



An Analytical Study of G.K Chesterton’s Selected Novels

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Abstract

G.K.Chesterton is perhaps the most neglected of the early Twentieth Century British novelists in English. Although his contribution to the English novel is substantial, with six novels of considerable worth to his credit, his novels have received less critical attention than they deserve, except *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and *The Man Who Was Thursday*. Hence the need to assess Chesterton as a novelist. If Maisie Ward suggested that politics distracted Chesterton from the literary career he was meant to follow, C.S.Lewis defended him by observing that his imaginative works revealed something permanent and dateless and that they are richly redolent of the age in which they were composed. Hugh Kenner defines the essential Chesterton as a metaphysician whose work is chiefly valuable for the insights it provides by way of aphorisms and analogies. Chesterton’s fiction does not lend itself to any easy description. It consists of works which are a blend of literature and propaganda. Their meaning is certainly social and political but this meaning is expressed through an imaginative pattern which each of them reveals. Chesterton’s insistence is that in his imaginative work his chief concern is with the conflict of ideas. One implication of his view is that the whole of human life is made up of an unending series of hieroglyphs which is the business of the allegorist to select and interpret. Yet another important feature of G.K.Chesterton’s fiction is its medievalism.

The common view of Chesterton’s social philosophy is that it expresses a longing for a literal return to medieval times. This interpretation is not apt because what the novels say about the restoration of a medieval social order is that it is a dangerous political dream. *The Man Who Knew Too Much* exemplifies the way in which medievalism is a mode of understanding modern political strife and life. It is against this background of ideas that the thesis deals with Chesterton’s fiction. While medievalism is an important feature of Chesterton’s work, there is also an ironic treatment of this phenomenon which does not of course imply a rejection of medieval values.

Chesterton is essentially a fictional artist committed to a “cause.” His novels and his novels represent the English ethos even as they reveal his passion for medievalism, Catholicism, and a high sense of social purpose which strikingly brings out the contemporary appeal of his work.

Keywords

Socio political, chaos, medievalism, Catholicism.

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1. Introduction

The first chapter deals with the background influences of his age on Chesterton. In reaction against the dominant imperialism of his age, Chesterton was also in reaction against its pessimism. He felt that the vital need was for some form

of optimism. The second chapter recounts the influence of orthodoxy and Catholicism and the Great War on Chesterton. The third chapter offers a discussion of Chesterton’s first novel, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), which describes a fantastic story with an imaginative growth of passionate patriotism among the citizens of the various boroughs of London. It is an allegorical romance with the Boer War as its background. The fourth chapter discusses Chesterton’s most satisfying novel, *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908), which gives a nightmare account of things as they seemed to be to the young half pessimist of the nineties. Though the novel has Christian overtones, it is not a Christian allegory. The fifth

chapter shows how Chesterton's next novel *The Ball and the Cross* (1909) seeks to present an allegory of society enslaved by science and materialism. Chapter VI is concerned with *Manalive* (1912) which deals with the problem of reviving the romance of common things. To narrate this, Chesterton uses the indirect method of narration and the epistolary form. The next chapter is devoted to a study of *The Flying Inn* (1914). It deals with Chesterton's personal fears of creeds other than the catholic faith. The opposing forces are Muslim against Christian and East against West. In the eighth chapter a study of Chesterton's last novel, *The Return of Don Quixote* (1927), is made. It dramatizes Chesterton's philosophy of distributism and his Catholicism. The last chapter attempts an assessment of Chesterton as a novelist. While summing up the arguments advanced in the earlier chapters, a close study of Chesterton's *Autobiography*, it is orthodoxy and heretics is made to show the interconnectedness of thought between the novels and prose work.

The absence of any direct reference to religious conversions in what is supposed to be a summary of the last five chapters of the novel is not a matter of evasiveness. The implication is rather that the novel maintains the same careful distinction between politics and religion that Chesterton maintains in G.K's *Weekly*, where the personal religious convictions of a papist are never confused with the purely political convictions of a distributist (167). Chesterton makes no secret of his religious views either as an Anglo-Catholic or as a Catholic, but he makes it perfectly clear that distributism has no necessary connection with Catholicism. Both in the novel and in the newspaper in which the novel was serialized, there is never any suggestion that the acceptance of distributist politics means acceptance of Catholic religion.

Dr.Hendry's symbolism connects medievalism with Catholicism and medievalism with syndicalism. The central image of the crimson illumination colour from which the symbolic contrast between opaque secularism and transparent Christianity is developed is also the starting point for a chain of imagery which moves outwards from the medieval pageant of the romantics to the industrial situation of modern England and the political preoccupations of John Braintree.

It is therefore a serious misunderstanding of the novel to interpret it in Maisie Ward's fashion as an example of Catholic propaganda. Olive Ashley's marriage to Braintree may suggest a synthesis between the important but somewhat arid values of syndicalism and the important but somewhat chimerical values of romance. Presumably Rosamund and Heme do good work at their Catholic settlement, and Olive Ashley certainly becomes a Catholic. But Braintree, whose policy for industrial England is the only political policy which the novel affirms, shows no signs of becoming a Catholic. Rosamund's comment on the marriage might be taken as emblematic of the balance between personal religious convictions and public distributist principles which Chesterton expresses in the novel.

2. Conclusion

Thus *The Return of Don Quixote* is perhaps the best example of the way in which the best fiction is at once a sophisticated and well-balanced propaganda for a political philosophy and extraordinarily effective literature. The medieval experiment which the hero introduces does little to alter the political realities of modern life, except to the extent that it distracts the people from the existence of the real social problems which it leaves unaltered. I have drawn richly on the criticism of Chesterton's work, slim though it is my indebtedness to the Chesterton's critics is amply indicated in the thesis.

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