

The Admirable Crichton Short Guide

The Admirable Crichton by J. M. Barrie

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About the Author

Sir James Matthew Barrie was born on May 9, 1860, in Kirriemuir, Forfarshire, Scotland. He was the ninth child and the youngest of the three sons of David Barrie, a weaver, and his wife, Margaret Ogilvy Barrie. He attended Glasgow Academy, Dumfries Academy, and Edinburgh University, where he graduated with a master of arts degree in 1882. In 1894 he wed Mary Ansell, a young actress in London. The marriage ended in divorce in 1909.

Even as a young boy, Barrie was determined to be a writer, and upon graduating, he took a job as a writer and sub-editor on the Nottingham Journal. In addition to his publishing duties, he found time to write sketches and stories, which he published anonymously in the St. James's Gazette.

Barrie moved to London in March 1885, determined to make his living from writing. Between 1885 and 1890 his works appeared in many magazines, most often in the British Weekly, usually under the pseudonym "Gavin Ogilvy."

He began signing his own name to his works by 1889.

In 1891 some of Barrie's early plays began to be produced. But the publication of his first novel, *The Little Minister*, that same year was considerably more profitable. Not only was the novel an instant success, but it earned Barrie a place on the staff of *Speaker*, a weekly paper.

Barrie wrote two other novels of significance, *Sentimental Tommy* in 1896 and *Tommy and Grizel* in 1900. But the stage proved to be his best means of expression. *Quality Street*, first performed in Toledo, Ohio, in 1901, established Barrie as a successful dramatist in the United States as well as in Great Britain.

It was translated into German and ran for many months in Berlin during World War I. Other plays followed in rapid succession. Most are comedies, some border on farce, and all have been popular with audiences. Barrie's plots are clear, and his characters interesting. Because the ideas embodied in the plays are not always significant enough to constitute serious drama, Barrie has gained the reputation among some literary historians as a writer of sentimental stories for children. To some extent, this characterization is accurate: Barrie is a man who, like the characters in several of his works, never grew up. *Sentimental Tommy*, *Peter Pan*, and *Mary Rose* all have their origins in Barrie himself. But to judge all of Barrie's works by a few, to know him only through the cartoon adaptation of his magnificent fantasy *Peter Pan*; or, *The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up*, is to misjudge his art and miss the significant ideas expressed in several of his works. Both *The Admirable Crichton* and *Dear Brutus* are works of significance and serious intent.

Barrie died in London on June 19, 1937.

The Admirable Crichton deals with the questions of social hierarchy and personal loyalty, and with the problems of human behavior and the ordering of human society. Barrie's suggestion that the British social structure might be flawed, that lords and ladies might in some ways be inferior to mere servants, seemed subversive to Barrie's audience and caused a minor sensation. The theater-going public saw his portrayal of weak, foolish aristocrats as a critical attack on the British social system. The play causes no such sensation today in the democratic United States. But the theme of the natural selection of leaders is found in the most ancient works of literature and is as relevant today as when Barrie's play was first performed.

Setting

The play opens in late nineteenth-century London, in a drawing room at the house of the Earl of Loam. Lord Loam has invited family members and guests to take tea with his household servants. The servants, ill at ease in the formal drawing room, sit or stand stiffly until the ordeal is over. The topic of conversation focuses on an upcoming trip aboard Lord Loam's yacht, *Bluebell Loam*, his three daughters, his nephew, and a clergyman are to make the sea voyage, and because of Loam's revolutionary desire to do away with "excessive luxury," his daughters are to have but one maid to accompany them, and he but one manservant.

The second and third acts occur on a deserted island in the Pacific where the passengers of the *Bluebell* find themselves after their ship is wrecked in a storm. After some rearranging of authorities and duties, the castaways build a comfortable house lit with electricity and construct devices to signal any ship that might pass. Eventually, the former butler Crichton rules the island, making sure that everyone is well fed, healthy, and happy. At the end of the third act, however, the castaways spot a ship, and Crichton triggers the signal devices, effecting the rescue of his subjects.

The final act returns the action to Lord Loam's drawing room, where mementoes from the island—skins, stuffed birds, and hunting weapons—decorate the walls. The members of the noble family immediately resume their trivial pursuits, such as reading the society page of the newspaper and cutting the pages of books no one ever reads, but they are uncomfortable any time Crichton, once again the butler, is in the room. When Crichton gives notice of his intent to leave Lord Loam's service, everyone in the family is much relieved.

After Crichton tells Lady Mary that he has in no way changed his faith in the natural order of things, he turns the light out and the play ends.



Social Sensitivity

The Admirable Crichton deals with a single social problem: the natural selection of leaders in any society. Women are viewed as neither inferior nor superior to men. Lady Mary is easily the brightest, most competent woman in the play; and although her hunting ability surpasses that of Crichton, she does not quite match his talents generally.

Tweeny, on the other hand, although illiterate, is easily a match for the men who pursue her; she quickly sees through Ernest and refuses his marriage proposal.

The Admirable Crichton criticizes a society where leaders are selected on the basis of heredity rather than on the basis of ability. Only when the characters are shipwrecked and social barriers stripped down is the natural leader of the group, Crichton, allowed to fully use his talents to benefit the group as a whole.



Literary Qualities

As a work of art, *The Admirable Crichton* is simple, consistent, and complete.

Formally, it is dramatic comedy with a rather unusual twist at the end. Crichton and Tweeny are obviously members of society with whom the audience is meant to sympathize. Lord Loam and the other nobles are mostly shallow people in a shallow society where playing cricket and uttering epigrams is as serious as life gets. On the island, life suddenly becomes more fundamental. A new society crystalizes, with the morally correct character as leader. The old, unreasonable rules have been replaced by more natural rules in a more significant society. But in the end the social boundaries of the London drawing room are reestablished. Crichton and Tweeny are again blocked from realizing their full potential. Still, Crichton can resign, thus escaping the disappointing Lady Mary and his untenable position in the Loam household. He ultimately wins the conflict, because he is right and knows he is right.

Tweeny, the illiterate young servant, grows from being speechlessly shy in the presence of the nobles to being critical and aggressive on the island. She is even able to scold Lord Loam when the situation calls for it. But Barrie does not make the mistake of making her too noble.

Although she is more capable of coping on the island because of her practicality, she never miraculously becomes a "sudden scholar." She is illiterate in London, and she continues to be so on the island.

Lady Mary behaves inconsistently in the play, but this flaw defines her character. She clearly discerns Crichton's qualities, and loves him for them. She has little in common with the foppish Lord Brocklehurst, but he is a lord. In London such social position is more important to her than her love for Crichton.

She even shows an awareness of her shallowness when she describes herself as "the sort of woman on whom shame sits lightly."



Themes and Characters

The characters in *The Admirable Crichton* fall into two categories: masters and servants. The characters belong to different categories on the Pacific island than they do in London.

Crichton, the main character, is a man in his early thirties. A dignified, respectful butler as the play opens, he is satisfied with his status and performs his duties with distinction. He does not think of himself as the social equal to Lord Loam any more than he would think of the kitchen servants as his equals. In his mind, they have their jobs and he has his. He detests the "democratic gatherings" insisted upon by his master, Lord Loam, because they perpetuate what he considers the falsehood that human beings are, or can be, equal. He participates only because his master orders him to.

When the travelers find themselves on the deserted island, however, it is Crichton who is best able to provide for the group's survival. He can start a fire, build a shelter, hunt, fish, and cook—in short, he can deal with this new environment. Crichton, then, becomes the master, and the London lords and ladies become the servants, attending to their duties under the guidance of Crichton.

Lady Mary, who had been the most haughty of the nobles and the last to give up rule to Crichton, falls in love with the former butler and decides to marry him.

But more than two years after the shipwreck, a ship appears, and Crichton, having invented an electrically controlled device to set signal fires all around the island, signals the ship to their rescue.

Lord Loam, the radical earl who insists upon equality between noble and servant classes in London, is of no value as a leader on the deserted island; he is simply out of his element. He is washed overboard during the shipwreck because of his ineptitude, and on the island he discards a hairpin he finds because in London he had no use for such things. But, as Crichton points out, a hairpin could have been very useful in such a primitive place.

Tweeny, a young, untrained household maid, makes the sea voyage only because she is the only servant who would agree to tend all three of Lord Loam's daughters. Tweeny's name comes from her social status: she is neither the upstairs maid nor the kitchen maid, but kind of a helper in between. Her youth, beauty, and willing spirit have caught Crichton's eye before the beginning of the play; but on the island, Crichton gravitates towards Lady Mary, and Tweeny has marriage proposed to her by the Honorable Ernest Woolley. In London Tweeny is illiterate, shy, and speechless around her betters; but on the island, her skills and her pragmatism make her superior to most of the nobles. She orders them about the kitchen, and when Ernest proposes marriage she turns him down.



Ernest, nephew to Lord Loam, is a self-centered young man, who, while entertaining enough in a London drawing room, is a time-wasting bore in the more primitive society of the island.

Crichton has to soak Ernest's head in buckets of water to teach him not to spew forth endless epigrams. He does learn, however, to become a productive member of the island family under the strict guidance of Crichton.

Lady Mary, the only one of the three sisters whose character Barrie develops, is more like Crichton than any of the others. She is perceptive, strong-willed, and somewhat haughty. It is she, for example, who remarks that the servants, Crichton especially, do not like the "democratic gatherings." On the island, Lady Mary becomes the best hunter of the group. Although betrothed to Lord Brocklehurst, she wins Crichton's heart and accepts his marriage proposal.

The other characters, the Reverend John Treherne and Lady Mary's two sisters, Catherine and Agatha, are not well developed. Early in the play they serve as foils for Lady Mary, and on the island they are part of the group that follows the admirable Crichton. The Reverend Treherne, whose talents are defined by cricket matches, is addle-brained throughout the play. At one point even Ernest thinks that Treherne must have used his head as a cricket bat.

The play's theme is expressed several times throughout the action. At the beginning of the play, when Catherine questions Crichton about her father's democratic pretensions, the butler tries to explain that absolute equality is unnatural. He is a butler, not a nobleman; he cannot act like a nobleman, nor does he want to any more than he would like to act like a lower-class servant.

On the island, when Crichton becomes aware that away from civilization the nobles are useless as leaders, he begins to overrule some of their futile, dangerous orders. Lady Mary chides him for his assertiveness. He responds, "My Lady, I disbelieved in equality at home because it was against nature, and for that same reason I as utterly disbelieve in it on an island." No one at first understands the ambiguity of his assertion; but later when he says, "There must always, my lady, be one to command and others to obey," Lady Mary realizes what he is saying and insists that the butler be loyal to Lord Loam. When Crichton refuses, the nobles dismiss him and stalk off to another part of the island. But since Crichton, the only one who knows how to build a fire, is cooking a pot of stew, the former rulers all return to sit at the feet of their new master, the one among them who can provide food. Nature has decided for them.

Following their rescue, all return to their old social positions. Lord Loam is once again the master, Ernest the self-centered playboy, and Crichton the butler. Lady Mary remains betrothed to Lord Brocklehurst, and no one speaks of the reversal of roles that happened on the island. When Crichton announces his resignation, everyone is "immensely relieved." He cannot be the equal of Lady Mary in London society. And since Lady Mary chooses not to leave London, Crichton resigns. He is disappointed in



her, but he bears his disappointment with the dignity born of his understanding of the way of the world.

What makes Crichton "admirable" is his devotion to the principles of nature.

Except for the relatively minor character Tweeny, only Crichton is selfless enough to disregard himself for the greater good of principle. On the island Lady Mary finds him admirable enough to be delighted with the prospect of marrying him; but back in London she is unable to forsake her social station.

Throughout the play the one who must act selflessly to defend the right principle is the admirable Crichton.



Topics for Discussion

1. Lord Loam insists upon holding a tea party for his servants once a month.

Does he in fact think of them as equals, as he says he does?

2. Why does Crichton dislike the gatherings? Why does he not refuse to attend?

3. Why does Lord Brocklehurst proclaim that he is glad "not to be one of the party of the yacht"?

4. Why does Barrie dispose of the crew of the yacht, not letting them show up on the island?

5. Why does Crichton soak Ernest's head in the bucket?

6. Why is Lord Loam's loss of the hairpin important to Crichton?

7. Why does Tweeny refuse Ernest's marriage proposal?

8. Why does Crichton choose Mary to ask to be his wife?

9. When the ship had obviously not seen the castaways on the island, why does Crichton pull the lever to set the signal fires?

10. Mary asks Crichton not to signal the ship; yet when she returns to London, she rejects Crichton for Lord Brocklehurst. Is she an inconsistent character?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Some critics think that Barrie was trying merely to write a story full of adventure, like *Swiss Family Robinson* or his own play *Peter Pan*, when he wrote *The Admirable Crichton*. What evidence is there in the play or in Barrie's biography to support or contradict that notion?

2. The original version of *The Admirable Crichton* had Crichton announce his intention at the end of the play to marry Tweeny and open an inn he planned to call "The Case Is Altered."

After World War I, Barrie changed the last act to leave Crichton's future uncertain. Which version of the play is better and why?

3. What was the critical response to *The Admirable Crichton* when it was first staged? Have the critics' views of the play changed today?

4. Barrie's characters in *The Admirable Crichton* have been compared to characters in the works of Charles Dickens, as being "larger than life," but, nevertheless, "true" characters. Compare the characters in Barrie's play with those in one of Dickens's novels.

5. The hero in Barrie's *Peter Pan* lives and thrives on an uncivilized island, as does Crichton. But Peter refuses to give up his island life, while Crichton returns to London. Compare the motivations of these two characters. Is one play more realistic than the other?

6. Some critics believe that Barrie is like his character Crichton in that he chooses to react to life as he finds it rather than be the ardent reformer.

What elements in Barrie's biography might be used to argue for or against such a notion?

7. Barrie uses clothes as symbols in his play. What symbolic meanings do the characters' clothes have in the play?

For Further Reference

Geduld, Harry. *Sir James Barrie*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1971. Geduld offers plot summaries and extensive analysis of all the major works. Barrie's dramatic techniques, however, are better addressed elsewhere. Geduld tries to show that the sources of Barrie's fantasies in his works are his own psychological experiences.

Hammerton, J. A. *Barrie: The Story of A Genius*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1929.

Hammerton undertook to separate legend and anecdote about Barrie from verifiable fact. His illustrations of places and people important to Barrie and his works make this an important study. This is an update of Hammerton's earlier book, *J. M. Barrie and His Books*, published in 1900.

Mackail, Denis. *The Story of J. M. B.* London: Peter Davies, 1941. Published at the request of Barrie's two literary executors, Mackail's work acknowledges and supplements the work done by Hammerton.

Moult, Thomas. *Barrie*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1927. Moult uses early work by Hammerton, published in 1900, as the basis of his book, but it has no index, which limits its usefulness. The discussion of Barrie's works is mostly paraphrase, with little analysis.

Roy, James A. *James Matthew Barrie*.

New York: Scribner, 1938. This book is an old, but perceptive discussion of Barrie's life and works. Roy styled his work as "An Appreciation" of Barrie.

Related Titles

The Admirable Crichton stands as a single play, but the characters are similar to those in many of Barrie's other plays. Both Peter in Peter Pan and Crichton are the kings of islands. Maggie in What Every Woman Knows is the woman Lady Mary might have been had she had Maggie's devotion to her betrothed or what Tweeny might have been had she been educated.



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