Topper Short Guide

Topper by Thorne Smith

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Characters

In a word, the characters are stereotypes. Cosmo Topper is a stuffy banker as well as a henpecked husband; Mrs. Topper a shrew and the voice of conventional morality; Marion Kerby a witty and sexually vibrant representative of the flapper era; and her husband George a handsome playboy who uses his wealth only to pursue his own pleasure. The other two ghosts, Colonel Scott and Mrs. Hart, are of the same type, one generation removed. The others are what E. M. Forster called flat or one-dimensional characters: bellhops, police, salespeople, secretaries.

Character bows to situation in Topper, and the situations are always ludicrous and fantastic. All women are potential sex objects, all men potential philanderers. The characters function well in this fun-filled world, but as they move from one Smith novel to another, they tend to become formulaic, interchangeable, and repetitive.

Social Concerns/Themes

The novel Topper satirizes the newly developed upper middle class in American society: its pretension, hypocrisy, conformity, and insistence on conventional moral behavior. Like all of Smith's novels, it also attacks the Volstead act, which left America dry and dependent on homemade or illegally procured alcohol. Its major theme might be termed "immoral" regeneration, as the staid banker Topper is transformed from a conventional lawabiding citizen to a drunken playboy and potential adulterer. But it is purely escapist literature: For all of his mockery of bourgeoisie wealth and ways, Smith's joyful wickedness has meaning only within the confines of that class.

The symbols of success are fast cars, beautiful women, expensive clothing, and dwellings with appropriately exclusive addresses. It is an exclusively white, Anglo-Saxon world, where all Irish are policemen, all blacks are servants, and all Italians sell food. Illicit sex is praised, no amount of drinking is excessive, and all those who hate the beautiful people are either envious or stupid. Topper mirrors the carefree, irresponsible world of the 1920s, which abhorred the Puritanical strain in American culture, but which never examined the consequences of a narcissistic, solipsistic lifestyle. The fantasy element is provided by the regenerated ghosts Marion and George Kerby, another irrational element to play against the seriousness and sobriety of the rational and respectable world of Cosmo Topper. However, the supernatural is not so much a theme as a deus ex machina to extricate Topper from his conventional lifestyle and introduce him to the joys of drinking and illicit sexuality.

Techniques

Smith's basic technique is one of contrast: the serious Topper and his conventional lifestyle against the flippant and reckless Kerbys, who (in life and in death) thumb their noses at the proprieties. As in most of Smith's novels, the attack on respectability involves a courtroom scene, where the forces of conformity and respectability are overrun by the absurdity of the situation. The intrusion of magic (in this novel the Kerby ghosts, and their ethereal companions Colonel Scott, Mrs. Hart, and their dog Oscar) makes a shambles of law and order and creates an opportunity for the sexual high jinks that are a major part of Smith's work. The dialogue is farcical, as the characters talk at cross-purposes, and confusion reigns. The novel is framed by the Kerby death car, which Topper buys at the beginning of the novel and almost loses his life in as a passenger at the end. It also marks out his journey from respectability and conformity to independence and a new sense of personal worth.

Adaptations

Five of Smith's novels were made into movies: Night Life of the Gods (Universal, 1935), Topper (Metro-Goldwyn, 1937), Topper Takes a Trip (United Artists, 1938), Turnabout (United Artists, 1940), and I Married A Witch (based on The Passionate Witch, United Artists, 1942). There was also a sixth film, based on Smith's characters in the Topper novels, Topper Returns (United Artists, 1941). They drew measured praise from the critics, but were popular with audiences. Night Life of the Gods was praised for its use of special effects, Topper for its characterization.

Mr. Ram's role was slightly expanded in Turnabout, and George Kerby was retained only in Topper. The old Topper films still appear on television, and occasionally in movie theaters. A popular television series by Loverton-Schubert productions appeared on the major networks from 1953-1955, and there was a disappointing made-for-TV film in 1979. Topper was at the center of a controversy about the colorization of classic black-and-white films.

Literary Precedents

Smith's brand of humor in Topper and other comic novels has been compared to music hall comedy, Rabelais, P. G. Wodehouse, and F. Anstey (pseudonym for Thomas Anstey Guthrie, 1856-1934). The dialogue of mock confusion obviously owes much to the stand-up comedians of the music hall, but Smith's brand of humor in Topper borders on the prurient rather than the Rabelaisean. Perhaps H. L. Mencken's twitting of the Puritan conscience and excoriation of Prohibition also formed part of Smith's intellectual background.

Like Smith, F. Anstey introduces magic into an otherwise rational world, with hilarious consequences, often threatening the breakup of engagements or marriages, just as Topper's marriage is threatened by the reckless behavior of the Kerby ghosts. Anstey's story "At a Moment's Notice" resembles Topper in that a respectable man is turned into a monkey after having an accident in a horse-drawn cab. He is made to appear ridiculous before a woman whom he would like to marry, and, like Topper, he awakens from a coma at the end of the story. Anstey, like Smith, also contrasts a severely constricted middleclass world with the madcap world of magic and transformation. He was probably the proximate source for Smith's peculiar type of comic fantasy.

Related Titles

The success of Topper prompted Smith to produce a sequel, Topper Takes a Trip (1931). The scene is shifted from New York to the Riviera, and Topper has almost reverted to his old respectable self. The novel is more episodic than Topper, and the encounters with authority and the sexually suggestive comic scenes do not enhance the contrast between respectability and playful high spirits as they do in the earlier novel. Topper also has the unique experience of cuckolding a ghost, for he commits "adultery" with Marion Kerby's ghost, even though he is constantly being pursued by the vengeful ghost of George Kerby. The novel is "framed" like Topper, in that Topper, in the opening and closing chapters, is gazing out of the window of his apartment on the Riviera.

The characters of Turnabout (1931) are somewhat more complex than in Smith's other satirical novels. Sally Willows is genuinely concerned about the fate of her oafish husband, and Tim gains sensitivity if not poise from his female experience. His simple honesty sets him apart from his wife-swapping colleagues, and makes it difficult for him to write the deceitful prose he must produce to make his living as an advertising copyist. Other characters are delightfully stereotypical: the gleefully malicious "Mr. Ram," the repulsive philanderer Carl Bently, the absurdly unjust Judge Clark, the charmingly amoral Claire Meadows, and Tim's pretentiously tiresome boss Mr. Gibber.

This intriguing novel combines a satire of upper-middle-class values with a mocking glance at a very modern concern: gender identification. Tim and Sally Meadows, a successful suburban couple, are dissatisfied with their lives, and each one feels that the other has an easier and happier lot. "Mr. Ram," an Egyptian statuette with human feelings and magical powers, sends them on a voyage of self-discovery by placing the soul of Tim in the body of Sally and shifting her soul to his body. Tim learns firsthand about the insults given to women when he is pursued by his wife's would be lover Carl Bently, and Sally learns the challenges and crudities of the aggressive male world when she tries to take Tim's place as an advertising executive (Smith's profession before he became a full-time writer). Tim actually has a baby, and experiences the humiliations and discomforts of the pregnant human female; he is even overpowered by the newly aggressive Sally when she tires of his complaints. Both Sally and Tim emerge from the experience with a new appreciation of each others' fate: Tim of the degrading and absurd treatment of women, Sally of the hypocrisies and incompetence of the executive suite.

Much of the humor is very broad (Sally tries to strike up a conversation in the ladies' room, and Tim is smoking a cigar as he prepares to have "his" baby), but there is an uncharacteristic seriousness about Smith in this work: Turnabout is entertaining and hilarious, but comes closer than any other of Smith's works to becoming a serious novel of ideas.

Smith uses the ancient technique of physical transformation to produce psychological or personal change in his characters. The transformation causes a series of comic, absurd incidents that are enhanced by Smith's brand of vaudevillian double talk and risque

humor. The forces of respectability are mocked by placing the transformed characters in ritualistic settings: the cocktail party, the church supper, the courtroom, the delivery room, the ladies' room. As in Topper, the humor is based on a series of contrasts between the banal realities of upper middle class life and the excitement of nonconformity; in Turnabout, the nonconformity is complete: After their outward forms have been restored at the end of the novel, Tim and Sally experience an inward transformation that makes them more sympathetic toward each other, and even less tolerant of the hypocritical society in which they find themselves.

The theme of physical transformation recalls the classical works of transformation, Ovid's Metamorphoses and Apuleius' The Golden Ass. F. Anstey's Vice Versa is very similar in technique to Turnabout, except that Anstey has a father exchange bodies with his son, instead of a husband with his wife. In both cases an exotic artifact provided by a relative has effected the change, and hilarious consequences result; again, both characters, after being returned to their respective bodies, have gained a new appreciation of the other's plight. While Anstey is more accepting of his social world than Smith, his work is also satirical of Victorian mores and employs broad contrasts to effect his social satire: an aging schoolboy and an adolescent father.

The technique of physical transformation is a staple of many of Smith's novels: from age to youth in The Glorious Pool (198434), from man to a variety of animals in The Stray Lamb, from plaster and stone to god and goddess in The Night Life of the Gods, from man to skeleton in Skin and Bones (1933).

Many of these plots can also be traced to the tales of F. Anstey, particularly The Tinted Venus, A Fallen Idol, The Brass Bottle, and The Talking Horse.

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