Gallowglass Short Guide

Gallowglass by Ruth Rendell

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Characters

Barbara Vine's absorption with unnatural psychological states dominates her portrayal of Sandor, more deadly by far in his separation from reality than Joe. Sandor's keen mind seems somewhere to have slipped over the thin line to outright obsession, at once his perverse strength and his fatal weakness. Sandor's pursuit of Nina had begun long before, when he and others had kidnapped her for ransom in Italy.

The stories with which he hypnotizes Joe at last coalesce into the myth that has guided Sandor's actions ever since, the belief that he is a new Paris, abducting a Helen for whom he counts everything else in his warped world well lost. Sandor thinks nothing of slashing Joe gratuitously with a cutthroat razor when Joe, doglike, comes too close. But when Joe's adopted sister Tilly, one of Vine's most engaging grotesques, takes Sandor into her bed to seal their cooperation in the kidnap plan, Sandor's lackluster performance is perversely predicated on his brutal reminiscences.

Out of the mouth of the rejected Joe come acute observations: Sandor, he, and Tilly are "three members of society who're been squeezed out of it," and Vine's devastating ending leaves no grounds to doubt that in her fictional universe a grisly justice must triumph when murderers have been loosed upon society.

Social Concerns/Themes

The title, Gallowglass, the fourth Barbara Vine novel, comes out ofviolent tradition in Celtic history: A "gallowglass" was a chieftain's bodyguard, sworn to stand constantly at his master's right hand, ready to taste food and drink and hurl himself in front of hostile spears or battle axes. Although Vine sets her story in contemporary England, society is scarcely less violent today than in the time of the druids, allowing her to focus on the modern phenomenon of kidnapping for ransom. Her dual protagonists, who alternately narrate the novel, are two "gallowglasses" whose fates converge on the figure of a "Princess," a lovely exmodel now married to a wealthy British businessman.

Joe, who speaks first, illustrates Vine's interest in the social misfits for whom Britain's National Health Service offers too little help too late. Raised by uncaring foster parents and ejected from a psychiatric ward by governmental cuts in welfare spending long before his depression is even alleviated, Joe comes close to throwing himself under an express train. He is rescued in the nick of time by Sandor, an enigmatic sadistic stranger with whom he falls into a selfless asexual love. Joe willingly becomes Sandor's gallowa glass, at his side each step of the tortuous way that Sandor plots to kidnap Nina Apsoland.

Joe's opposite is Paul Garnet, hired by Apsoland to guard his wife. Garnet is as normal as Joe is skewed. After Garnet's wife left him, he accepted Apsoland's offer so that he could raise the daughter he loved. But by falling in love with Nina Apsoland, Garnet opens a chink in the cordon of security he is supposed to be maintaining, endangering both Nina and his daughter Jessica.

The entangled lives Vine portrays as meeting in pursuit and defense of Nina Apsoland allow her to explore various faces of love. By Ruth Rendell's theory of creating sympathetic figures for her novels, Joe's dogged, hopeless attachment to Sandor should make him acceptable to readers, if not wholly palatable. Garnet, on the other hand, falls in love with love, a physical passion for a beautiful woman blinding him to his duty and even to his concern for his child. Once Garnet's daughter becomes a lever in the kidnap scheme, he abruptly falls out of love with Nina: she had done "too much" for him, he told her, in offering to give herself up to the kidnappers' in place of Jessica, and that meant death to their relationship.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

In Gallowglass Vine departs from the Jamesian reticence she used in The House of Stairs (1989), where she unveiled the crime at the novel's core with deliberate gravity. Here the kidnapping is plotted openly throughout the novel, but its real motivation lies hidden in the twisted mentalities she depicts. The surprises at the end of Gallowglass are produced not so much by revelations of guilt and innocence as by a strange denouement in which the old girl-meets-boy plot line is turned upside down. Normalcy, as Paul Garnet represents it, withdraws from commitment, while whatever psychological disturbances Joe and Tilly suffer only draw them closer together.

The device of dual narrators that Vine employs in Gallowglass allows a constant seesaw between the unholy trinity of Sandor, Joe, and Tilly and the conventional romantic triangle of Garnet, Nina, and Apsoland. Vine inverts the traditional happy ending of fiction, severing the largely physical bond between Nina and Garnet and allowing Tilly and Joe, raised as siblings although not related by blood, to find what happiness they can together, incestuous in spirit if not in fact. This taint in their relationship lends the closing of Gallowglass a note peculiar to Vine's absorption with abnormal psychology, both a condemnation of society's rejection of its misfits and a plea for compassion toward them: What no one seems to understand, Joe believes, "is that what's the wrong end of the stick for others may be the right end for you."

Related Titles

Rendell/Vine's technique of bringing two disturbed characters together at the climax of a suspense novel, seen in The Bridesmaid (1989), has modulated in Gallowglass into an overt comparison between the normal and the disturbed.

The abnormal sexual patterns she has hinted at in several previous novels, like the experimental relationship between two women in The House of Stairs (although both characters claim it is not a lesbian affair), is limited in Gallowglass to the mildly incestuous overtones of Tilly's choice of Joe as lover. Joe seems incapable of any sort of physical passion: He asks plaintively, "However you look at sex, it's not attractive, is it?" Because of these shifts in emphasis, Gallowglass seems both more conventional and less powerful a novel than the earlier Vine books. This novel more closely resembles Rendell's Wexford novels, which conventionally pit normalcy against criminal aberration, occasionally to a degree that detracts from their author's attempts at advancements in fictional technique.

Copyright Information

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