

Love Goes On

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Maurice Bendrix said in *The End of the Affair* that, were he writing a novel, he would have to end the story at the point where Sarah dies. He says "a novel, I used to think, has to end somewhere..." and it does have to end somewhere. Children, when they go to take their first class in writing are taught that a story has to begin somewhere and has to end somewhere. "It is like a hamburger," the old English teacher used to say, "it has two buns that are the beginning and the end, and the lagniappe which is what happens around your climax which is represented by the burger". These rules, although good for a simple story, are not effective when explaining emotions such as love and grief. These are the emotions that shape the human psyche, the experiences and people that make a person what they are, and this is what Bendrix is finding out when he says "nothing in life now ever seems to end."

The perfect expression of this sentiment can be found in the romance as opposed to the novel for very specific reasons. A romance, by title alone, seeks to work with emotion, and any plot, as one might seek it in a novel, is only secondary to the true purpose of the romance. The romance seeks to show how emotion, an intangible thing that cannot be grasped or explained in a literal way, can have concrete impact on life and soul. In proving this, the romance goes beyond such boundaries as social conventions and the everyday constrictions of time itself to create a more full picture of the impact of love on the human condition. The romance is curious in the

sense that it strives to convey not so much what the characters are doing, but what they are feeling as a result of what they are doing.

When Laurel, from *The Optimist's Daughter*, says "Love goes on," she does not mean that she thinks of Phil and Becky when she hears a song on the radio, or that she will put flowers the Judge's grave on Sunday. Laurel says, "Love goes on." because what she is is a combination of the love of those people she has loved and that have loved her in return. She can never escape or leave behind what they were to her, and this is the true meaning behind *The Optimist's Daughter*. As one reads the novel and goes with Laurel through all the tedious and uncomfortable rituals that accompany death, one can feel the undercurrents of something that has not yet been revealed. It is an internal struggle eluded to, but not revealed to the reader or Laurel until the bird drives her into her parents' room and into her past where she must come to terms with the deaths of those she has loved. Love has gone on for her all this time and has been there for her to see every morning when she looks in the mirror, but until now she has not been able to see it. She has looked in the physical world, but it is not in Mount Salus or in letters yellowed with age in her mother's secretary; the love is within her. It is a concept such as this that is more clearly understood in the more flexible romance as opposed to the novel whose boundaries are too rigid to allow such depth of emotion.

Just as the love of Sarah changed Bendrix, so did the love of the Judge, Becky, and Phil change Laurel. They are two people who are a sum of their experiences and they must carry that with them now and open themselves up to that or never come to terms with the loss they feel. Laurel, in the end, knew this, but Bendrix, stubborn and bitter as he is, is only beginning to realize it. One might say that *The End of the Affair* and *The Optimist's Daughter* are poor examples of romance, full of tragedy and grief as they are; but they are tales more truly about

love than that any Harlequin romance ever could be. They are tales about how love can go on. About how love, perhaps the pinnacle of human emotion, can never die.

David Herrington is a History major. Dr. James Walter was his English professor.

Dr. Walter's Comments: *In explaining the difference between a romance and a novel, David shows how a writer's conviction, rooted in authentic insight, can bring forth a new clarity regarding something so central to human experience as love.*