

# Alice Adams Short Guide

## Alice Adams by Booth Tarkington

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# Characters

Booth Tarkington was especially skillful in depicting women. Keith J. Fennimore in his critical study of Tarkington's books comments that "as Henry James is said to have done, Tarkington looked at women rather as women look at them; women look at women as persons, men look at them as women." Alice Adams is his finest portrait of a woman. Alice fantasizes, lies, and uses every ploy her imagination can conceive to convince herself and others that she does not belong in the steadily deteriorating circumstances of her family life. She does have charm and a certain degree of wit, and she is basically a realist who now and then pulls herself up short, and asks herself, "Why am I telling these lies?" Her struggle to win the wealthy socialite, Arthur Russell, strains her tactical resources to the utmost, but the reader comes to admire the real Alice beneath the pattern of lies she weaves to prevent Russell from coming too close to the other members of her family living in the small pseudo-colonial house. She has courage and determination, and these serve her well when she realizes on the night of an awful dinner party that she has no future with this young man. Her family is destroyed by its own lack of imagination and mediocrity, but she survives and plans for herself a future she is capable of realizing.

Virgil Adams is a well-drawn figure.

He is a weak person who is finally goaded by his wife into a business venture that he knows at heart is beyond his capacity. His wife will not let him forget that he and a colleague had invented a formula for glue years before. His employer had never used the formula, and Mrs. Adams constantly berates him for not using this formula to make a fortune of his own rather than being a minor employee all of his life. When readers first see him at age fifty-five, he has had a heart attack from which he is recovering. He is at home, and is a target for his wife's shafts all day long. He gives in and sets up a small glue business for himself. His conscience refuses to allow him to forget that J. A. Lamb legally owns the formula. Adams constantly worries about the actions that Lamb might take, for he is an industrial giant. A small man conscious that he has offended a much greater one, Adams is tortured by guilt and fear into a second heart attack, precipitated by meeting with his old employer.

Mrs. Adams is an example of Tarkington's skill in creating a predatory female. She lives for her daughter and hopes that with a successful marriage Alice will also improve the social position of the Adams family. Her lust for money has made of her a monster who constantly belittles and harasses her husband. After his disastrous business venture fails, she resumes the attacks, rather than admitting that she had driven him into something way out of his depth.

Arthur Russell is seen only in his romance with Alice. He is described as a young financial wizard who has already substantially increased an inherited fortune, but Tarkington does not show him at work. Basically, he is a man of the upper class with all of its prejudices. If he possessed any instincts about human character, he might have realized much earlier that Alice is deceiving him. These instincts might also have told



him that she is a much finer person than her circumstances would indicate. Except in business dealings, he is apparently a very ingenuous young man.

Alice's brother Walter has no social ambitions. His self-deceptions are those of a petty criminal who believes he is smart enough to deceive others.

He embezzles money from the J. A. Lamb Company, and runs off leaving poor Virgil to repay the money. Before disappearing he is a source of constant embarrassment to his sister. Whenever she feels that she has been successful in her lies about her family's wealth and position, along comes Walter to puncture the illusion. For example, soon after Alice meets Arthur Russell at a dance party given by the socially prominent family of her friend Mildred Palmer, Walter is found shooting craps with the servants. On a walk through the city, Alice and Arthur meet him coming out of a brothel with a tart.

## Social Concerns/Themes

Alice Adams was written while Tarkington was working on the books that make up his Growth trilogy, and in its seriocomic fashion presents the same concerns and themes. The Adamses, Mrs. Adams in particular, dream of wealth and social position, and their obsession destroys them. They are really lower middle-class people with neither the strength of character nor the ingenuity to be anything else.

This novel demonstrates how pervasive false values are in American society. Tarkington presents an ordinary family with the same materialistic creed that had corrupted their social superiors. That they wish to escape the smoke and soot of their surroundings is understandable. But the spiritual equivalents of soot and smoke, false ideals and pretensions, make it impossible for them to face reality and their true place in the scheme of things.



# Techniques

In *The Show Piece* (1947), one of Tarkington's posthumously published works, he explains what he means by an "investigatory novel." It is "intended to investigate human beings and if possible to reveal something about them." In *Alice Adams* he seems to have succeeded more than he himself realized. He regarded the book as secondary in importance to the *Growth* trilogy which he considered his most significant work up to that point. He frankly doubted that the story of such ordinary people would be of much interest to the public. Yet the book is the finest "investigatory novel" he would ever write. In it objectivity triumphed over both his optimism and his usual conformity to what he felt his readers wanted. Plot and character are both worked out with such control that even critics who had panned his other works had to admit that here he had written a masterpiece.

A recent critic, Adam J. Sorkin, observes that Tarkington's low opinion of what he was writing (he seems to have written it as a diversion while on vacation at Kennebunkport) enabled him to write it in relative detachment and to give his comic talents full scope, unhindered by sentimentality. The writer had the talent to produce excellent comedies of manners when he chose, and in this novel he caught the natural voices of several representatives of society from the socially prominent Mrs. Palmer and her friends to Walter Adams and his street slang. Two scenes — both disastrous for poor Alice — are especially brilliant: the dance party at the Palmers' at the beginning of the novel, and the dinner party given at Mrs. Adams's insistence at the end. At the first event Alice, in a dress made over for the occasion, spends the evening pretending she is waiting for her escort who has stepped out for a while.

It is her last appearance at a function of this sort because her friend, Mildred Palmer, has decided to drop her, finally agreeing with her mother that Alice is too pushy. Tarkington catches both Alice's hopes on this occasion and her desperation when nobody wishes to dance with her. Her meeting with Arthur Russell is the only thing which makes the evening bearable for her. He continues to see her although she carefully sees to it that he never meets her mother or gets inside of their house.

The inevitable meeting occurs when Mrs. Adams insists that he come to dinner. Everything goes wrong that possibly can: The night is miserably hot; the house is stifling and reeks of cooked Brussels sprouts; Arthur sits through the evening in silence while Mrs. Adams talks on endlessly; as the evening ends word arrives of Walter's crime. Alice knows that the stories she has told of her father's prosperity and the family's social position have been exposed as lies. Arthur will not be back.

Alice also realizes that the long years of pretense are over. She, absent of her family, has the strength to put the recent past behind her, and rise to the situation in a rather heroic fashion. In the book's final scene Alice is climbing the stairs to Frincke's Business College.



She will become a secretary, passing through the "very doorway she had looked upon as the end of youth and the end of hope." She has decided to make what she can of her life even if it means that she must work at a dreary job.

# Adaptations

Excerpts from Alice Adams were anthologized, and the book was translated into several foreign languages. It was twice made into a movie. The first film was made in the 1920s and starred Florence Vidor. Katherine Hepburn played Alice in the second movie made by RKO in 1935. Fred MacMurray was Arthur Russell; Fred Stone was Mr. Adams; Frank Albertson played Walter; and Anne Shoemaker played Mrs. Adams. Tarkington wrote a number of screenplays in the course of his career, but never adapted any of his major books for the movies.



## Literary Precedents

A servant or lower-class person posing as a member of the upper class is a stock character in farces, or in contemporary situation comedies. One example is the libretto of Johann Strauss' most famous operetta *Die Fledermaus* in which a maid, Adele, enacts such a role at a nobleman's ball. *Li za Doolittle*, a former flower seller, thanks to the expert vocal coaching of Professor Henry Higgins, passes herself off as a great lady at a high society gathering in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913) and its musical adaptation, *My Fair Lady*, 1956. Alice Adams, because she simply wants to escape from an impossible family situation, is a more sympathetic character than most such pretenders.



# Copyright Information

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