Maigret Meets a Milord Short Guide

Maigret Meets a Milord by Georges Simenon

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Social Concerns

Simenon's protagonist, Maigret, called the Bergson of the new detective novel influenced by Freud after World War I, illustrates a change in emphasis in the genre. New methods of investigation that relied on instinct, intuition, and empathy gave primacy to irrational forces of the unconscious over rational deduction. Unlike Sherlock Holmes, Maigret tries not to reason but to understand intuitively.

Maigret Meets a Milord, one of the earliest of Simenon's Maigret novels, furnishes a fine introduction to the detective's modus operandi. For Maigret, the important thing is not to learn who committed the crime or how he committed it, but why he committed it.

The rain has been falling for two days when Maigret begins his work at lock 14, which connects the Marne with the lateral canal. The body of a welldressed unidentified woman without papers has been found in a horse stable reached only by a narrow path. Since his arrival, Maigret has been discovering the world of canals and inland water transportation, all of which are quite new to him. In a manner typical of the initial phase of his investigations, the detective sits in a cafe to absorb the local atmosphere. He smells the peculiar odor of stables, tar, groceries, oil, and gas that distinguishes this cafe from others. Sitting there he watches the horse-drawn barges move slowly from lock to lock until Sir William Lampson arrives to identify the dead woman as his wife who had left his yacht a few days earlier.

On the following day Inspector Lucas, soon to become very familiar to Maigret, joins the detective at the lock.

Lucas informs Maigret that Lampson is interested only in whiskey and women and that his friend, Willy Marco, is a notorious crook. When the latter is found dead also, Maigret enters the second phase of his inquiry. As events grow clearer and some of the characters become better known, the reader is encouraged to believe that he is arriving at the same conclusions as Maigret.

But then, the detective interrogates Jean, the carter of the "Providence," and intuitively charges him with Marco's murder. Jean attempts suicide by jumping into the lock. Although rescued, Jean escapes from the hospital and is found dying in the stable where the barge's horses are kept. His fingerprints reveal to Maigret that Jean had been a doctor who had been in prison.

Maigret questions Jean with a series of statements to which he responds by blinking his eyes, whereupon the detective engages in a lengthy monologue, which is the reconstruction of the events leading to the murder of Mary Lampson. She had been his wife and promised to wait for him, but when he left prison he found her living with Lampson as his wife. Wishing to humiliate her, Jean abducted her, brought her to the stable from which, after three days of fear and shame, she attempted to flee and was murdered.

Jean planted a sailor's hat in the stable to divert suspicion from himself and later killed Willy, who had seen him steal the hat.

Maigret explains to Lampson why Jean escaped from the hospital and attempted suicide. He could not be away from the stable with its smells of horses, coffee, and everything that represented his ties with the past.

Every person needs his own place with familiar warmth and smells. For some these are the smells of whiskey, women, and cologne, and the corrupt Englishman understands that he is as much alone and at a loss as Jean had been.

It is the detective's reassuring presence that comprises the chief difference between this series and other groups of Simenon's novels. Many repeat the same themes, and the novelist often treats more serious subjects in the "Maigrets" than in other works. Nevertheless, the "Maigrets" go only to the edge of tragedy, while others pass over into it.

Techniques

Simenon is a traditionalist in that his plot structure is chronological, starting at the moment of crisis, with the past presented in a series of flashbacks, and moving directly to the conclusion.

Transitions are clearly indicated and characters easily distinguished from one another. Many of his dramatic situations are traditional, ranging in mood from melodrama to tragedy.

None is a comedy; for Simenon, life is difficult.

Overall, Simenon's work is unique in twentieth-century literature. He has recreated an entire period so completely that his work can be compared to Honore de Balzac's Comedie humaine (1829-1848). At the same time, his characters have a universality that transcends time and geography. His novels are a transition between the traditional novel, the primary purpose of which was to tell a story, and the modern one, which has broad goals. Simenon's works are very much of the twentieth century. Like the majority of his colleagues, he is impatient with language and believes that self-conscious language is an obstacle to thought; language is a means, not an end. Simenon's novels express the anguish of the twentieth century: the feelings of alienation, guilt and expatriation commonly found in the works of Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, Andre Malraux, and Albert Camus. Unlike the existentialist protagonists, however, Simenon's characters are unable to understand their unhappy situation.

More like Samuel Beckett's, his characters are objects in the conflicts in which they find themselves, not subjects. Perplexed and confused, they wonder where they have been and how long they have been suffering from a kind of amnesia. Their bewilderment stems from a certain schizophrenia of their inner beings. In the process of redefinition of modern literature, man is no longer possessed of a soul and consequently has no values. Led only by vague forces, he cannot initiate actions, but merely acts them out and is not responsible for them.

Themes/Characters

According to Maigret there is no gratuitous evil. Any crime becomes understandable once the facts become known. Maigret's inquiries usually reinforce his belief that a murderer is an unfortunate human being, for almost anyone is capable of murdering if given enough motivation. The motive is often humiliation, treated in a minor key in the "Maigrets." Maigret is interested in learning about the victims of crime, for this knowledge will lead him to understand the criminals better.

Often the victim is more evil than the criminal, and Maigret then hopes that the latter is acquitted.

Thus, there are few professional criminals. Completely free of hatred or ill will as a rule, Maigret is also free of pity as he proceeds with his strictly professional objectivity to disclose the ordinary human behind the criminal.

Preoccupied with one another over a prolonged period of time, the hunter and the hunted sometimes develop a certain closeness that resembles a family relationship.

As a consequence, Maigret refuses to judge most criminals, thus reflecting Simenon's concern with the weaknesses of the judicial system found in many of his novels. Maigret notably recognizes the impossibility of human beings understanding one another; yet there is the necessity for judges and jurors to have clear-cut cases. It is frightening to realize how delicate is the thread on which their decisions hang.

Maigret is less of a hero than is the traditional protagonist of a detective novel because of his simplicity and bourgeois traits. Despite his great cleverness and harmony with his environment, the detective is basically a comfortable father figure. The wealth of detail given by Simenon precludes surrounding Maigret with an aura of mystery.

Literary Precedents

The detective novel has its origins in the Romantic period in the work of Honore de Balzac. The dark, mysterious truth was to be discovered by a superior being, bandit or policeman, living outside the norms of society. In the post-Romantic period, the detective novel of Edgar Allan Poe gave precedence to reason over the forces of darkness, and Arthur Conan Doyle enhanced the power of the intellect by adding the advances of modern science. After World War I, however, the findings of Freud gave greater importance to the irrational forces of the unconscious. Simenon's Maigret represents this latest change in emphasis.

Related Titles

Pedigree (1963; original in French, 1948) and the untranslated Je me souviens (1945) record Simenon's childhood and adolescence. The author uses his encyclopedic memory for names, gestures, physical and psychological quirks, and atmosphere as points of departure in the creation of fictional reality. This is the portrait of his petit bourgeois family in Liege during the early twentieth century. The characters' lives develop against the background of the important sociopolitical events of the period that affect them. The themes of these novels center on Liege and the social class into which Simenon was born. Important, too, are descriptions of his family, notably his domineering mother and long-suffering father, as well as the two large families or clans from which they came. The role of the author himself, especially as a rebellious, debauched youngster, is, of course, great. In addition, the boarders Simenon's mother took in form a significant part of the sordid social scene.

The protagonists in the group of novels to which Act of Passion (1952; Lettre a mon juge, 1947) belongs exhibit Simenon's existential side. This novel provides a good illustration of the unconventional morality of his heroes, whose ethics are not absolutely dictated by intelligence and will, but depend on individual choices. One may do a wrong in order to do a right that has greater priority. Simenon's characters, fundamentally creatures of instinct, exemplify in their solitude his belief that human truth cannot be communicated to others. (Foreigners often symbolize this alienation.) They are dominated by vague ideas that they cannot formulate until they analyze and organize them, but by that time it is usually too late. Meanwhile, they try to escape their solitude and silence by various, usually unsuccessful, means: sensuality, alcohol, marriage. One can only seek to sympathize through understanding, the only means of communication for the author.

Burgomaster of Furnes (1952; Le Bourgemestre de Furnes, 1939) and the untranslated Le Passage de la ligne (1958) are among the Simenon novels that constitute an "exotic" group. In these novels, flight is another important physical and psychological escape from solitude. Some event causes the usually middle-aged hero to break with the type of life he has led, often by committing a crime. As a result, he encounters adventure in an exotic environment, and learns how the other half lives. He may fail, going mad or dying prematurely, or returning to his old life with the realization of the futility of existence; but his courage in liberating himself sometimes gives him the insight to survive more successfully.

Before taking flight, the lives of Simenon's characters here are marked by mechanical routine that is almost ritualistic. Seemingly spontaneous, a crisis has long been developing that makes the hero break with the unsuccessful ritual. Having gone too far in his search for self-knowledge, he may be terrified and escape into madness. On occasion he will return to everyday reality, perhaps different from the one he knew before, with appreciation for the simple, natural things of life. Fortunate but rare is the man who practices some evasion constantly; more common are those who, grinding out their daily existence, try to forget but remain locked in their solitude.

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