of the New York Police Department, is now living in a tiny mountain home in Italy, having given up his old profession. (Ellery's wife and son mysteriously disappear in subsequent works.) The novel itself goes back to the time when Ellery and his father lived together in a West 87th Street apartment in New York City, "a veritable fairyland of easy bachelordom." Ellery, a Harvard graduate, places great store in the values of the past and has an independent income which allows him the opportunity to pursue a dilettante's study of culture. Because he is given to wearing smoking jackets and a pince-nez, carrying a walking stick, and speaking abstrusely, many commentators regard Queen as a snobbish prig, especially in the early works. Yet rigorously analytical and emotionally detached, Ellery is capable of penetrating mysteries that all others find beyond comprehension.

In doing so, he restores the world to order, and it is within this role as problem-solver that his true character emerges. He is fundamentally a comic hero whose intelligence and imagination enable him to solve a complex problem, and thereby bring about the reintegration of the social community.

The other characters in The French Powder Mystery are, by and large, stereotypes, fulfilling certain needs within the plot's development. The Cast of Characters appearing at the outset of the novel makes clear their representative natures and functions. Cyrus French is "a common American avatarmerchant prince and Puritan," his daughter Marion, "a silken Cinderella," and her fiance, Westley Weaver, "an amanuensis and lover — and friend to the author." More important and interesting than these supporting characters are the figures of the victim and the villain. Although they too are necessities of the plot, and in most respects, stereotypes, an understanding of their roles and characteristics is essential for an appreciation of the comic texture of the work.

The victim, in this instance the two victims, Bernice and Winifred, while members of the community threatened by the villain's action, are slowly revealed to be, to some extent, worthy of their fates. Their behavior, although less reprehensible than the culprit's, has made them social offenders. Bernice in her involvement with narcotics, and Winifred in her semi-adulterous actions, have violated accepted morality, and thus are not entirely unworthy of their suffering. Only those who are perceived to be socially unacceptable in some way experience the fate of the victim, for participation in the happiness of the comic work's conclusion is restricted to those truly "good" people.

The villain is, of course, excluded from this happiness for he has broken the laws of God and man. His actions are more inherently evil than those of his victims, yet he is often more interesting than they. His breach of the social and legal code makes it necessary that he be removed from society, yet he gains a certain esteem in that his intelligence has allowed him to commit a clever crime and to escape discovery for most of the novel by presenting himself as one of the innocent. His pretense of innocence must be uncovered by the detective-hero, and his true nature revealed in order that the truly innocent be released from chaos and suspicion.

Social Concerns

The French Powder Mystery, the second Queen novel, is an excellent example of the formal detective novel.

Given its form, it is not surprising that, on the surface, the work seems to concern itself little with significant social issuesl; for the formal detective novel is, by nature, dominated by the action of solving a mystery through the elaboration and intensely analytical study of clues and evidence. Yet such works are not without social concerns, and The French Powder Mystery is no exception.

The plot of the novel centers on Ellery Queen's attempt to discover who murdered Winifred Marchbanks French, and the solution to the puzzle involves Queen and company in the world of the narcotics trade. Although the novel offers some insight into the illegal drug trade of the 1920s and the effects of narcotics upon users, it can hardly be said to reflect a strongly realistic view of these topics. What makes The French Powder Mystery interesting in terms of social issues is its treatment of the twin themes of order and disorder. Although these themes may not seem readily apparent on the surface, they are central to an understanding of all formal detective novels.

In these works the reader encounters a group of characters, usually wealthy and well-bred, frequently in an isolated locale. Their usually peaceful, well-ordered world has been disrupted by a criminal action, most often murder.

The police are called in, but they are baffled by the case, and it is only with the arrival of an unofficial investigator, the gentleman amateur detective, that the pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place.

In The French Powder Mystery the date is Tuesday, May 24, and the scene, French's Department Store where, in a display window's concealed wall bed, the murdered body of Winifred Marchbanks French, second wife of Cyrus French, the store's owner, is discovered. Inspector Richard Queen of the New York City Police Department is called in to investigate, and along with him and his associates comes his son Ellery, writer of detective stories, amateur sleuth, and student of culture. All involved with the case, including family members and the store's directors and employees, are assembled, and the slow process of establishing motives, opportunity and alibis is begun. Simultaneously the collection of evidence and clues commences. As the sorting out of this complex wealth of material proceeds, the reader is drawn into the world of those involved in and affected by the murder of Mrs. French. Their superficially harmonious society has been rendered chaotic by the murderer's action, and it is the function of the amateur detective to restore order to it. To accomplish this he must uncover the roots of the discord that threatens the social order.

In The French Powder Mystery, Ellery learns that Bernice Carmody, daughter of Mrs. French by her previous marriage to Vincent Carmody, is a habitual drug-user, and that her mother, having become aware of this fact, arranged to meet the man who was

supplying her daughter with the drugs on Monday evening at the family's store. Her murder is then ordered by the key figures in the drug ring, for she knows too much about the organization to be allowed to live. In the final pages of the novel Ellery leads the reader and the cast of characters through a detailed account of his investigation, and finally presents the solution to the case. The drug ring is smashed, the murderer exposed, and all others involved released from suspicion. Within a larger frame, the social and moral code broken by both the victim's and the culprit's actions has been restored to wholeness. The appeal of works like The French Powder Mystery rests largely upon a belief in social order and decorum. Those who challenge and threaten the established order must be expelled so that harmony may be regained.

Underlying the maze of clues and alibis in The French Powder Mystery is a clear commitment to the upholding of social and ethical code of existence.

Techniques

The French Powder Mystery is a classic example of the detective novel as pure puzzle. The first piece of the puzzle is the discovery of Mrs. French's murdered body in the display window.

From here the novel proceeds through a lengthy collection and examination of clues, alibis, and motives until the final solution is presented by Queen. While this novel, like so many other classic whodunits, has its fair share of red herrings, confusion, and deception, its central technical achievement is its strict adherence to the principles of fair play. With sufficient attention paid, by the conclusion of Queen's deductive puzzles the reader is already in a position to solve the mystery himself, for Queen presents all clues fairly and clearly as the case unfolds. Abiding by the rules of fair play, Queen invites the reader to match his wits against those of Ellery, and the appeal of works like The French Powder Mystery rests, in part, on this exercise.

Many critics have approvingly noted that Queen's claim that all necessary clues to the mystery are presented before the solution and that only one solution is possible is consistently accurate. The same could not be said of all detective stories. While many readers may not have the patience to solve the crime themselves, their enjoyment of the novel's building suspense is undiminished, for instead of matching their wits against Queen's they are content to follow and admire his brilliant and rational methods of deduction. One of Queen's major achievements is his ability to delay the presentation of the mystery's solution for as long as possible. In The French Powder Mystery, this ability is clearly evident, for the culprit is not named until the novel's final two words.

Other notable technical features of the early Queen's works, including The French Powder Mystery, are the use of the same name for author and detective, a device used in all Queen's work; the creation of a narrator, J.J. McC., to present some of Ellery's cases in written form to the public; and meticulous plotting. The construction of plot in The French Powder Mystery leads unerringly to the final proof which is achieved by the exercise of reason.

Queen's stress on the rational faculty is revealed in his detailed analysis of tangible evidence, his use of diagrams, maps, plans, and the avoidance of violence as a tool for uncovering criminal activity.

Themes

In a general sense, The French Powder Mystery is primarily concerned with good and evil. Evil, in the form of narcotics and murder, has intruded into the self-contained world of the French family and business. As in other formula literature, such as the fairy tale and the western, good and evil are painted with broad strokes in the detective story. The French Powder Mystery is no exception to this pattern.

Characters are not allowed complex emotions or motives for their behavior.

They either uphold the rules of decency and goodness, or they do not.

The appeal of this black-and-white presentation of virtue and vice rests upon shared assumptions of author and reader about good and evil. The typical reader desires that those who are honest, faithful to friends and family, and hard-working will be rewarded, and that those who are dishonest, disloyal, and lacking in industry will be punished. The detective story does not disappoint in this regard. While it is undoubtedly true that the simple resolution of the forces of good and evil in The French Powder Mystery presents a naive and artificial view of existence, it is also true that the simplicity of its vision provides both diversion and reassurance for its many readers.

Adaptations

Please refer to this section in the biographical entry on Ellery Queen.

Literary Precedents

Queen's literary ancestors include Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, E. C. Bentley, and closer to home, S. S. Van Dine. Like these writers, Queen emphasizes the principles of rational deduction, and creates a detective-hero who is intelligent, eccentric, and infallible. Like Poe's Dupin and Conan Doyle's Holmes, Queen possesses extraordinary deductive abilities and a creative imagination which, in concert, enable him to penetrate almost insoluble mysteries. Yet Queen is less antisocial than either of these figures, less sardonic in his response to the world. He is, like E. C.

Bentley's Philip Trent, a gentleman accepted by the upper levels of the society in which he moves. However, it is to Van Dine's Philo Vance that the early Ellery Queen bears the closest resemblance. S. S. Van Dine, the pseudonym of the journalist and art critic Willard Huntington Wright, wrote eleven novels featuring his detectivehero Vance. These novels reveal the basic structure of the formal deductive puzzle, and are noted for their ingenious and complex plots. Like Vance, Ellery Queen is a refined, cultivated, and learned young man. Both inherited money from a relative, Vance from an aunt, Queen from an uncle, which removed them from "the class of social parasite" and allowed them to lead the "ideal intellectual life." Vance is drawn into the world of crime and murder through his acquaintance with District Attorney John F. X. Markham, while Queen's contact with this world is through his father, Inspector Richard Queen of the NYPD. Like Van Dine, Queen creates in the early works intricate plots at the expense of detailed characterization. Queen departed from the Van Dine model in his decision to make author and sleuth identical, where Van Dine had made his author identical with his sleuth's assistant, and in his insistence upon fair play.

Many critics regard Van Dine's work, while logical, as obscurely intellectual, making the reader's task of following his deductions almost impossible.

Queen's puzzles, on the other hand, require far less arcane knowledge on the part of his readers for their solutions.

Other literary precedents for Queen's early work outside the field of crime literature include the novel of manners and Restoration comedies of manners.

While Queen's work clearly suffers in comparison with that of writers like Austen, Congreve, and Sheridan, there is in his novels a similar presentation of a stable and closed society which places the highest value upon the observance of custom and convention.

Queen's work lacks the satiric tone of many comedies of manners, yet it does resemble them in its belief in a secure and benevolent universe. Violations of the social code may occur, crimes may be committed, but the fabric of this genteel world is never seriously threatened. Order is always restored at the end. Like many comedies of manners, Queen's formal detective novels seem distant from actual experience. Written in the 1930s, they make virtually no reference to the political, economic, or social disturbances

of the time. Instead they provide a vision of existence which, like that of comedy, reassures the reader that the wicked will be punished, the virtuous rewarded, and that truth will always triumph. In their avoidance of extremes, complex emotion, and violence, they serve as reminders of a world of innocence and simplicity, a world unlike that occupied by most of their readers. Naive and escapist they may be, but like other nonrealistic literary forms such as the Elizabethan pastoral, they answered certain needs of the readers of their time.

Related Titles

The other novels bearing the subtitle "A Problem in Deduction" are The Roman Hat Mystery (1929), The Dutch Shoe Mystery (1931), The Greek Coffin Mystery (1932), The Egyptian Cross Mystery (1932), The American Gun Mystery (1933), The Siamese Twin Mystery (1933), The Chinese Orange Mystery (1934), The Spanish Cape Mystery (1935), Halfway House (1936), The Door Between (1937), The Devil to Pay (1938), The Four of Hearts (1938), and The Dragon's Teeth (1939). They resemble The French Powder Mystery in their emphasis upon the puzzle, upon order and social decorum, and upon the importance of plot rather than character.

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