Who is P.G. Wodehouse?

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1 Introduction

Sir Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, KBE, (/wdhas/; 15 October 1881 14 February 1975) was an English humorist whose body of work includes novels, short stories, plays, poems, song lyrics and numerous pieces of journalism. He enjoyed enormous popular success during a career that lasted more than seventy years, and his many writings continue to be widely read. Despite the political and social upheavals that occurred during his life, much of which was spent in France and the United States, Wodehouse's main canvas remained that of a pre- and post-World War I English upper class society, reflecting his birth, education and youthful writing career.

An acknowledged master of English prose, Wodehouse has been admired both by contemporaries such as Hilaire Belloc, Evelyn Waugh and Rudyard Kipling and by recent writers such as Christopher Hitchens, Stephen Fry,[1] Douglas Adams,[2] J. K. Rowling,[3] and John Le Carr.[4] Best known today for the Jeeves and Blandings Castle novels and short stories, Wodehouse was also a playwright and lyricist who was part author and writer of 15 plays and of 250 lyrics for some 30 musical comedies, many of them produced in collaboration with Jerome Kern and Guy Bolton. He worked with Cole Porter on the musical Anything Goes (1934), wrote the lyrics for the hit song "Bill" in Kern's Show Boat (1927), wrote lyrics to Sigmund Romberg's music for the Gershwin Romberg musical Rosalie (1928) and collaborated with Rudolf Friml on a musical version of The Three Musketeers (1928). He is in the Songwriters Hall of Fame.[5]

Wodehouse spent the last decades of his life in the United States, becoming an American citizen in 1955, because of controversy that arose after he made five radio broadcasts from Germany during World War II, where he had been interned by the Germans for a year. Speculation after the broadcasts led to allegations of collaboration and treason. Some libraries banned his books. Although an MI5 investigation later cleared him of any such crimes, he never returned to England.

Figure 1: PGW

2 Writing Style

Wodehouse took a modest attitude to his own works. In Over Seventy (1957) he wrote: "I go in for what is known in the trade as 'light writing' and those who do that humorists they are sometimes called are looked down upon by the intelligentsia and sneered at."

However, he also lightly taunted his critics, as in the introduction to Summer Lightning.[32]

A certain criticfor such men, I regret to say, do existmade the nasty remark about my last novel that it contained 'all the old Wodehouse characters under different names'. He has probably by now been eaten by bears, like the children who made mock of the prophet Elijah; but if he still survives he will not be able to make a similar charge against Summer Lightning. With my superior intelligence, I have outgeneralled the man this time by putting in all the old Wodehouse characters under the same names. Pretty silly it will make him feel, I rather fancy.

His writing style is notable for its unique blend of contemporary London clubroom slang with elegant, classically-informed drawing-room English; for example:[33]

I once got engaged to his daughter Honoria, a ghastly dynamic exhibit who read Nietzsche and had a laugh like waves breaking on a stern and rockbound coast.[34]

Much of the charm of characters like Bertie Wooster in the Jeeves-Wooster novels derives from the light-hearted cheeriness and bonhomie that Wodehouse conveys through a particularly effective choice of language. While Wooster is often described by acquaintances as mentally negligible, the reader more often sees him as the hapless victim of circumstances, very often circumstances which his "code", his aspiration to be a preux chevalier (valiant knight), prevents his avoiding. For example, Wooster is frequently made the unwilling fianc of girls who announce their engagement to him after discarding another suitor. Wooster would never get out of such a fix simply by saying no, or as he would put it, issuing a nolle prosequi, because his code does not allow him to be so ungallant.

This is Wooster's appeal. He hasn't an ill-tempered, mean-spirited bone in his body, and apart from some mischievous penchant for purloining policemen's helmets, is always a gentleman. Wodehouse's language, and Wooster's peculiar slang, neatly reinforces all of our hero's charm. Wooster always has a nice detachment from his problems, an ability to see them from the outside, to put himself in the third person. Thus, he will find himself "deep in the mulligatawny with no hope of striking for shore," "knee deep in the bisque." He will refer to himself as B. Wooster, or Bertram, or Wooster, Bertram, and announce that "It is pretty generally recognised by those who know him best", and "the Woosters are always magnanimous." However others may slight his mental acuity, or however much he may admire Jeeves for his ability to come up with schemes to extract Wooster from the tureen, he never loses his self-confidence, and remains convinced that he is a man of iron will, a man who can, with the arch of an eyebrow, or relying on just a touch of steel in his voice make others see that he is unmoved on a given point, showing the velvet fist in the iron glove, "if that is the phrase I want", and confident, in matters sartorial, of his own diablerie (devilry). (Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves, 1963)