The Good Husband Short Guide

The Good Husband by Gail Godwin

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Characters

There are four main characters: Magda Danvers, her husband Francis Lake, Alice Henry, and her husband Hugo Henry. At the book's opening, all seem more notable for what they have done in the past than for their current activities.

Magda, in her graduate school days, was a combination of brilliance, charisma, and self-promotion. She managed to get her study of visionary poets published before it was ever submitted as her dissertation — a flouting of academic taboos for which she later paid. In the "present" of the narrative, she is still witty, analytical, and full of unique observations and theories. As her illness goes on, more and more of these cannot be communicated but take place only in her own mind. This mental isolation is another tragedy which parallels the tragedy of her unfinished second book.

Even though much of the book takes place from Magda's point of view and in her memories, we learn surprisingly little about the fifty-eight years of her life. Her first and second meetings with Francis, whom she "stole" from a monastery, are recounted. We are also told that Magda and Francis spent several summers in Europe, where she did research, and that Magda's mother regarded her attainment of a husband as a much bigger achievement than any of her scholastic work. No other scenes of their marriage before Magda's illness are shown. Nor does the reader visit her childhood, or even learn her reasons for specializing in the visionary poets. Whether this is deliberate on the author's part — because such things become meaningless in the face of death — or accidental, it is hard to tell. But these are the very things that would have humanized Magda as a character. The lack of them tends to distance the reader from Magda's decline and pain, so that she becomes a figure drawn in outline rather than a fully fleshed-out human being.

Much of Francis's past is also blurred, but he comes across more vividly in his deeds. He is a person who lives to serve; he finds happiness in homely acts such as cooking or polishing windows to a sparkle. He is not an unintelligent man, but he does not examine his own thoughts as Magda thinks he should. This is a perceptual difference rather than dullness. Francis does find beauty in flowers and in misericords, the small hidden carvings in cathedral choirs that Magda urges him to study. His diffidence has only increased while living in Magda's shadow, even though after she dies, he leads small tour groups through ancient churches. His basic inclination remains, however, to stay in the background and to wait for others to define his tasks.

Hugo Henry at first appears both bombastic and overly sensitive, rushing to finish his wife's sentences before she does and sulking when a rival writer's books get better shelf display than his.

As the book follows him at Aurelia College and on tour, he becomes more complex and sympathetic than in this first impression. Hugo has had a fair amount of acclaim and achievement in the past. But now he is blocked, coasting on his laurels, and helplessly watching his new marriage fall apart.

He genuinely anguishes over these problems and flounders about trying to solve them. In the end he regains his writing motivation but cannot save his marriage. During these efforts Hugo comes across as the most understandable of the major characters.

Alice Henry was Hugo's new editor before they discovered the meeting of minds that led to their marriage. Like Francis, she has a quiet and self-effacing manner. But unlike him, she wants more out of life than to be Hugo's handmaiden. When they lose the longanticipated baby, Alice can find no satisfaction in looking after their chilly rented house. She spends hours at Magda's bedside, as much to shut out the silence in her own house as to bask in the glow of another marriage. Like Margaret in Father Melancholy's Daughter, she seems curiously out of touch with her own emotional needs, mistaking envy of Francis's serenity for romantic love. At book's end, separated from Hugo, she has picked up her editorial work again. She seems poised to work out some sort of relationship with Francis, in whose house she is staying while he goes back temporarily to his old seminary.

The other characters play supporting roles, darting in and out of view with their eccentricities revealed in small sharp passages. One partial exception is Bea McCandless, Hugo's hostess when he returns to his South Carolina hometown to help dedicate a library.

Bea is also fighting a terminal illness, lupus, but her response has been to turn outward rather than inward and to work to help her community. Bea's enthusiasm finally frees Hugo from his block and supplies the spark needed for his new, ambitious novel. The contrast with Magda's self-absorption is clear.

Social Concerns

As The Good Husband opens, Magda Danvers has just learned that her ovarian cancer is incurable. Magda, a brilliant scholar who has never lived up to her early promise, resolves to discover the meaning of her own death.

The novel follows her last months in considerable detail as she struggles to pass this "Final Examination" well, and on her own terms.

Of course death is a perennial concern of humankind. The nineteenthcentury novel tended to sentimentalize and domesticate death. Twentieth-century fiction, in large part, has shared our culture's refusal to give it sustained attention. Death certainly occurs in modern novels, but most often as the starting point, the resolution, or the by-product of other plot developments.

Recently some novels have again used death as a central subject. The AIDS epidemic and the spread of non-Western or New Age philosophies are social trends that may have contributed to this countertrend. The Good Husband does not directly show these influences. It takes a wholly nonmystical approach to death, and the fatal illnesses shown, ovarian cancer and lupus, have not been as visible as AIDS.

Godwin's tone is also militantly unsentimental. However, in a curious way she domesticates death as the Victorians did, by having the whole process take place at home and showing few medical details.

Besides Magda's efforts to discover (or impose) a meaning in her own death, she wrestles with the question of what it means to others. Many members of the Aurelia College community pass through her sickroom and the novel's pages: some briefly, others for a long and involved stay. Magda's husband Francis Lake cares for her with solicitude. Alice Henry, herself recently bereaved in childbirth, visits and keeps returning. Her visits please both Magda and Francis, and they provide solace for Alice's own depression as well. Magda sees "what is in [others'] hearts that they don't even know yet," and she tries to plan the future for them. Through her death, Francis's and Alice's lives both change (albeit in ways not quite foreseen by anyone), adding some weight to this theme. Its effects on other characters, described by some critics as subtle, may come across to many readers as so subtle as to be invisible.

The second social concern in the novel is the nature of creativity. What makes some people creative, and others mere laborers in the vineyards? What accounts for blocked or fallow periods in the life of an artist? Why do some people remain underachievers, perhaps for their whole lives? The dilemma of Magda's unfinished scholarly projects and Hugo Henry's writer's block loom large in the story.

The book's other major focus is marriage. As the title implies, Francis Lake has been a good husband to Magda.

Both Magda and the author consider him as near to an ideal husband as a woman is likely to find. In terms of comfort and devotion to Magda this is certainly true. If one reads the novel as a study of the dynamics of marriage, however, another picture emerges.

Although Alice believes Magda and Francis had an idyllic marriage, this is not necessarily true. The harmony they did share seems to have been attained by Francis's suppression of his own individuality and occasional anger.

Hugo and Alice's marriage is like theirs, being the match of an exuberant and driven creative person with a quieter and more discreet mate. It is different because Hugo genuinely cares about Alice's own ambitions and feelings even if he shows it clumsily. Alice is not so self-abnegating as Francis, either; she expects to be a full partner in her marriage. And hers is the marriage which ultimately fails, even though inwardly and outwardly it is more normal than the other. The message which emerges from this contrast is ironic, perhaps best captured by the waggish saying that the most stable marriages are those in which the partners' neuroses mesh. Plot events also touch lightly — very lightly — upon such timely topics as racism, homosexual couples, and medical malpractice.

The foibles of academe are part of the background, presented in a tone just short of satirical.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The book's style is not unusual or showy. Many short flashbacks and information-summary passages are sprinkled through it, but they blend smoothly into the overall narrative.

Each of the four main characters is shown at significant points in his or her own story. Occasionally the same episode is related twice, from two different points of view.

In structure, the tension builds to the point of Magda's death, about twothirds through the book. The last third follows Alice, Francis, and Hugo in its aftermath, with smaller turning points which help each to decide about new directions.

No other works come to mind as direct influences on this novel. The Good Husband is distinctly if quietly different from most literary treatments of death and of marriage. One work which contains some parallels is May Sarton's A Reckoning (1978). Like Godwin's novel, it is the story of an intellectual woman's journey to death, carrying the theme of death as "a reckoning."

Themes

The Good Husband's themes connect directly to its primary concerns, yet they are difficult to pin down. Insofar as the novel is an examination of howto-die or what-death-is, its theme is extremely opaque. Death itself is opaque, true, to all of us who have not passed this "final examination." But most novels about death present a theory or statement about it, which can range from saccharine reassurance to bitter nihilism. Godwin does not seem to have any such statement.

It may be that Magda's "ordering of her loves" is another way of saying, "At the end, all we have is love." As she fades, Francis, who devotedly loves her, cares for her tenderly long after outside events stop having any meaning. And Alice, whose loving friendship developed after Magda's illness, is there at the end like a benediction.

Yet the theme may be: "One dies as one lives." In some ways, Magda dies very much alone. Intent on doing things her own way even if it contradicts good sense, she rages at Francis between her reveries. Her last words to him are: "Oh, you idiot!" followed by "You're on your own." From this reading, the most the reader can conclude is that Magda managed to die, as she had lived, on her own terms. Magda also says many times that it is up to her to provide meaning to her own death. Perhaps the message is no more than that the goal of a good death is self-knowledge.

The book's theme of creativity and achievement is a bit clearer. Hugo Henry's problem reflects the common belief that blocks can occur spontaneously in a writer's life. Sheer effort or will does not conquer them, but serendipity may. Hugo's breakthrough happens when he is traveling, hearing new stories, and about to resolve his problems as a husband and a father. So getting one's personal support system in order may also be involved.

Magda's specialty is the visionary poets. They, like her, had strong drives toward self-indulgence and self-absorption, but they managed to create art out of them. She is never able to overcome her block. Why? The book gives few direct clues. The reader has to guess, from the evidence of Magda's life. A likely reading is that Magda simply had everything too easy. With an adoring husband and no other personal commitments, she was free to indulge herself. She focused on creating her own flamboyant persona rather than on any serious outside project.

She needed something to push against to make her truly strong.

Key Questions

The novel's major themes — death, creativity, marriage and relationships — are mysteries that no one can fully explain. To the author's credit, she does not try to sum any of them up in a simple prescription, although her hand can be seen in the way the mysteries are shaped in the story. This adds to the book's potential for interesting discussion. The story situations can be looked at directly, or used as a springboard for larger implications. Or even for considering how much art imitates life, and vice versa, as some of the character dynamics contradict usual fictional and real-life patterns.

1. What if Francis had been the one with an untimely fatal illness? Would Magda have tended him so patiently to the end? If she did not, would her conscience have bothered her?

2. Would Alice's depression over the baby's death have lasted so long if she had not been in an unfamiliar town, and bereft of other useful work?

3. Hugo has regularly noted down ideas that seemed promising for future works, yet nothing took hold until his visit to Calhoun. Was it just serendipity that he heard a story there which became his next novel? Or was something else at work?

4. When Alice tells Hugo that she's leaving him, he reflects ruefully that what she is offering Francis has never been his to lose. Do you agree? If so, was their marriage a mistake?

5. Do you believe Alice will fare better with Francis? If not, what kind of man would be a better husband for her?

6. Might Magda have been more productive if she had been married to someone else, or not married at all?

Why or why not?

7. Although Magda's specialty is the visionary poets, the visionary life seems to play very little part in her thoughts as she approaches death. Why do you think this is?

8. The book's stance toward death is secular and unsentimental, and Magda herself seems to share this view. Yet her letter reveals the hope that art and symbols are the imitation of a greater spiritual reality. Is this a widely held idea? Is it unique to our own time?

9. Magda tells Francis that his failure to examine his own motives and inner life will hurt him. This does not happen. Was Magda wrong? Why or why not?

10. In many romance novels, the hero is a macho male, the very opposite of Francis Lake. Is Godwin's portrait of Francis as "the good husband." realistic?

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