



Adult Learning Within Reach

Member Lecture – 20 January 2022

The virtuous sidekick: celebrating the steadfast friend in literature
Clare Jackson, WEA tutor

Questions answered post-lecture

Q1 Would you see a connection between the sidekick and the chorus in classical drama?

In as much as I can offer comment on classical drama, I think this is a very valid connection. The sidekick is offering commentary, and like the chorus in classical drama, frequently does not necessarily have as much agency as many other characters in their text (or any). However, I would go back to the point that the sidekick does generate a lot of drama through their very virtues of temperance and moderation. The chorus in classical drama can heighten existing dramatic atmosphere or establish dramatic atmosphere – but the sidekick can actually make conflict happen.

Q2 Would Jeeves in the Bertie Wooster stories not be a sidekick who provides solutions?

I do see why you raise Jeeves. Jeeves being a servant, however, does mean the power dynamics between him and the protagonist are different, I feel, and therefore the purpose of the character is not quite the same. The wise or wily servant figure of course occurs a great deal throughout literature, but I feel fulfils a different function to the 'sidekick'.

Bertie Wooster sometimes describes Jeeves as a 'right-hand man' or 'my man'; essential as this relationship is, however, it is not the same as a friendship. Jeeves is not an equal in societal terms. In more hierarchical times than our own, the sidekick's word would have more weight than that of a servant, and therefore the tensions surrounding their advice are greater. The other point for me is that the sidekick does not provide solutions; the protagonist, in the end, must work their own solutions out, for good or ill. Rational answers are not enough. On a lighter note, it is worth pointing out that a lot of Jeeves' suggestions are dreadful, and have awful consequences! He often has to get Bertie out of difficulties that he, Jeeves, has created!

Q3 If wonder if some sidekicks are to some extent, self-insertion?

I think this is an enormously shrewd point. In a sense, one could see the sidekick as presenting all the sensible / rational / temperate solutions which the author must then find a way of dismissing or by-passing to create drama. The author could be said to have placed him or herself on stage, and be testing his or her plot out against the sidekick's wise advice. The sidekick could be seen as an Everyman figure, in some senses, and this includes the author and audience.

Forthcoming WEA courses by Clare Jackson

Literature (C2527495) – started 14th January to 25th March – 10 sessions x 2 hrs