The Houseguest Short Guide

The Houseguest by Thomas Berger

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Social Concerns

As in Neighbors (1980; see separate entry) Berger's The Houseguest presents a "comedy of bad manners," in this case to provide ironic and satirical commentary on American values and moral confusion in the 1980s. After first establishing himself as a model of the helpful and considerate guest, Chuck Burgoyne, the "houseguest" of the novel, proceeds to violate every unspoken taboo of the host/guest relationship while staying with the Graves family at their summer home on an island off the New England coast. Although the Graveses are by no means flawless or even particularly likable—except for Lydia who has married the Graves's son, Bobby—their manners are so impeccable that the mother and the son have never acknowledged the endless philandering of the father. He, in turn, never voices his disappointment with what he considers their major defects. But Chuck's career of rudeness becomes so insulting that they are brought together more closely than at any other time in their lives, and in their outrage they cheerfully contemplate murdering Chuck.

Berger's dark comedy illustrates the power of uncontrolled emotions when the normal conventions of behavior break down. The highest point of irony is achieved by the ending, where all of Chuck's actions are forgiven and he is cheerfully accepted once again, after his status as "guest" is ended and he becomes a salaried employee and major -domo. Explaining the change in status, Doug Graves, the father, says, "He could certainly never get back in here as a guest!

That was the trouble before: the basic arrangement was wrong." Presumably one point of Berger's satire is that the same rudeness and obnoxious personal meddling may be tolerated to some extent from an employee who does good work but is insufferable from a guest.

Another important dimension of the novel's social criticism is its treatment of the tension between the Graves family and the year-round residents of the island, who are collectively depicted as members of one extended family, the Finches. This working-class clan controls law enforcement, health services, and all of the retail businesses on the island.

Doug Graves views them as uniformly greedy, insolent, and untrustworthy. Since events in the novel are never presented from the Finches' point of view, the accuracy of Doug's assessment is not confirmed; but the reader can readily infer the presence of deep-seated resentment on the part of the Finches toward the Graveses, outsiders who treat them virtually as hired servants.

The hidden antagonisms and hostilities in the American class system have seldom been described so savagely, yet so amusingly, as in this novel. Despite their vulgarity the Finches are likely to win the grudging sympathy of most readers, simply because the unconscious assumptions of the Graveses are rooted in a thoughtless arrogance, which their charm does not always conceal.

Techniques

In The Houseguest, Berger does not use any unusual or innovative technical devices. His command of language, beginning with the narrative's surprising opening sentence, is an important key to the novel's effectiveness. Moreover, Berger's use of multiple points of view enhances the novel's ironic comedy. Another important narrative device is the slowly increasing moral importance of the action.

The Graveses begin by being annoyed that Chuck fails to rise early enough to make their accustomed breakfast. Their indignation gradually increases to the point of hysteria and a murder plot.

The use of an extended family of Finches to represent the working class of the island is an effective device. And the behavior of the Finches and of Chuck Burgoyne remains within the realm of fictional realism, if only barely. Here the novel is unlike Neighbors, where Earl Keese's annoying neighbors, Harry and Ramona, and the insolent handyman assume more symbolic roles as Keese seems to be losing touch with reality on the final day of his life.

Themes/Characters

As in most of his novels, Thomas Berger's central theme in The Houseguest is the moral initiation of a sympathetic character. In this case, the central character is a woman (a nearly unprecedented event for Berger): Lydia, the daughterin-law of Doug and Audrey Graves, who has been married to their son, Bobby, for only five weeks. Lydia is from an ItalianAmerican family who have recently become wealthy. The Graveses represent old wealth and status; Doug is an attorney in a prosperous law firm established by his grandfather. The polite, but unfeeling, social setting provides a new and challenging environment for Lydia.

Lydia gains insight and self-esteem, even as the civility of the novel begins to unravel, She finds that, almost alone in the family, she retains a sense of moral responsibility. She also proves to have the strongest inner resources for dealing with Chuck's challenge to peace and order. If the most practical way to deal with him is to plan and execute his murder, then Lydia is more capable than the others of committing the act. Nevertheless, the events of the novel continually surprise her, and she is astonished by the remarkable restoration of order attained by the simple expedient of hiring Chuck at the novel's conclusion. Her initiation is completed when she becomes aware of the importance of good manners for civilized behavior. "I don't think I've ever before understood what manners are," she says.

"And I'm not at all sure I do even now."

But her heightened awareness is confirmed by her insistence that she will stay only on condition that she remain a houseguest.

Most of the other characters are comic triumphs. Doug Graves, the philandering husband and father, is especially hilarious because of his combination of civility and insufferable arrogance, not to mention the contrast between his tireless womanizing and his fastidious avoidance of vulgarity in speech and conduct. His easy acceptance of indebtedness—so long as his creditors do not become noisy or importunate—is also amusing. Equally memorable is Audrey, his patient but insecure wife, who monitors his infidelities as some follow the baseball box scores; yet she never brings up his secret affairs. Bobby lacks his father's self-assurance, but nevertheless provides an amusing moment when he breaks out of his lifelong silence about his parents' neglect of him.

The houseguest of the title, the enigmatic Chuck Burgoyne, is an effective portrait of a social climber whose competence in numerous areas allows him to feel contempt for his hosts, whom he sees as people who take privilege for granted. He wants acceptance on the social level of the Graveses; at the same time he clearly feels the superiority and contempt of a self-made man toward this family whose social position is due to accidents of birth. Presented largely through the eyes of the other characters, Chuck seems driven by obscure motivations until the truth comes out. In the end, Chuck is one of the novel's most successful characters, since his behavior is clearly the result of a powerful ingrained ambivalence toward the Graveses. The numerous Finches, who are

mostly minor characters, are superbly sketched. Berger portrays their conduct as bordering on the outrageous, but he resists the temptation to take them beyond the limits of believability.

Key Questions

Inevitably, readers of The Houseguest wll be stimulated to discuss how people should be expected to behave when they spend the weekend in one's home and also how people feel they ought to behave as visitors. Such considerations can easily lead into discussions of the decay of American manners, as well as to confusions over the correct course of behavior.

Readers may also be prompted to comment on the length of Chuck Burgoyne's visit to the Graveses's house overlooking the beach. At the opening of the novel, Chuck's stay has already reached a week, a period long enough to establish his competence as a cook and to make the Graves family somewhat dependent on his helpfulness. This is an unusual feature of the novel, since most contemporary American social life does not include such lengthy visits, unlike the country house world of Edwardian England depicted in the works of Henry James and E. M. Forster and gently satirized in the fiction of P. G. Wodehouse. Hence, some readers may be reminded of Benjamin Franklin's famous aphorism that guests and fish both begin to smell after three days.

Another issue raised by the novel is the question of when bad manners cease to be incivility and become amoral or immoral behavior. It is notable that except for Lydia, who values privacy and consideration for others, the Graves family is not exactly a model of excellent deportment. Doug Graves, for instance, has been involved in numerous affairs with other women for years, although he is punctilious about maintaining appearances.

His wife, Audrey, although also meticulous about maintaining propriety and avoiding emotion, is essentially a sadistic violator of the privacy of others. She snoops through Doug's briefcase for evidence of his philandering and takes a vicarious pleasure in his heartless and libertine treatment of his female victims.

Nor is their son particularly scrupulous in his treatment of others. Although less predatory than Doug, the agreeable Bobby seems to have married Lydia in order to have an emotional crutch and defender against his father's arrogance.

Readers may want to ponder Berger's own comment—made in an interview with David Madden in Critical Essays on Thomas Berger—that none of the characters in The Houseguest is morally admirable except for Lydia. Or in Berger's words, "Chuck Burgoyne is a vile fellow. The Graveses are simply worthless. Lydia is the only decent person in the book." Discussion of this statement might lead to an assessment of Berger's own moral point of view, as it is exemplified in the novel.

1. Is Berger's view that Lydia is the only morally admirable and sympathetic person in the novel correct, or can we feel some sympathy for the other characters? Is not Audrey, for instance, the victim of a philandering husband, and has not Bobby been the victim of harassment and sexual abuse on the part of older boys and the instructors at his prep school? Could Bobby's marriage to the warm and spirited Lydia be a reaction to a home where he was given material comforts but emotional coldness?

2. What seems to be Chuck Burgoyne's relationship to the Graveses at the beginning of the novel? Despite the fact that they like him and appreciate what they consider his thoughtfulness, why is his stay at their summer house so extended and indefinite?

3. Each of the Graveses seems to assume that Chuck is an acquaintance of someone else in the family. What does this tell us about their relationship with each other?

4. What defects do the Graveses have as a family? Why have both Audrey and Doug refrained from close emotional contact with their son, Bobby? Why is emotional contact so offensive to both Doug and Audrey?

5. What influences in her background, such as wealth combined with a lack of style, have drawn Lydia to marriage with Bobby?

6. When Chuck reverses his pattern of considerate behavior and begins to act with effrontery and contempt toward his hosts, what actions appear to be deliberately provocative? Which actions are merely inconsiderate, as a result of contempt for the Graveses?

7. Chuck Burgoyne saves Lydia from drowning, but he later appears to rape Lydia. Does he in fact violate her? Why, apart from simple lust, does he try to take advantage of her?

8. What roles do the numerous Finches play in the story? Although Doug's view of the Finches is entirely negative and contemptuous, are the Finches generally unsympathetic people? Is their attitude toward the Graveses and other summer people on the island understandable?

9. What is Doug's attitude toward women? Is his attitude toward his numerous paramours contradictory to the spirit of his persistent sexual adventuring? Why or why not?

10. Is the family's plan to kill Chuck a reasonable response to his actions? Why does the family contemplate such a drastic step?

11. How does Lydia's successful effort to confront Lyman, Chuck, and the other Finches restore a sense of reality to a bizarre situation? Is Lydia's disarming of the drunken Lyman believable? What would have been the effect on the novel's outcome, if Lydia's pistol shot at Chuck had actually struck him, instead of going between his legs?

12. Is the novel's conclusion a "happy ending"? Or is the ending highly ironic?

Why does a change in the "basic arrangement" in which Chuck becomes a hired servant rather than a houseguest resolve the conflict between Chuck and the Graveses?

13. Another irony of the novel's conclusion is Lydia's decision to become the "houseguest." Why does Lydia insist on assuming the role, together "with all the

privileges of that situation"? What does she mean when she comments, "I don't think I've ever before understood what manners are . . ."?

Literary Precedents

The American novel of manners has a surprisingly long tradition, reaching back to Henry James and Edith Wharton, or to James Fenimore Cooper's ITomeward Bound (1838) and Home As Found (1838).

This is more than academic, for Berger has published an essay on Cooper. In recent times, the comic novel of manners has been practiced in highly idiosyncratic ways by novelists as different as John Barth, Alison Lurie, and Anne Tyler.

However, the main influences on Berger in this novel are the works of Saul Bellow and Berger's own earlier novels.

Related Titles

The novel in the Berger canon which The Houseguest most resembles is Neighbors, both in its concern for America's obsession with bad manners and in the gradual development of a highly surrealistic situation. The Hottseguest provides credible motivations for its characters and returns to the credibility of realism at its conclusion, while Neighbors is an absurdist morality play on a high literary level.

Characterizations in The Houseguest also recall other Berger novels. Doug Graves is a more memorable version of Blaine Raven, Carlo Reinhart's snobbish, drunken, womanizing father-in-law. Audrey is reminiscent of Naomi, the long-suffering mother in Sneaky People (1975), who secredy writes pornography in order to forget her philandering husband. Lydia, the most likable character in the novel, has the moral sensibility of Carlo Reinhart of the Reinhart series.

Chuck Burgoyne, whose rudeness motivates the action, appears to have no exact prototype in Berger's canon, but he resembles numerous characters used previously by Berger as exemplars of bad manners. He recalls Harry of Neighbors, Siv Zirko of Being Invisible, and numerous characters in The Feud (1983).

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