



## The Benson Murder Case

*S.S. Van Dine*

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This novel opens with the death of playboy stockbroker, Alvin Benson, who is found in his brownstone mansion with a bullet through his head. First on the scene is Philo Vance, amateur detective, who is at once intrigued by the absence of Alvin's toupee and his false teeth. These odd clues set him in pursuit of an elusive murderer. He confronts a host of suspects and uncovers a number of family skeletons in his quest for the truth.

S.S. van Dine is the pen name of Willard Huntington Wright (1888-1939) who wrote this novel in 1926. He wrote 13 best-selling crime novels and his amateur detective, Philo Vance was later immortalized on screen by William Powell in "The Canary Murder Case".

## The Benson Murder Case Details

Date : Published 1988 by Hogarth (first published 1926)

ISBN : 9780701206772

Author : S.S. Van Dine

Format : Paperback 251 pages

Genre : Mystery, Fiction, Crime, Thriller, Mystery Thriller

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## From Reader Review The Benson Murder Case for online ebook

### Marty Milner says

I enjoyed this book. I have to admit I binge read it and loved the New York settings and the accurate characterizations of New York types. Some people are highly critical of this style- I enjoy all kinds of books. Remember this book is almost 100 years old and for a detective mystery it moves along with style and ease- bouncing from one dump of red herrings to another. I intend to read the others over time as this is an acquired taste. I like to read books that are only available as eBooks , science thrillers and ones that might be a little unpolished as I enjoy digging in the author dirt. Lord knows there are enough trolls out there steeped in anger and negativity so I prefer to be encouraging if the writer has put in a worthy effort. Even though this one has been dead for some time I gave it 5 stars and admire that the work is still worth the read! Consider it if you'd like something different that doesn't read like a movie script... :-)

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### JZ says

Well, this was a disappointment. Who remembered what a snob S.S. Van Dine was?

I read this series of Philo Vance books when I was but a child compared to now. They were popular hardbacks, filling the shelves of the house we moved to when I was 10. Somewhere in a box deep in my moving boxes, one of them sits, still, waiting for me to open its musty pages again. I have very little memory of the stories, so I thought I'd revisit sooner, since now I can read them as ebooks, and have an automated voice read out the words.

This book went on and on about how much fine art and erudition our hero possessed, how refined and conversant with the classic languages of Latin and French, along with many obscure words uncommon in our own English, but seldom used except by those who wish to exclude others from understanding the drift, dontchaknow, Philo Vance was. I was a little nauseated by the hero worship of the narrator, who described people 'lower' than he as 'typical of their class' or other denigrations.

The story was fine, the explanation long in coming. It should have been half as long.

Sorry, Charlie. Your kind don't read books like this anymore, if there are any of you left. It just wasn't worth looking up all those snide and legalese phrases. It wasn't that great.

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### Ebenezer Arvigenius says

It is probably not fair to judge a classic by the standards of the books which will follow in its footsteps. Unfortunately, the fact that Van Dine could not rely on previous authors to avoid unnecessary errors does not make the read any more enjoyable.

From the pages and pages detailing Vance's art collection to the sneering superiority with which the main character lavishes such gems as "Evidence is irrelevant. Every halfway competent criminal expects the police to look for it and will therefore avoid leaving any" on the rubes, the book is both padded and

annoying.

Adding insult to injury, the criminal case that Vance uses to show his brilliance is so easy that any Agatha Christie reader will have figured out before the half-time mark. The few red herrings used are tame and barely adequate to cover the fact that all relevant information is already revealed in the first 50 pages or so.

In the end you have a lackluster crime novel with unnecessary lengths and an annoying protagonist. If you want a window into the life of the upper class during the short period between the great depression and the great war this might be worth a read. Otherwise there are a lot of classic crime novels significantly better at what Van Dine was trying to do here.

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### **Ren says**

I was listening to a podcast about the Elwell murder case, and they mentioned that it was the same case that inspired this book. I had fond memories of reading some of my dad's mystery books about an American amateur sleuth, so I decided to get the ebook of the Benson Murder Case. After a few chapters, a few things became apparent:

- 1) S.S. Van Dine couldn't write at all;
- 2) Philo Vance is a pompous ass;
- 3) my dad read Ellery Queen.

This is a bad book. I can't overstate how bad it is. The prose contains some of the worst sentences I've been unfortunate to encounter in my life, and my work involves reading a lot of Facebook post. Van Dine can't handle more than two characters in a scene. Several times, two characters are doing something, and then he cuts back to a third to relate what *he* was doing while the other two were doing something else. Not to mention the narrator, his own alter ego, who shadows Philo Vance for the entire book without ever saying a word or doing anything aside from looking at things. At one point he gives up entirely on trying to describe what the characters are even doing, and an entire dialogue is in script form.

The plot itself is mostly nonexistent. All the interesting details about the murder are copied from the Elwell murder case, which was a famous unsolved crime of that time. The solution itself is painfully obvious from the first time the murderer appears, thanks to the ineptitude of the writer. All that remains is follow along while Philo Vance jerks his supposed friend Markham around, and lets innocent people be arrested while he imparts nuggets of wisdom such as "women can't shoot people in cold blood, don'tcha know old chap, eh what?"

Some books don't age well. This book was crap in the 1920s. Don't read this drivel.

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### **Ishita says**

#### **WARNING: The review might contain certain spoilers.**

What a brilliant series! I am so glad I finally decided to pick the series up, it's been shelved for me for quite a while now!

The story starts with the art Connoisseur Philo Vance sitting at breakfast with Van Dine, who run his own business, when they're called upon by the district attorney himself- Markham. He tells them about a favor a close friend asked of him and offers them to join him. The favor- a through investigation of his brother's murder. As they reach the crime scene, they're faced with a murdered Alvin Benson reclining in his chair in a position so natural you almost expect him to "to turn to us and ask why we were intruding upon his privacy". Alvin's brother, Major Anthony Benson, Markham's friend, like a good ol' big brother, offers every assistance he can and turns over a list of few names for them to start their investigation.

What makes a crime mystery truly worth reading is it's unpredictability. any book that keeps us guessing is one well written. And in this book, when you look at it and finally understand it, it's not so extraordinary- the motive, the means, opportunity. But what baffles us is- we never suspected him- the murderer. Not even until the very end when Vance finally demonstrates his case against him. But what's extraordinary are his methods of deductions. It gets further exciting when he finally explains his methods in the last chapter. With all the art and literary euphemism and references you'd think he's a philosopher of life but as it turns out, his methods do have substantiality to them.

## PLOT

What more about the story and makes it that much more interesting is the fact that this is a real life case. Philo Vance, obviously not his original name, does exist. The case was indeed confusing and required considerations from more than one angle and had Vance not provided us with his great insights, we must've gotten confused with the circumstantial evidence against those suspected too. Despite of there being a twist, it's not so much because obviously Vance has known it since "five minutes later (he) entered the Benson living room".

## CHARACTERS

To be honest, there's only one character I really ever want to talk about- **Philo Vance** . He's ingenuous! And to think that he really exist! He's, and likes to think of himself, some sort of literary philanthropist. He's quite amusing but starts to get on your nerves at times. Amusing because he's fascinating to watch and I picture him as some sort of guff, dressed in silk (which he really doesn't!), smoking a pipe (when he really smokes Cigar), a man who takes pride in his literary intelligence, artistic possessions and philosophical knowledge. His "don't y'know"s are annoying at first but as the book moves on, it kinda grows on you and you find yourself reading those with an accent. It's quite funny, the voice you use! At the same time, that vanity is precisely why he starts getting on our nerves- he thinks everyone else naive for following protocol. Not that he talks down on them but it's almost as if he pities them. That's plain irritating! But then- we can't really blame him, seeing as all minds brilliant in that respect have been some kind of "high functioning sociopaths"!

**S.S. Van Dine** is not just a writer, he's an attorney and has worked with Vance all through these series of cases. However, while sometimes it is refreshing to have someone who can make Vance sound less sarcastic and to level things up, we don't really see much of him. He's like a personal one-man entourage of Vance. I wish we'd seen more of him and, being as he's been following the entire case and everything, I wish he'd put some of his own remarks in it too. He plays the role of the narrator through the series and that's just that. I believe he could've come out stronger as an entity if only he'd played a little more part in it. One would think he'd understand Markham, being an attorney himself! And that scenario must've made these proceeding even more exciting- to watch him struggle as to understand what to believe- Both Vance and Markham are experts in what they do and he's very well acquainted with one while he can completely stand in the shoes of another! That unintelligent agony!

**Markham** was a strong character. If anyone, he had the nerves to both stand and stand up against Vance with resolution. He's smart, in the conventional sense of the word, and is also a good officer. He's not intelligent the way Vance is but is clever all the same. Although, there've been times when I found myself pitying him. But then there've also been times when I've shared his feelings of exasperation with Vance because of his know-it-all, oversmart, I've-outsmarted-you-but-I-won't-reveal-it-yet or I've-known-it-for-ages-now-you-legal-psychologically-unintelligent-fool attitude. Urgh! \*eye roll\* (Yes okay, you're right! Now stop with that I-told-you! attitude.)

The possibilities in this case were amazing. Everyone seemed like an obvious suspect while he wasn't so obvious at the same time. Vance demonstrates with brilliance his ways and his belief that anything and everything is possible when provided with sufficient circumstantial and material evidences accompanied by the willingness to believe in it. His methods of deductions are amazing and nothing but plain intelligent. And although brilliant, no one with a psychological knowledge would really be surprised with it. But that doesn't mean they won't be impressed!

Not to mention the writing! This was one of those beautifully technical while lyrically written books that render a different charm to crime mystery books, altogether. In my opinion, this is what makes Classic Mysteries the best combination of two of my absolute favorite genres- Classics and Mysteries. While you can be assured of having a beautiful writing experience with a classic, a story that keeps you guessing is a treat when it comes to crime mysteries. For me, the book accomplished both with superb elegance.

This is an amazing series, one of my favorites now, and I sure am gonna read it through to the end. Anyone who loves an intelligent mystery would love it.

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### **Kenchiin says**

Brilliant.

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### **C.J. says**

This exceptionally annoying book is a chilling visit to the Old Boys' Network in New York before the war. Philo Vance is a more smug & racist version of his British contemporary Lord Peter Wimsey, complacently judging people by their social class, gender, & ethnicity, as well as the shape of their skulls, while inflicting his taunting, tedious company & pronouncements upon hard-working city employees. The mystery per se is fairly interesting, although nothing unusual; Vance (=Van Dine) does take an unusual approach in looking at the case from several different points of view before revealing the solution to the murder, which of course he knew the minute he first set eyes on the corpse. Why this popinjay is tolerated by the D.A. or anyone else was beyond me. Particularly irksome were pages of esoteric art criticism & commentary (I love art, but not in the middle of a mystery!), & Vance's physically impossible peppering of his conversation with apostrophes -- not just droppin' the occasional G, don't ye know, but leavin' out ev'ry schwa and a s'prisin' range of oth'r function'l syl'bles.

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## Libros Prestados says

Es un cuento raspado, porque entiendo que parte de la gracia de la novela era demostrar que el método psicológico de Philo Vance funciona, pero a veces lo ciegos, cabezotas y densos que eran los policías me sacaba un poco de quicio. También el hecho de que Philo se guardara información para sí, aunque al final explica por qué lo hizo y se lo perdonó.

Hacia las tres cuartas partes de la novela, cuando el fiscal del distrito y amigo de Philo ya se fía de él, todo discurre con mucha más naturalidad y se da paso a una resolución tal vez algo previsible, pero ingeniosa, y que en mi caso no decepciona.

Sin duda es un misterio clásico, que en vez de basarse en la deducción fría y las pistas como otros detectives, se basa en la figura de Philo Vance, un "dilettante" culto, irónico y flemático que estudia los crímenes como si de obras de arte se tratara, reconociendo al autor no por las pistas, sino por la impronta personal del autor.

Aunque el hecho de que los policías y el fiscal se agarraran a su forma de investigar aún cuando Philo había acertado varias veces me molestó un poco, lo cierto es que la novela me ha divertido mucho y creo que los amantes del género lo encontrarán una lectura interesante y entretenida. Y a Philo Vance un detective carismático y distinto a muchos.

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## Alexander Inglis says

SS Van Dine, the pseudonym of Willard Huntington Wright, created the popular fiction detective Philo Vance. His first appearance was in *The Benson Murder Case*, which was published by Scribner's in 1926. Another 11 novels appeared, about one per year, until his early death in 1939 at the age of 51.

There are some, like the current Philo Vance wiki author, who believe "Vance's character as portrayed in the novels might seem to many modern readers to be supercilious, obnoxiously affected, and highly irritating" and, actually, that's true. Throughout this tale, I heard the unmistakable inflected accent of Lord Peter Wimsey, without his corresponding business-like masculinity. As Ogden Nash quipped: "Philo Vance / Needs a kick in the pance".

But that's really unfair. Yes, the book is a little padded, and the explanations at times wearily long-winded, but there's also terrific charm. And, without question, the work is an expression of its time: the period shortly after WWI when New York was re-emerging from the chill of war and for the first time feeling its strength as a true International capital -- and before the devastation that would hit four years later as the markets crashed. It was a time of much greater class delineation, and certainly an era where being called an immigrant was not yet pejorative. Much of this tale inhabits the privileged class of which Vance was securely, and proudly, a member.

So, there's my own long-winded way of putting it: a charming bon-bon of classic early American detective fiction that's well worth devouring.

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## **Beth Cato says**

I read an annotated version of this book within the massive tome *Classic American Crime Fiction of the 1920s*.

I must say, the first chapter of this book convinced me that it was going to be absolutely dreadful. It probably didn't help that preceding information in the book had pointed out that the Philo Vance series eventually withered and died because the insufferable, rambling nature of the lead character became too aggravating to bear. But once I made it past that initial introductory chapter and to the actual murder, the story was much more engaging.

The positives: It's a good murder mystery. The set-up is complex and intriguing, and it nicely utilizes New York City. Alvin Benson is found dead, shot in the head, and the clues in his house are myriad, from the handbag and gloves left on the mantle to the car parked out front during the night. The district attorney invites his friend Philo Vance to see the crime, and on a whim, the insufferable art collector digs into the mystery, and digs in deep. The way Philo Vance psychologically examines people is fascinating. I liked that I guessed the murderer quite early on.

The negatives: Philo Vance. He's aggravating. He boasts throughout that he's known who the murderer is from the time he first viewed the corpse at the crime scene, but he strings along his DA friend for days, relentlessly teasing him and shredding apart his reliance on circumstantial evidence. While the latter is necessary (the DA was ready to convict several people on tenuous evidence), the whole know-it-all aspect gets old really fast.

The choice of narrator felt utterly useless, too. Another of Vance's friends is the observer of everything, and he contributes nothing to the story. He's no Watson, there to offer occasional advice or act as a foil or do medical examinations. No, this guy is just there, a shadow. I can't even remember his name; it only came up at the very beginning, I think.

The annotations probably helped my reading experience a lot, too, providing translations or context for the French and Latin Vance often employs, explaining Vance's commentary on art, and noting what NYC locations were real and fictional. Interestingly, the author muddled a lot of period details himself. By the calendar within the book, the murder should be set in 1918, but various details on geographical locations or police technology didn't exist until the early 1920s. Writers these days can check those kinds of things through Google...

I wouldn't read onward in this series, I think, because the very idea of Philo Vance becoming even more annoying is a big turn off. That said, this book offered me a tremendous boon in terms of research, with fantastic period details and cultural references.

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## **Jokoloyo says**

A fine standard classic mystery. My first read of the author. For mystery game, the author played by the rule fairly.

For personal taste, I am tired with the many philosophical quotes in the main protagonist's voice in talking.

Maybe for fulfilled number of words quota of the novel?

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### **Sonic says**

this is a picture of the 1930 scribner edition, which looks exactly like the 1926 edition:

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### **Dfordoom says**

Of all the books that have some claim to being considered classics of the crime genre none have divided readers quite so dramatically as S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance novels. The features that exasperate and enrage critics of these books are the very things that delight their admirers. I'm very much in the camp of the admirers.

*The Benson Murder Case* kicked off the series in 1926. Philo Vance has often confided to his friend Markham, New York's District Attorney, that he would love to have the chance to try his hand at crime-solving. He has developed some interesting theories on the subject and it would amuse him greatly to put them to the test. When wealthy broker and somewhat notorious playboy Alvin Benson is found shot to death in puzzling circumstances Markham is finally persuaded to give Vance his opportunity.

Vance wastes no time in making obvious his considerable disdain for the professional crime-solvers of the police and the DA's office. To Vance they seem to be hopelessly addicted to the pernicious practice of looking for physical clues and circumstantial evidence. All of which is complete nonsense, as he informs them with more candour than tact. His own theory is that psychology is the key. Some people are psychologically capable of murder; some are not. And some crimes could only be committed by people with a very particular personality profile. If you have the instinct and the intelligence to analyse the personalities of the various suspects then finding the guilty party becomes child's play.

All of which is of course complete moonshine, but that just adds to the fun of the Philo Vance mysteries (or if you are not a fan it just makes them all the more annoying). If you like plots that make sense and if you like your fictional detectives to employ realistic and plausible methods of criminal investigation then these books are not for you. It's not that Van Dine's plots aren't clever and intricate - it's just that their connection with reality is more than a little tenuous.

And then there's Philo Vance himself. His aristocratic arrogance, his very affected English accent (acquired during a prolonged stay in England), his contempt for modern life, his political views (circumstantial evidence is, he explains, almost as great a folly as democracy), the fact that no matter what subject comes up during an investigation Vance will prove to an expert in that field - all these things will either delight or incense the reader.

While Van Dine is very much of the Golden Age school of crime writing with the emphasis on puzzle-solving at the same time Vance's belief in the psychological approach to murder is an interesting anticipation of more modern trends in crime fiction.

Personally I just can't get enough of Philo Vance.

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## Esma Tezgi says

2.5

Katil kim polisiyelerini okuman?n hem ayr? bir tad? var hemde insan?n zihnini tetikte tutuyor, Benson Cinayeti'de katil kim sorusu etraf?nda dönen bir roman olunca tercih ettim. Bu tarz bir kitap okuyal? biraz zaman olmu?, bu tad? yeniden almak ho? oldu.

Philo Vance serisi, ba? karakter odakl? serilerden. Benson Cinayeti'nin odak noktas? da her ne kadar katili bulmak gibi görünse de ba? karakterin dahisini kan?tlamak. Philo Vance çok zeki, sanatla u?ra?an biri ve savc? arkada?? sayesinde bu davaya dahil oluyor ve dehas?n? sergileme imkan? buluyor. Kitap ise ba? karakterin yak?n arkada??n?n a?z?ndan anlat?l?yor ve karakterin toplumda nas?l bir görünüm sergiledi?ini görmek kolayla??yor.

Kitab? okurken her ne kadar istemesem de sürekli olarak Sherlock Holmes'a gitti akl?m, karakterin yap?s? ve kitab?n stili bir çok yönden Sherlock Holmes'a benziyor. Vance zeki, kibirli, toplumla pek uyum sa?layamayan bir karakter. Yazar güzel bir karakter kurgulam?? ancak o kadar iyi sunamam??, zekas?n?n fark?nda ve kibirli bir karakter ancak kibri çok çi?, o kadar zeki bir adam?n baya?? ve s?radan ?eklilde kibrini belirtmesi gerçekçi de?il, karakterin üzerinde s?r?t?yor. Yazar karakteri suskun olarak tan?ml?yor, insanlarla pek konu?mayan, mümkün oldu?unca az cümle kuran biri olarak ancak kitapta hem uzun hemde çok fazla konu?mas? vard?. Bunlar okurken beni çokça rahats?z etti ve kar??la?t?rmak istemesem de Sherlock karakterinin bu yönlerden ne kadar ba?ar?l? oldu?unu dü?ünmeden edemedim.

Diyaloglar?n aras?na serpi?tirilmi? al?nt?lar güzel ancak gere?inden fazla idi, özellikle de suskun bir karakter için. Al?nt?lar?n Latince olmas?n? da çok gereklili bulmad?m, diyaloglar?n kuru birer metin olmas?na sebep olmu?tu ?a??rt?c? bir ?ekilde.

Katili tahmin etmekse zor de?ildi yine de yazar?n stili güzeldi, karakterin özgün bir tarz? var ancak bu kitapta çok ham kalm??. ?lerleyen kitaplarda yazar karakteri daha iyi kullanabildiyse ortaya güzel polisiyeler ç?kt??n? dü?ünüyorum.

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## John says

Many years ago, when I first read Julian Symons's wittily graceful if sometimes controversial history of crime fiction, *Bloody Murder* (1972/74), I was sufficiently impressed by his excoriation of S.S. Van Dine's Philo Vance novels that I resolved never to touch one with a bargepole if I could possibly help it. More recently, however, I came across the suggestion that the early version of Ellery Queen was just a clone of Philo Vance and, since I love the early Queens (and the middle ones, and most of the later ones . . .), my resolve melted. I wondered if perhaps Symons might have been over-severe. And so, a couple of days ago, I took the plunge with *The Benson Murder Case*, the first in the series.

Reader, Symons was spot-on.

Alvin Benson, half of the Wall Street trading company Benson & Benson, has been found murdered, shot through the head while sitting in his favorite armchair, wearing his slippers but not his false teeth or toupee. Sergeant Heath of the Homicide Division and DA Markham investigate, but really the investigation is spearheaded by Markham's foppish, moneyed friend Philo Vance. Vance eschews such trivia as circumstantial and even hard evidence, preferring instead to focus on his own barmy psychological theories in solving crimes. So we're treated to a whole gamut of bonkers notions, from physiognomy (the idea that criminals have distinctive cranial features) through gender distinctions in the committing of crimes.

That would be okay -- you expect any novel published in 1926 to have some antiquated aspects -- but all of this is couched in the most flowery, pretentious language imaginable. If something can be expressed in ten words using a Latin phrase or poetical quotation (or a French one, or a German one or . . .) rather than two words of plain English, it is. Although I'm all for arcane vocabulary -- I love to pick up the occasional new word -- here the use of obscure words in preference to everyday ones is taken to a degree far beyond the plainly ludicrous. Just to give you a flavor, here's part of an exchange between Markham and Vance:

“Just how do you propose to elicit your information?”

“With *morbidezza*, as the painters say. Much more refined and gentlemanly, y’ know.”

Markham considered a moment.

“I think I’ll keep out of it, and leave the Socratic elenctus entirely to you.”

“An extr’ordin’rily brilliant suggestion,” said Vance.

Markham, you’ll recall, is a grizzled DA, a hardbitten fighter of crime, yet he’s using terms like “Socratic elenctus”? Just what the hell is “elenctus,” anyway, if not something you see on the labels of dusty bottles you eye nervously when you come across them at the back of your grandmother’s medicine cupboard? A quick check of my Chambers Dictionary made me realize that what was meant was actually a word that I’ve come across but would never in a million years use: “elenchus” -- Socratic refutation. I don’t know if Van Dine, industriously parading his erudition for us all to see, got confused by the word’s adjectival form, “elenctic,” or if perhaps this is a proofing error either in the original or for the more recent digital edition I read. (I spotted other oddities like “redintegrating” for “reintegrating”; I don’t blame the proofreader, for this must have been a nightmare task.)

I preferred simply to translate *morbidezza* as “cheese” in my mind and leave it at that. Makes perfect sense in context.

And now look at that closing sentence of Vance’s: “An extr’ordin’rily brilliant suggestion.” That gives you an example of the man’s speech patterns. For Vance isn’t a clone of Ellery Queen at all (or, more accurately, vice versa); he’s more nearly a clone of the early Lord Peter Wimsey, as encountered by those fool enough to read Dorothy Sayers’s *Whose Body?* (1922), as I did recently. At least Wimsey had some redeeming characteristics, even in that early incarnation (and he did improve as time went on); Vance seems to me to have none.

The profound affectation of his speech -- doncha know, m’dear, eh, what, old bean? -- might I suppose be taken as amusingly parodic if it weren’t so insufferable, so downright emetic. The affectation carries through

to all the other aspects of his character, not least his conviction of his own intellectual superiority to all around him and his deeply ingrained snobbery (a snobbery that extends to the narrative as a whole). Clearly he regards democracy as something ghastly that gives rights to all those frightful inferior people the world is full of. For no good reason other than to prolong the period during which he can strut like a supercilious popinjay, keeping his secret, he delays for days telling his friend -- his *friend!* -- Markham the solution to the case. He delights in toying sadistically with those who are genuinely not the brightest bulbs on the chandelier, making it plain he thinks they're asses, happily leading them to make public fools of themselves. Of one he remarks: "Not exactly one of Nietzsche's *Übermenschen*—eh, what?" Nice, hm?

(That diacritic on *Übermenschen* is, by the way, *sic*. Again, I'm not sure if it's a product of the pretentious Van Dine's ignorance or just a typo.)

Apart from that, Mr. Grant, how did you enjoy the play? Well, there's the occasional alleviating feature -- there's a nicely constructed false alibi at one point -- but there aren't very many of them and it's easy not to notice them as they float by on the ordure-laden stream. I kept trying to tell myself that Van Dine was an early practitioner, at least in the US, of this sort of mystery fiction; but he wasn't *that* early -- I mean, he was late enough to rip off the character of Wimsey, whom I've never regarded as being an especially early figure in detective fiction.

You'll forgive me, I trust, after I've castigated the novel for its maddening overuse of foreign tags, but I was moved to dig out one such as I tried to sum up the character of Philo Vance. The word's German: *Backpfeifengesicht*, and the literal meaning is "a face in need of a fist." (You can find something of the science behind the concept here. In fact, if I ever filmed an S.S. Van Dine novel, Shkreli would be my first casting choice as Vance.)

After spending a couple of days in the company of Philo Vance, wading through the extraordinary pretensions and repulsive attitudes of Van Dine's prose, I feel I'm in desperate need of a strong purgative dose of, I dunno, Mickey Spillane, James Hadley Chase . . . Okay, maybe not something *that* extreme, but . . .

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Damn' stupid waste of a bargepole, doncha know, eh, what?