

Daughter of Deceit Short Guide

Daughter of Deceit by Eleanor Hibbert

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Characters

All of the other players in this story are overshadowed by the woman who dies when the story is barely underway, Desiree, nee Daisy Rayton. Her daughter says of her, "She had lived her life free of conventions and she had given so much to others. She had chosen to live as she pleased, and I had heard her say that if you don't hurt anyone, what harm can you do?" It is the kindness that she shows to Lisa Fennell, though, that results in her death, and her decision to deceive Charlie Claverham has far-ranging, hurtful effects that she did not foresee.

Her decisions affect every life in the novel and memories of her are constantly invoked. She is presented as an admirable person, beautiful, vivacious and professionally successful, yet many events in the book prove that the desire to do no harm is a false hope. If not exactly egregiously self-serving, it is, at least, naive. When she first learns she is pregnant, Desiree says in a letter to the baby's real father, "I think love is more important than a lot of moral laws." Subsequent events do not really disprove this, but the people whose lives are influenced by Desiree's decision to conceal the identity of the real father go through a great deal of suffering before love is allowed its proper course. And Desiree's intention "to never let life lead her," "to guide it the way she wanted it to go," is shown to be personally successful but sadly inadequate to the unknowable future.

Lisa Fennell illustrates the impossibility of controlling one's own destiny.

She is a profoundly duplicitous and ultimately pitiful character. To attract Desiree's notice she falls under the wheels of her carriage, apparently by accident. Seeing the girl is friendless, Desiree takes her in. Soon she is in the chorus and then understudy to Desiree herself. When Desiree first becomes ill, then has a fatal fall, Lisa is there to take over for her. As Noelle becomes interested in Roderick Claverham, Lisa's attention is drawn to him.

It is as if her ambition requires that their lives become hers. The full intent of Lisa's manipulations, her attempt to take total control over her fate, are only disclosed much later. Fate intercedes in a way she could not have foreseen. She falls during a performance, injuring her back in a manner that will progressively deteriorate.

Roderick, who cannot marry the woman he loves, marries Lisa out of a mixture of pity and regard. This marriage, which quickly reveals its emptiness, is hardly the future that Lisa tried to "guide" events toward. She has no career, no children, and a husband who does not love her. The nadir of her misery is Noelle's return to Kent, now knowing that she and Roderick are not related and the threat of incest is removed. Lisa confesses to Noelle her indirect role in Desiree's death, but refuses to agree to the divorce that her husband and his family demand. The situation is resolved suddenly by Lisa's suspicious death.



It is clear that Noelle Tremaston has little control over her fate except for what fortitude and patience can achieve. She has her mother's generosity but not her talent. Upon Desiree's death she becomes essentially the ward of first Charlie and then Robert Bouchere. She is about sixteen years of age; although she has had a good education, she is equipped to be only a governess or companion. While she is considering these options, she visits first Charlie's estate in Kent, where she is told that Charlie is her father, and then Robert's estate outside of Paris. Her prolonged visit there is significant in two ways.

She is forcefully reminded of her lack of control over her own destiny as the Bouchere family and Gerard du Carron to whom she has become attached are destroyed in the violence that sweeps Paris in the Franco-Prussian conflict of 1870. She flees to England bringing with her Gerard's teenaged daughter, Marie-Christine. Her friendship with the girl develops into a mother-child relationship. In contrast to the other mothers and mother-surrogates in the story, Noelle allows Marie-Christine to follow her interest in archeology and pursue a match with a young archeologist, choices that will not bring fame, fortune or greater social status. The novel's final chapter, about events six years after the marriage of Roderick and Noelle, contains Lady Constance's confession of her role in Lisa's death.

Her confession brings closure to the novel's consideration of women of great ambition who hurt others either intentionally or unintentionally, women who hurt others through their ambitions for their children, and women, like Noelle, whose ambitions are played out on a smaller stage. Noelle will quietly attend to the satisfactions of home and family; Marie-Christine will have the satisfactions of the profession and relationship that she herself has chosen.



Social Concerns

Daughter of Deceit explores the different forms that female ambition can take and the price paid for achievement. The character of Desiree, a very successful musical-comedy actress, is the main vehicle for examining the issue. Desiree, the mother of the narrator, Noelle Tremaston, reaches the peak of her profession by her single-minded pursuit of the dream she had as a girl.

She sought to leave the constricted social and religious environment of her Cornish village at a young age. She is able to achieve her dream while maintaining her humanity; her ambition does not make her cruel or bitterly competitive. Desiree lives her life as she chooses; Noelle says of her mother, "She had not so much defied conventions as ignored them." She does not openly flout conventions but lives with discretion on the boundary between traditional values and immorality.

Despite bearing a child out of wedlock, Desiree's career flourishes until her early death. The price she pays for her sexual freedom is that she cannot count on a conventional family to take care of Noelle. Her worries on this score cause her to make a nearly-tragic error in judgment. Her mistake comes close to causing a lifetime of unhappiness for the daughter for whom she wants only the best. In addition, her great success makes her a magnet for envy and jealous competition and this, we learn near the novel's end, is really the cause of her death. Desiree's ambition, which is both true to herself and cognizant of other's needs, has a less appealing variation in the ambition of Lisa Fennell. Lisa is Desiree's protegee, whose calculating nature and driving ambition cause her mentor's death. Lisa has brief but limited success on the stage and lives to suffer for her callousness. For women, success in the public eye seems to come at great personal cost and peril.

The lives of Holt's secondary characters illustrate another variation. Fiona Vance, a neighbor in Kent and MarieChristine du Carron, Noelle's young friend from France, both follow their passion to study archeology. Applying their energies to this narrow and not very public sphere they achieve satisfying careers and personal lives. While Desiree is an attractive and successful woman, Holt seems to say, more modest ambitions can allow quiet satisfaction while exacting a less harrowing personal toll. Throughout the novel, the interest in the past is shown to be "a wonderful way in which to escape from the present." In the lives of Fiona and Marie-Christine, the positive energy generated in re-creating the past will propel them into a happy future.



Techniques

Daughter of Deceit's Noelle Tremaston is a peripatetic heroine. Her movement from happy ignorance to sad wisdom is organized around a series of places — London, Kent, Paris, and Cornwall — each of which plays a role in the stages of her life. They are contrasting worlds, urban and rural environments, each with its good and bad associations. They add interest by providing a variety of cultural and social backdrops for the action. Noelle's early life is in London, the exciting and glamorous home of Desiree's theatrical triumphs. In Noelle's mind, it is associated with her early happiness and with the bohemian lifestyle that she grew up with and is delighted to encounter later in Paris. After her mother's death, London is associated with that tragedy and the home she once knew passes into the hands of another. Her reclamation of this home several years later is a major achievement. She moves from an urban to a rural environment, Kent and later Cornwall, but each place has its dangerous and unwelcoming aspect, as well as more positive features. There is no pastoral peace in Kent, where Lady Constance is at first unpleasant and Noelle is nearly killed by Mrs. Carling's machinations. Kent later comes to represent the resolution of her worries and fulfillment of love, the establishment of a new home. Her experience in Paris and its rural environs is similarly mixed. Her excitement in once again being around artists and in establishing an emotional connection with Gerard du Carron and MarieChristine is short-lived. Personal lives, amid urban excitement and the relative peace of the countryside, are overtaken by world events. Her friends are killed and Noelle flees. Rural Cornwall provides closure to one phase of Noelle's life and the beginning of another. Her mother escaped from country life as soon as she could, so Noelle knows only of the Cornwall of mystery and superstition, and the Cornwall of suffocating constraint. As Noelle digs deeper into the truth of her own origins, though, she is drawn to Cornwall.

There she finds her real father and discovers that, far from being related to the wealthy Tremastons, she is the daughter of a man of musical and artistic ability but no ambition who leads an isolated life. He did not have the same dreams his "Daisy Ray" had. The mature Noelle claims something from each of these places. From London, Cornwall and Kent she takes a sense of home, heritage and belonging. From France, she has Marie-Christine who is, for Noelle, a new family. She can pass on to Marie-Christine the values of modest achievement and love that is based on honesty and mutual respect and interests, not deceit and dark ambition. Kent, the rural life, claims Noelle and is home to the family she and Roderick raise after the sins of their parents are laid to rest.



Themes

This novel is less concerned with romance and mystery and more with the forms, positive and negative, that a parent's love for a child can take. The title directs the reader to focus on Noelle as a daughter. From title to final page, the novel develops variations on the parent-child bond. The deceptions practiced by Desiree, including permitting Charlie Claverham to think that he is the father of her child, are inspired by her love for Noelle and the desire that she be cared for. This seemingly harmless deception brings unhappiness to Noelle, who is prevented from marrying Roderick Claverham, Charlie's son, when she is told of her parentage.

Eventually, they are able to marry, but the sad truth is that without Desiree's well-intentioned lie, Noelle could have known her real father, Ennis Masterman, much earlier and the unhappy marriage of Roderick to Lisa Fennell could have been prevented.

Roderick's mother and Charlie's wife, sad, stern, Lady Constance, plays out another misguided drama of parental love. Her desire that her son make a suitable match, a match "to maintain the standards laid down by our ancestors," brings her to interfere in his choice of mates, causing pain to herself and others. Her love for her son is corrupted by her concern for "standards." After going through a crisis with Noelle, she sees the error of her beliefs and reveals the deception in her own life. She has known for many years of her husband's affair with Desiree. While Lady Constance may have been reconciled to having Noelle as a daughter-in-law, she is never reconciled to her son's second choice. The love of the mother for her son and her desire for his happiness finally takes its most extreme form when she poisons Lisa so that he may marry Noelle.

Surrogate parents play a role, too, in developing this theme. Lady Constance's confession of murder, near the end of the novel, invites comparison with the actions of Mrs. Carling, Fiona Vance's grandmother. Mrs. Carling wants a good match for Fiona and this eccentric woman contrives a plan to get rid of Noelle who may interfere with her plans for her granddaughter to marry Roderick. Her failed attempt which, ironically, brings Lady Constance and Noelle into greater understanding, is clearly the work of a madwoman. Lady Constance and Mrs. Carling represent an extreme of parental concern. The Biblical notion that the sins of the fathers are visited on their sons is reiterated in a variety of contexts. The "sins" committed by these parents and their effects on the lives of their children do not give the lie to the brutal adage, but rather hold out the hope that the penance or suffering which those sins exact on the offspring need not be lifelong.



Key Questions

Daughter of Deceit is in some ways identifiable as a representative of the gothic romance genre, but not in others. Readers may be interested in discussing how the novel fulfills their expectations of the genre, how it does not, and how that influences their response to the book and its characters.

The concentration purely on the female characters and de-emphasis of romantic fulfillment is unusual among Holt's novels. The character of Noelle, specifically, is likely to spark discussion as she is neither a typical gothic romance heroine, nor typical of Holt's heroines.

1. How would you describe Noelle Tremaston's personality and her role in the novel? Can you compare her to female protagonists of any other novels by Holt?

2. The notion that "the sins of the father are visited on the son" is offered in several contexts in Daughter of Deceit.

Do the events of the novel seem to prove or disprove the idea?

3. Desiree is an actress, Gerard du Carron is a painter, and Ennis Masterman is both a musician and sculptor.

What special role does the world of artists and artistic expression play in this novel?

4. References to the Franco-Prussian conflict of 1870 and the Paris Commune of 1871 make it possible to pinpoint the novel's action as taking place in the 1860s and 1870s. Do these realistic references add to the novel's appeal?

5. Ennis Masterman's depiction of Desiree is entitled "The Dancing Maiden." What is the original "dancing maiden" and how is this link significant?

6. The coast of Kent where the Claverhams live is the site of Roman ruins.

What is the role of these ruins in the novel? In what way is archeology important in the novel?

7. Can you compare the depiction of men's lives and careers with those of women in this novel? Does it seem that Holt means to convey a depressing message to women or is her message more general?

8. Mrs. Carling's claim to be able to see the future introduces a hint of the supernatural early in the novel. Of what importance is the ability to see, or the inability to see, the future in this novel?



9. One of the plays in which Desiree appears is *Countess Maud* in which a common shopgirl is revealed to be the daughter of an earl. How does this play mirror some of the concerns of the novel?

10. Lady Constance is perhaps the most complex character in the novel.

Do your feelings toward her change?

How do you feel about her behavior as she testifies at the inquest and then confesses her role in Lisa's death at the end of the novel? Is she to be pitied or is she repugnant?

11. Gertie, a servant at Levenson Manor, says that Mrs. Carling "does certain things to make her prophecies come true," in other words, gives fate "a little push." Her attempts are sinister. Is there any way in which Desiree, Lisa and Lady Constance could be said to do the same?

Literary Precedents

As with most of Holt's novels, *Daughter of Deceit* has a joint heritage from the gothic and romance genres.

The novel departs significantly from both formulas, though. It relies less than many Holt novels on the brooding atmosphere of mystery and threat provided by suspicious coincidences and sinister locales. The traditions of the gothic remain in the hints of the supernatural in the depiction of Mrs. Carling and in the hidden threat that she poses.

The novel's concern with parental roles makes it a good vehicle for those traditional gothic concerns, the search for the true father and the motif of the sins of the fathers. The sense of secrets from the past that must be uncovered is less strong in this novel because Holt's interest here is in the influence of parents who are alive and can bring ruin on their children with their present actions. The mysteries of parentage and tangle of relationships also allows the effective introduction of that primal family fear so often exploited in the gothic: incest.

The presentation of romance is less compelling than in the Holt novel that is most closely connected to *Daughter of Deceit*, *The Shivering Sands* (1969). That novel is set in Kent near Roman ruins and fully exploits the mystery and history the locale provides complete with a tip of the hat to Wilkie Collins's "shivering sands" of Yorkshire from his 1868 novel, *The Moonstone*. The frustration of obstructed love and love plagued by suspicion permeates *The Shivering Sands*. In *Daughter of Deceit*, the interesting relationships are those among the female characters and parents and their children. The male characters are secondary to Holt's intentions in this novel. In true romance fashion, the principals have found their perfect mates at the novel's end, but the events that have driven the plot are less dependent on romance conventions and more dependent on powerful female characters who are used to explore modern themes in a variety of environments.



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