The Heart of Midlothian Short Guide

The Heart of Midlothian by Walter Scott

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Characters

As indicated in the foregoing passages, Jeanie Deans is far and away the most significant character in the novel, and, it is generally agreed, one of Scott's finest achievements in realistic characterization.

One early feature of the realism is Jeanie's physical appearance, which immediately sets her apart from typical romantic heroines: her personal attractions were of no uncommon description. She was short, and rather too stoutly made for her size, had grey eyes, light-coloured hair, a round good humoured face, much tanned with the sun, and her only peculiar charm was an air of inexpressible serenity, which a good conscience, kind feelings, contented temper, and the regular discharge of all her duties, spread over her features.

This combination of description and analysis of character (no matter how simple and straightforward it is—Jeanie is simple and straightforward) provides an image of the sort of person Sir Walter wanted for his primary character, one whose moral dilemma (as many have called it, though she has little choice, given her strict background and profound sense of right and wrong) informs the essence of the book.

Jeanie is clearly the heroine of the story, and her sister, Effie, provides a dramatic contrast with Jeanie. While not a villain, Effie is more of a weak victim, easily led and foolish in her passions, and of a lesser character than Jeanie. Some critics have complained that Effie is not developed fully enough; but so far as she is, she serves the needs of the plot well. And, her contrast with Jeanie underlines this heroic girl's fine qualities. That Effie falls in love with Geordie Robertson (really George Staunton), has his child, and later in the plot marries him is quite believable, since she has been revealed as a very pretty girl with a weak will and a lack of firm moral standards. However, there is sympathy for her in both Jeanie's heart and that of her father, who has been heard to cry out, "Effie! Effie!. .. puir blinded misguided thing!" Misguided she has certainly been.

Effie's return to the plot as the wife of George Staunton, now Sir George (he has inherited the title from his late father), seems to some readers superfluous. However, Effie, now Lady Staunton, helps to resolve the mystery of the lost baby. As it turns out, he was indeed stolen away and became a thief and later escaped to America, where he was probably killed by Indians (he also is strongly suspected of being the criminal who murdered his own father, George). Jeanie and Reuben, of course, keep the secret of the true identity of Lady Staunton and Sir George forever. This "coda" to the novel is believed by some readers to be a necessary working out of the details of the plot. It is a fitting finale that, after her husband's death, Effie stays with Jeanie for a time and then returns to the high society she had known in London—-only to leave it after some ten years to enter a convent on the continent, there to atone spiritually for her errors and sins.

Criticism has been leveled at Scott for not providing an adequate background for George, specifically how and why he became a criminal (he only admits that he was weak and submitted to evil influences). As he is first seen, in the Porteous Riot passages, he is already a hardened villain, though the cause of the riot may be judged to be somewhat justified, since Porteous had ordered his troops to fire on unarmed civilians engaged in a mainly peaceful protest. The whole episode is based on an actual event in Scottish history (any worthy edition of the novel will supply a note that explains this occurrence), and it underscores the Scottish resistance to some of the more undesirable effects of the Act of Union of 1707, which united the Parliaments of England and Scotland and allowed considerable legalistic interference (as it was perceived by many Scots) by England in Scottish affairs, such as the harsh law by which Effie is condemned to death.

Robertson/Staunton appears only sporadically throughout the plot, and he is indeed not fully developed as a character.

In defense of Scott, one could argue that George is not a central character and does not deserve or need the fullness of development due to a main participant in the action. One feature that might enliven and clarify the story could be more information about how and why Effie became so entranced by such a person. Her differences from Jeanie reveal the flaws in her character sufficiently, but the attractions of George are not clearly depicted.

One quite valid explanation for the differences between the sisters is that they were born to two mothers and were raised somewhat differently by their father, the strict Covenanter David Deans. (A Covenanter was a person devoted to the National Covenant of 1638, whose signers affirmed the Scottish preservation of the "purity" and sanctity of the Protestant religion in Scotland.) While David made sure that Jeanie was strict in her religious devotions and conscientious in her domestic duties, his treatment of Effie was far more "loose," partly because of the child's beauty, fragility, and seemingly innocent charm.

Of course, the devout old man comes to bitterly regret his daughter's backsliding.

David's strict adherence to his faith also provides an interesting and sometimes entertaining conflict between himself and Reuben Butler, whose religious views are more liberal. Their arguments almost ruin the proposed marriage between Reuben and Jeanie. But, Reuben's tact and David's tired but enduring patience win out, and the marriage takes place not far from the close of the story. Deans's intransigent nature also gives Scott the opportunity to underline some features of the Scottish personality that help to explain character motivation and the general tenor of Scottish society at the time. This revelation also gives the lie to those who find Scott lacking in deep thought and profound insight. It takes a very thoughtful author to explain so clearly and succinctly the loyalty and sense of community that characterized Scots in that early period: Perhaps one ought to be actually a Scotch man to conceive how ardently, under all distinctions of rank and situation, they feel their mutual connection with each other as natives of the same country. There are, I believe, more associations common to the

inhabitants of a rude and wild, than of a well-cultivated and fertile country; their ancestors have more seldom changed their place of residence; their mutual recollections of remarkable objects is more accurate; the high and low are more interested in each other's welfare; the feelings of kindred and relationship are more widely extended, and, in a word, the bonds of patriotic affection, always honourable even when a little too exclusively strained, have more influence on men's feelings and actions.

Though Scott held no illusions about the relative lack of cultural advancement of Scotland compared with England, his insightful and honest generalization not only marks him as a very thoughtful author, but also helps to clarify some of the motivations and actions of the characters, such as the feeling of solidarity that Jeanie experiences on her journey south with the various Scots with whom she comes in contact and who assist her on her way.

Though George's background is not developed, that of Reuben (and of Jeanie) is, even to his childhood, when he was an intelligent but not particularly strong boy.

Thus, Jeanie, who was an early comrade, stands forth as the stronger of the two, though inferior in intelligence and, soon, in education. The preparation for their falling in love is more than adequate and believable. Butler emerges as a "useful" character, not only in his relationship with Jeanie, but also in his activities during the Porteous Riot. He also helps in procuring for Jeanie an interview with the Duke of Argyle, a statesman whose brief appearances in the text portray him as the ideal of a Scottish nobleman, one who loves his homeland but who must tread softly in England, where much of his political energies have to be exerted. The scene of Jeanie's plea for Effie's life before Queen Caroline is a masterly presentation of the ins and outs of courtly behavior; one of the highest tributes to the Duke is his wise decision to stop trying to win over the Queen and to let Jeanie speak for herself.

Lastly, while Meg Murdockson and her daughter, the deranged Madge Wildfire, appear only here and there in the novel, they are very memorable characters. Often alluded to as evidence of Scott's superiority in creating characters of low station and exotic personalities and behaviors, they help to elucidate the plot turns that create the largely grim outcome. The previous seduction of Madge by George (an act whose motivation seems sketchy and is not really explained) has helped to madden the girl and to turn her mother, the witchlike Meg, against any other woman whom George grows fond of. The baby that Effie bore with George is given into Meg's care, providing the plot development regarding the fate of the baby and some of George's late remorse for his earlier behavior. The scene in which Meg is hanged for a witch indicates Scott's power of stylistic brevity, when the topic is appropriate, and his command of striking imagery: the outline of the gallows-tree, relieved against the clear sky, the dark shade formed by the persons of the executioner and the criminal upon the light rounds of the aerial ladder, until one of the objects, launched into the air, gave unequivocal signs of mortal agony, though appearing in the distance not larger than a spider dependent at the extremity of his invisible thread, while the remaining form descended from its elevated situation, and regained with all speed an undistinguished place among the crowd.

The description of a hanging as seen from a distance has never been better accomplished.

Madge is artfully depicted as at least partly insane, as she sometimes talks sensibly and at other times rants wildly. Her later death comes as no surprise and may even cause some sympathy in the reader, as it does in the good-hearted Jeanie. All of the other characters revolve around this heroic young Scottish lass, and, as the central focus, Jeanie helps to give all of them an air of reality and meaning—one of the principal reasons that so many readers find The Heart of Midlothian to be Scott's best novel.

Social Concerns

The principal social concern in The Heart of Midlothian, one of Sir Walter Scott's best works, is a remarkably modern one.

The chief moral issue concerns the admirable heroine of the story (perhaps the bestdrawn female character in the entire range of Scott's fiction), Jeanie Deans. She must decide whether to commit perjury in order to save her sister's life. That the "lie" would be a relatively minor one—just a matter of whether the sister, Effie Deans, had told Jeanie that she was pregnant—is of no real consequence to Jeanie; she has been brought up to believe that the truth must prevail— any truth, all truth. Jeanie's alternative is to admit that Effie never told her of the pregnancy. This situation developed because of the strict Scottish laws concerning child murder—a matter that calls to mind the furor over abortion today.

Effie's conviction stems from the fact that the baby has disappeared and that she told no one of its existence; the legal presumption is that she killed the infant to avoid the shame of being an unwed mother and the burden of caring for the child. This stern judgment reflects the social climate of Scotland in the early eighteenth century, when large numbers of children were murdered. Further, insofar as the law relates to society, Jeanie's decision to tell the truth, no matter what the cost, is relevant. Strictly speaking, she could not have been convicted of perjury, since Effie certainly would support her sister's statement. Thus, the matter of legalistic convenience as opposed to conscience is stressed in this novel.

The proof of Jeanie's solid character (which is presented in a remarkably realistic and believable manner) is seen in her determination to save her condemned sister by going to London and appealing to the Queen, Caroline. Some studies of Scott say that she walked all the way; in fact, she walks a long distance, but also is provided with a ride by friendly persons now and then. Nevertheless, her journey is hazardous and arduous. She meets with hardships and bandits, but she rises above all problems and hindrances, largely because of her firm determination and appealing nature.

A number of people befriend her on her way, as well.

Jeanie's interview—first, with the Duke of Argyle, and, with his help, the Queen—underscores another social phenomenon of signal importance: the class structure of the British Isles at the time. Jeanie is a farm girl (a detail that Scott enforces artfully by noting her difficulty with the written word), and she must associate, to plead for her sister's life, with nobility and royalty.

The Deans family, middle-class landowners (as the middle class might be judged in Scotland then), are respectable (until Effie's grievous error) and respected. The novel also presents images of the lower class, most strikingly in the person of the thief James Ratcliffe (somewhat reformed early in the plot) and his cohorts (among them, a man referred to as George, Geordie, and Robertson, and who is really the aristocrat George

Staunton; his descent into thievery and general criminality sheds further light on the matter of class distinction). All levels of society are thus revealed, and Sir Walter's understanding of and sympathy with each of them emerges clearly in the text.

While Scott respected and even honored upper levels of society (he has been criticized for calling the King "chief"), he knew, loved, and dealt successfully with the lower orders, too. Being a lawyer, he was not unfamiliar with criminal types (once, as an old man, he jumped in front of an escaping convict and prevented his flight). One sees him portraying with warm regard the narrow-minded David Deans and the egocentric Bartoline Saddletree (who thinks he knows all about the law) and the humorously dull-witted (but good-hearted) Lord Dumbiedikes (Scott possessed the gift of creating or finding expressive names for his characters). Also, the crazed Madge Wildfire (another apt nickname), whom some reviewers perceive as a wicked woman but whom Scott clearly understands and presents as a nearly tragic figure. All of these persons are intertwined in a plot that some have criticized because of the extended opening, the scenes of the Porteous Riot, which, however, was based on a real event in Edinburgh (as was Jeanie's trip to London, founded on the real-life journey of a woman named Helen Walker). However, there are staunch defenders of the story line, noting that the riot explains a great deal about the social attitudes of the time, most particularly the resentment felt by Scots toward the power of England's enforcement of unpopular laws.

Sir Walter's implied thesis throughout these events is that all classes have a place in society and must be judged fairly, with compassion, and with a respect for their better qualities. So, when George Robertson is found to be the son of an aristocratic family, Scott does not elevate him to a higher moral plane; he has been a criminal and has treated Effie shamefully. For all his transgressions, Scott makes George pay dearly, in a long concluding passage that has also attracted negative comment, along with support for closing the novel with all "loose ends" tied up. Scott's "message" about society here is certainly that the problems must be faced, understood, and dealt with firmly but with a broad understanding. No character sets forth this attitude more clearly than Jeanie herself. She treats everyone, high and low, with respect and as much understanding as she can muster.

Scott could do no more.

Techniques

The three main areas of technique that have attracted attention are plot, characterization, and style. Of these, plot is the most often discussed. One of the standard criticisms of Scott's novels is their languid openings (though some critics earnestly defend them, noting the need for the historical and other background information for the story to be clear).

In the case of The Heart of Midlothian, however, the action commences early in the story. After the first chapter (indeed tiresome, to many readers), which is part of the introductory material to the "Tales of My Landlord," the second chapter immediately takes up the situation that leads to the Porteous riot, introducing key characters Wilson, Robertson, and Porteous himself.

The violent action of the riot and hanging of Porteous by the mob is told in a lively and brilliantly scenic fashion (a few critics have noted Sir Walter's skillful use of color to enliven important scenes). As the grim procedure continues, Reuben Butler is brought into the plot; and, shortly thereafter, Scott provides information on the early years of Reuben and Jeanie Deans—as well as the beliefs her father inculcated in Jeanie that motivate her to refuse to commit perjury and then to save her sister's life by a heroic action. Thereafter, the story line moves on with reasonable pace, marked now and then by Scott's modernistic tendency to shift time frames, so that an event in one frame is followed (and often explained) by an event that occurred in the past. Happily, this device is employed sparingly and does not confuse the attentive reader.

The other chief complaint about the plot is that it continues after the "real story" of Jeanie's successful journey and happy return is completed. As Edgar Johnson points out, however, there is much that needs to be explicated: Jeanie's happy marriage, her final relationship with her sister (who remains egotistical and relatively unthinking, as her elopement with Robertson/Staunton proves), and the outcome of George Staunton's "new" life—as well as the tragic revelation of his son's fate.

All of this may, as many have claimed, be told in an inferior fashion, as compared with the earlier chapters. But it may readily be argued that the content is not superfluous, even though the material may have been appended, as some believe, because Scott had contracted with his publisher for a fourth volume.

All of Scott's novels have been faulted by critics for what they regard as wordiness and tautology. However, it may not be fair to judge an early nineteenthcentury style by twentieth-century standards. More important, perhaps, is the fact that Sir Walter developed two styles: the expressive (and occasionally difficult) Scottish dialect and the standard received English mode of expression. A comparison of Scott's writing with that of other authors of the period reveals that Sir Walter does offer sometimes long sentences and occasionally roundabout expressions—as do a number of writers of that era.

Dialect adds to the verisimilitude of the text, especially for historical phenomena such as the Scottish resistance to the rigor of English laws in The Heart of Midlothian. The heartfelt complaints of Scottish citizens against the Act of Union and its results and the equally heartfelt exclamations of, for instance, David Deans in his religious expostulations with almost everyone, especially his family and Reuben Butler, could not otherwise be delivered in so eloquent and believable manner. Possibly the most impressive passage of such dialectic style is Jeanie's appeal to Queen Caroline, for example: "But when the hour of trouble comes to the mind or to the body—and seldom may it visit your Leddyship—and when the hour of death comes to high and low—lang and late may it be yours—O, my Leddy, then it isna what we hae dune for oursells, but what we hae dune for others, that we think on maist pleasantly." Even the Queen, after Jeanie has concluded, exclaims, "This is eloquence." The speech, which may remind some readers of the comment that Lockhart claims the dying Sir Walter made to him, is both respectful and sensible (and eloquent in a way that standard speech could not be).

This passage also demonstrates Scott's art of characterization. Jeanie's appeal is respectful but not toadying. She is cognizant of the Queen's superior position, but she retains her own sense of self-worth. As suggested above, Scott's chief mode of characterization is to reveal his personages by their behavior, words and actions. It must be added, though, that some analysis does take place. For example, in the chapter dealing with the childhood of Reuben and Jeanie, Scott offers a review of early character traits that help to explain actions and statements later in the text. Reuben, for instance, was "weak in constitution, and, though not timid in temper, might be safely pronounced anxious, doubtful, and apprehensive." The author explains that these tendencies derive from Reuben's mother—and from his physical weakness: "He was a pale, thin, feeble, sickly boy, and somewhat lame for an accident in early youth." The lameness Scott understood all too well, from his own disability. All in all, this picture of Reuben as a boy prepares the reader for his behavior later on, as an adult. Apart from being Jeanie's intellectual superior, he is her physical inferior, and together they complement each other in a most believable fashion.

This is characterization at its best.

All things considered, the reader of The Heart of Midlothian should realize that he is perusing a well-planned, important novel that deals with an important period in Scottish (and, by extension, English) history. A fairly popular complaint about Scott's choice of subject matter is that he was interested only in the past, in things that were over and settled. In fact, one can find in this book indications of Sir Walter's concern over law and order, the interests and needs of common folk, and the undying rule of law and of a high morality. Such matters are timeless.

Themes

As suggested above, the moral dilemma that faces Jeanie Deans, and with which she deals successfully, is at the core of the novel. Even when Effie begs her sister to lie for her, to save her life (child murder was a capital crime), Jeanie remains firmly attached to her highly moral upbringing. She adheres to what she sees as a higher morality than sisterly love; her principal love is for God, whom she will not betray, even for her own flesh and blood. This rigidity of conscience results from the childhood that Jeanie has spent in the home of her Covenanter father, David Deans. Therefore,the attitude that she reveals is not only believable, but inevitable. Her journey to London to free Effie is not only heroic, it is of-a-piece with Jeanie's firm principles: she has refused to "save" her sister, so she must do all that she can to prevent Effie's execution.

Throughout the story, Jeanie's high moral code (and that of her husband-to-be, Reuben Butler, a minister, appropriately) shines a thematic light on the events and the other characters in the novel. A related thematic thread is the need for truth, in order to live a happy and meaningful life.

As the truth helps Jeanie to retain her selfrespect and sense of self-worth, the lack of truth (or the twisting of it) brings misery to Effie, George, and many of their cohorts.

Madge is one striking example; she helped to spirit away the baby that Effie bore.

Robertson/Staunton not only tells lies; he lives one for a long time. His death at the end of the book can be viewed as more than poetic justice; it may be judged as profound moral justice.

The contrast between George and Jeanie is thematically and dramatically effective: George dies in a fight, and Jeanie finds happiness married to Reuben. She has been a heroine indeed, as her father says upon her return from London: "Jeanie—my ain Jeanie—my best—my most dutiful bairn [child]... I am hardly worthy of thee! Thou hast redeemed... the honour of our house— Bless thee, my bairn, with mercies promised and purchased! But He has blessed thee, in the good of which He has made thee the instrument." In the same way, Scott has made Jeanie his instrument to send forth his message about morality in general and truth in particular.

Key Questions

In discussing this novel, one should keep in mind the importance of setting: the special significance of Jeanie's moral choice and Effie's dilemma, among other matters, can be found largely in terms of the time and place of the action. Some background on the situation in Scotland after the Act of Union and the Stuart rebellions would be useful and worthy of comment. While no plot takes place in a vacuum, the cultural and historical surroundings of The Heart of Midlothian are particularly relevant to a clear appreciation of the book.

1. Do you agree with Dorothy Van Ghent that the moral problem that Jeanie faces—"to lie to save a life, or not to lie"— is "a problem of no trivial interest" and, "because of a loss of a common moral code" in today's society, "is a question of potentially profound interest for the modern reader"? Does Jeanie do the "right" thing, given the situation in the novel—and would it be the "right" thing now?

2. Does the plot indeed progress too long?

Is the working out of the destinies of George, Effie, their son, and others really helpful in gaining a sense of completeness from the novel? If not, where should Scott have ended the story?

3. A friend of Scott's, Lady Louisa Stuart, wrote to Sir Walter in August of 1818, shortly after the novel was published and complimented him on the unusual and difficult task of "making the perfectly good character the most interesting." Is Jeanie really of greater interest than Effie or George or any of the other members of the literary "cast" of characters?

4. Does the Porteous Riot scene strike you as truly necessary to the plot? Given the information that Scott offers, does the hanging seem justified, and is Robertson's part in the action here any indication of his true nature? Also, is it believable that Effie would not accompany George and the mob when he offers her freedom from the jail?

5. Do the two female "villains" of the novel, Meg Murdockson and Madge Wildfire, arouse any sympathy? Do their deaths create a sense of justice or of pity? Scott is famous for creating such unusual, even bizarre characters. Do you find them credible and impressive—or overdone?

6. Sir Walter is credited with possessing a sensible, realistic view of history (despite the "romantic" tenor of his works), seeing that change is inevitable and often desirable—that the "old ways" had to give way to "modern" alterations. In view of this claim, do the complaints of David Deans and others against the new ideas and laws imposed by the English authorities appear to be justified, or are they simply a literary convenience for the author, to enliven the plot?

7. Do the passages with Saddletree, Dumbiedikes, and their like run on to excess? Are they perhaps just "padding" that adds little to the story, or do their words and actions enhance the main plot lines of the book?

8. Is the Scottish dialect, found in so many important passages in the text, distracting, or does it add to the atmosphere of the time and place and help to develop key characters? For instance, would David Deans's religious fulminations be as effective if they were expressed in standard English?

9. Which particular scene in the novel seems to you to be the most dramatic— for example, the interview between Jeanie and the Queen, or the courtroom passage in which Effie cries out to have Jeanie save her, or the Porteous Riot scene? What criteria should be applied, in order to determine what makes a great literary "scene"?

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