Dear Brutus Short Guide

Dear Brutus by J. M. Barrie

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Overview

Dear Brutus explores what might happen if ordinary men and women, mired in unhappiness, were given the magical opportunity to remake their lives, or, as the butler Matey says, the chance to "take the right turning." The play addresses the human proclivity to blame others or fate for their failures and unhappiness, and provides the audience with penetrating insights into human nature.

About the Author

Sir James Matthew Barrie was born on May 9, 1860, at Kirriemuir, Forfarshire, Scotland. He was the ninth child and youngest of three sons of David Barrie, a weaver of Kirriemuir, and his wife, Margaret Ogilvy. He attended Glasgow Academy, Dumfries Academy, and Edinburgh University, where he graduated with a master's degree in 1882. In 1894 he married Mary Ansell, a young actress in London, a marriage which was to end in divorce in 1910.

Even as a young boy, Barrie was determined to be a writer, and upon graduation, 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 Gazette.

Barrie moved to London in March 1885, determined to make his way by publishing his stories. His works appear in many magazines between the years 1885 and 1890, most often in the British Weekly, usually under the pen name "Gavin Ogilvy." But by 1889, Barrie began signing his own name to his works.

The publication of his first novel, The Little Minister, in 1891 was considerably more profitable than his plays. Not only was the novel an instant success, but it earned Barrie a place on the staff of the weekly paper Speaker. In 1922 he received the coveted award Order of Merit; in 1928 he became president of the Society of Authors, and in 1930 chancellor of Edinburgh University. He died in London on June 19, 1937.

Critics attribute Barrie's fixation on childhood to the death of his brother when Barrie was six years old, and the devastating effect it had on his mother.

After the death, his mother became overbearingly dominant, and ruled Barrie's life even through adulthood. His themes depicting the innocence and joy of childhood are apparently his attempt to recapture his life before his brother's death. Just as Barrie idealized childhood, he expressed in his writings disenchantment with adulthood, as in Dear Brutus.

Barrie wrote two novels of significance, Sentimental Tommy in 1896 and Tommy and Grizel in 1900, but it was through drama that he found his best means of expression. Quality Street was first performed in Toledo, Ohio, in 1901, establishing Barrie as a successful dramatist in the United States as well as in Great Britain; the play was translated into German as Qualitat Strasse and presented for many months in Berlin during World War I. Other plays followed in rapid succession. Most were comedies, some bordering on farce, and all became popular successes. Barrie's plots are clear, his characters interesting. Because the ideas upon which the plays are based 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, the allegation is accurate: Barrie was 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 work by a few, to know Barrie only by what Walt Disney did with his magnificent fantasy Peter Pan: Or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up is to misjudge his art and to be ignorant of his significant ideas. Both The Admirable Crichton and Dear Brutus, among several others, are works of serious intent and general significance.

Setting

The play opens in a drawing room at the manor of a rather mysterious character named Lob—not Mr. Lob, just Lob.

The room itself is dark, but through the French windows at the back of the room one sees Lob's garden bathed in bright moonshine. Into the dark room Lob's guests begin to appear, entering from the adjoining dining room, where they have just finished the evening meal.

Someone finds the light switch and illuminates the room. But the moonlit garden is still predominant. The setting of act 2 is the bright garden, or rather a moonlit wood, which has magically replaced the garden. Here most of the characters appear in their "might-havebeen" lives. In the last act, the dream of the midsummer night is over and the setting is once again the dark drawing room in Lob's house. As the characters return from their midsummer night's experience in the bright wood, someone again finds the light switch and illuminates the room. Here reality returns.

Temporarily still in their dreams, the characters find in Lob's drawing room the familiar furnishings, tea sets, and Lob himself to help them awake into reality.

Social Sensitivity

Dear Brutus does not employ sensational or shocking devices. The plot does include mate-swapping and is therefore clearly in the modern tradition. But although John is having an affair with Joanna Trout while he is married to Mabel (and an affair with Mabel while he is married to Joanna), the whole idea of infidelity is represented by nothing more scandalous than an occasional furtive kiss.

As in his play The Admirable Crichton, Barrie again pokes playfully at the aristocratic social structure of monarchical England. Alice Dearth finds no happiness in being the Honorable Mrs. Fred instead of the wife of the seedy painter Will Dearth. And the pretentious Lady Caroline Laney is most happy when she is the wife of the butler Matey, although, like Lady Mary in The Admirable Crichton, she cannot accept social disgrace when she returns to the "real" world of act 3.

Literary Qualities

Formally, Dear Brutus is a dramatic comedy. Complications are introduced in act 1, reversed in the magical woods in act 2, and resolved in act 3. Like Shakespeare and Keats before him, Barrie uses the myth of the magical midsummer night's dream to represent the abstract concept of love. No one can explain biologically why humans, like Mr. and Mrs. Coade, fall in love and stay in love over many years. No one can explain how human beings can be desperately in love with someone one moment, like Jack Purdie and Joanna Trout, and desperately at odds the next.

For some, "the course of true love" does not run smoothly. In act 3, Barrie appears to agree with Puck in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream— "Lord, what fools these mortals be."

Barrie also uses the symbols of light and dark effectively. Lob's sitting room is almost constantly dark, and when it is illuminated, the light is harsh and artificial. The natural moonlight that illumines the garden and the magical woods is always brighter, intruding as it does into the supposed reality of Lob's room. The audience is left with the question of which setting is real and which is illusion.

Themes and Characters

The central character of the play is Lob, a man so old that no one can remember his ever being any younger. Lob has invited eight people to his home for the midsummer night experience in his magic woods. He is a fairylike character, small and seemingly superhuman in both his understanding of human nature and his communication with nature, as manifested in his magnificent garden. His very name, from English folklore, ties him to Shakespeare's sprightly fairy Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, whom his fellow fairy in A Midsummer Night's Dream calls "a lob of spirits."

Lob has invited the eight guests to grant them a second chance at life.

Even Lob's butler Matey, although not an invited guest, fits into the group—he is in need of a second chance. The five women guests have discovered Matey stealing rings from the guests and are about to report him to the police. Matey argues that he is a thief by circumstance, not character, led to thievery by fate. "I am not bad naturally," he says.

"It was just going into domestic service that did for me." Man's way of life, he says, "all depends on your taking the right or the wrong turning." In act 2 he enters the magical wood along with most of the guests to change his fate. He is, actually, shoved into the woods by his master Lob, who stays in the house.

Will and Alice Dearth are disillusioned with life. Of Alice Dearth, whom we meet first, Barrie says in his notes, "Murky beasts lie in ambush in the labyrinths of her mind." She is a bright, beautiful, talented woman who is dissatisfied with her life and angry at her husband, from whom she is estranged. She wishes she had married another man, Fred, so that she might have had a better life. She tells Will, "If I hadn't married you, what a different woman I should be. What a fool I was." Will tries to tell her that while he might not be a good man, Fred is no better. The problem, he suggests, is not in him or Fred or fate, but in her.

Will Dearth is a painter, or was when he had confidence in himself. Overwhelmed by the "adorable wildness" of Alice as a young woman, Will married her and set out to be a great artist. But when he discovered that Alice "had no opinion" of him, he began to have no opinion of himself. If someone he loved as much as he loved Alice found that she did not care for him, he could not care for himself. He suggests that if they had children, she might have continued to care for him, but she tells him that he merely would have been a bad father, just as he is a bad painter and a bad husband. Will's major interests in life, now that more significant ones have been denied him, are in drinking port and smoking cigars. Now he is like Robert Browning's Andrea Del Sarto with his Lucrezia ("Andrea del Sarto," 1855): he is still a good craftsman, but the music is gone. When Alice and Will go into the woods of act 2, she is looking for her happiness with Fred, and he is looking for the child that might have been.

Mabel and John Purdie are also unhappily married. Mabel is described by Barrie as a passive, pleading woman. If Alice Dearth would use force to get what she wants, Mabel

would purr on a man's shoulder until he gave in. Mabel is aware of her husband's philandering, but for the most part she chooses to suffer in silence. She is the loyal wife, who hopes that her husband will finally grow tired of his affair with Joanna Trout and return his love to his wife.

John is a romantic, who sees Joanna Trout as "spotless as the driven snow," while Mabel has "a horrid way of seeming to put people in the wrong." The people she seems to put in the wrong are Joanna and her husband, who are, of course, in the wrong. But neither Joanna nor John can see past their infatuation with each other. John insists that if he and Joanna had met earlier, then he would be happy. He laments that he must suffer forever because he took the wrong turn. He and Joanna enter the woods wishing for what might have been.

Joanna is as star-struck as John. She sees John as a perfect man trapped by fate to be bound to the "horrid" woman, Mabel. All of the evidence presented dramatically to the audience is that Joanna, while a lively woman, is shallow and blind to reality. John is clearly a simple-witted person, who utters inanities about his own assumed nobility, about Joanna, and about Mabel. But Joanna is not discriminating and takes John' s romantic shallowness for nobility.

Lady Caroline Laney is another frail woman whose life shows her devotion to the insignificant trappings of life. She has been to an "enormously select school," where young women are taught to pronounce r's as w's. Her character demonstrates that, as Barrie points out in his notes, "nothing else seems to be taught." She is very proper but bored with life. When given a second chance, she takes it without urging. Her last words before entering the magical woods are, "One would like to know."

Besides Lob, the only character not to enter the woods is Mrs. Coade, called Coady by all the other characters. She and her husband, also called Coady because the couple is so well adjusted to each other that one can answer for the other, are content with life and with each other. Their relationship serves as a standard by which all the other characters are compared—except, of course, Lob, who is a bit more than a human character. Mr. Coade does enter the magical woods, perhaps more for the mystery than for any desire for a second chance. Lob, however, despite urging all the other characters to enter the woods, tells Mrs. Coade not to go. She goes to her room to await the return of the others.

Act 2 finds Lady Caroline Laney married to Matey, no longer a butler but now a rich businessman. The dialogue suggests that he has made his fortune by less than honest means. He is the same thief that he was as a butler, showing that his character, not fate, has caused him to be what he is.

Joanna Trout becomes Joanna Purdie, wife of John. But she cannot find her husband, for he is romantically involved with Mabel. As he wished Mabel to be more like Joanna in act 1, now he wishes Joanna to be more like his new love, Mabel. Still the romantic, he is in love with love. In the close relationship that marriage brings, he soon tires of reality.

Since the sight of his wife's garments "lying about" on his chairs does not suit his ideas of romantic love, he turns to affairs with other women who do not clutter his life with reality. He now loves Mabel for the same reasons he loved Joanna.

With his second chance, Will Dearth becomes a soul-conscious painter, Dear Brutus described by Barrie as "ablaze in happiness and health and a daughter." Margaret, the might-have-been daughter, is a delightful creature who acknowledges her father's talent and glories in his love.

Will is as perceptive and loving as he was earlier, but his new-found contentment and his daughter's love have transformed him into an "uncommonly happy nobody" rather than the "great swell of a painter" he imagined himself to be. He understands that his sensitivity can be the source of happiness as well as unhappiness. "Fame is rot," he tells Margaret, "daughters are the thing." This scene between Will Dearth and Margaret is easily the most poignant in the play.

Alice Dearth enters the scene still looking for happiness. She is now Fred's wife, but Fred has not made any difference in her values. She has servants, a motor car, a town house; but she complains of being hungry. Will and Margaret, although they have little money, give Alice what they have and share their good fortune with this unhappy woman. Seeing that the ragged painter and his delightful daughter are the happiest of humans, Alice grows even sadder and advises Will not to lose Margaret. Will, however, follows after Alice, when she leaves to try to satisfy her appetite. He sees a house in the woods, excuses himself from Margaret, and tries to find some food for Alice.

In the last act the characters return one and two at a time to Lob's drawing room. As they return, they are still under the spell of the woods. John and Mabel believe they are romantic lovers, but when Joanna comes in, John begins to forget who is his wife and who is his mistress, asking at one point, "Which of you is my wife?" He begins to understand that he is not the "deeply passionate" man he had thought himself to be, but rather a romantic philanderer.

Joanna recognizes what has been going on and determines that, although she may philander again, it will not be with John Purdie. They all realize what the woods has taught them: that, as John says, "it isn't accident that shapes our lives ... . What really plays the dickens with us is something in ourselves.

Something that makes us go on doing the same sort of fool things, however many chances we get." John first announces the theme of the play and explains the title when he quotes the lines from Julius Caesar. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars/ But in ourselves, that we are underlings."

The thieving butler Matey and Lady Caroline enter the room, still caught up in their dream of his being a wealthy financier. The others, including Mrs. Coade, who comes from her room to greet the guests, recognize the truth.

Matey's financial success in his "mighthave-been world" has been gained by "pilfering on a large scale." As John points out to him, "in the essentials you haven't altered."

Next to return is old Coade, who had spent his time in the woods playing upon a flute. He does not immediately know his wife, but as he looks at her he finds her face to be "very soft and lovable." He had spent his time in the woods of the second chance dreaming of the face of his wife of over thirty years.

To him she is never old, just beautiful.

Their life together has been happy because of the essential love they share, and when Coade returns to reality he proposes to her again, "wanting the same soft face after thirty years." In his second chance he has not written the book he always thought he might write, but he whispers to Mrs. Coade, "You are all I need."

Alice Dearth eventually returns in a dinner gown and introduces herself as "the Honorable Mrs. Finch-Fallow," still Fred's wife, still hungry. She remembers seeing the painter in the woods, remembers him as "a jolly, attractive man."

When Purdie remarks that Will Dearth was "far from jolly" when he was with his wife, Alice remarks, without knowing she is speaking of herself, "Perhaps that was the lady's fault."

Will Dearth arrives looking for food for the hungry Alice. When he sees Alice, reality slowly intrudes upon him until he knows that his magnificent daughter was merely a dream. He is then struck dumb by the pain of his loss. Yet he has the dignity to thank the sleeping Lob for the hour he had with her. Alice leaves the room overcome with emotion.

The theme that humans are in large measure responsible for what happens to them is repeated by most of the characters after their return from the woods.

Given a second chance, most merely repeated their earlier mistakes, mistakes caused not by fate but by something in themselves. When Joanna asks of the midsummer night's dream, "does it ever have any permanent effect?"

Matey, who has seen the experiment on several occasions, ends the play by saying, "So far as I know, not often, miss; but, I believe, once in a while."

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does the play open in a darkened room?

2. Lob is described as a gnome-like character. What would such a character look like, and why does Barrie want Lob to appear gnome-like?

3. Mrs. Coade, who is called "the nicest" of the women in the play by one of the other women, is described by Barrie as keeping about her house a portrait and "certain mementoes" of her husband's first wife. How does such information suggest that she is "nice"?

4. Why are the women planning in act 1 to send a telegram? Why do they not send it?

5. Lady Caroline Laney pronounces her r's as w's. Why does she do so and how does this trait help us to understand her character?

6. Most of the characters in act 1 are unhappy with their lives. To what do they ascribe their unhappiness?

7. How do Lob's razors help Matey determine his master's age?

8. The play contains much irony— Lady Caroline Laney is the hardest on Matey in act 1, but she marries him in the magical woods; Alice Dearth believes she knows her husband best when in fact she knows him least. How does irony help to present the theme of the play?

9. The phrase "Crack-in-my-eye Tommy," often uttered by Will Dearth, is obviously a private idiom. Why does Barrie give this peculiar habit of speech to Dearth?

10. Lob invites his guests because they all have something in common. What is it?

11. Mr. and Mrs. Coade are standards by which other characters can be judged. What characteristics do they have that make them ideal for that role?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Some critics think that Barrie has written in Dear Brutus a play of "charming but credible fantasy." By comparing Dear Brutus to other plays in which Barrie uses "charming" fantasy, such as Peter Pan, show how the fantasy in Dear Brutus is credible.

2. Barrie is often accused by critics of "seeking to shun the realities of life."

Does the use of the magical woods in Dear Brutus support that accusation, or can the play be used to show that Barrie does in fact address significant realities of life?

3. In his first stage directions Barrie announces that the two major characters in the play are "Darkness and Light." By discussing the play's theme and the relation of the more recognizable characters to that theme, show why Barrie calls Darkness and Light the major characters.

4. The theme of a second chance in life is present in other works by Barrie, such as The Little White Bird (prose) and The Admirable Crichton (play). Show how the theme is used in those works and how it is developed to its fullest in Dear Brutus.

5. The title of Barrie's Dear Brutus comes from a speech in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar where Cassius tries to persuade Brutus to take charge of his life and rid Rome of the dangerous Caesar. Cassius argues that life's events are not caused by a fate "written in the stars," but by the strengths and deficiencies of our own characters. Show how that idea is dramatized both in Julius Caesar and Dear Brutus.

6. Barrie's stage directions in Dear Brutus provide thorough descriptions of the setting, which may be created to plan by a set director. His descriptions of characters are also thorough, but considerably more difficult to present on stage. Discuss the various character descriptions found in the stage directions and show how they may (or may not) be staged.

For Further Reference

Geduld, Harry. Sir James Barrie. New York: G.K. Hall, 1971. Geduld offers elaborate plot summaries of all the major works. Barrie's dramatic techniques are, however, best dealt with elsewhere. Geduld tries to root Barrie's fantasies in his psychological experiences. Contains a useful bibliography.

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

Hammerton, disturbed by the sloppy scholarship on Barrie, undertook to separate legend and anecdotal stories 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 J. M. Barrie and His Books, first 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 expands upon the work done by Hammerton.

Moult, Thomas. Barrie. London: Jonathan Cape, 1927. Moult uses Hammerton's early work as the basis of his book, but provides no index, which limits its usefulness. The discussions of Barrie's works is mostly paraphrase, with little useful analysis.

Roy, James A. James Matthew Barrie.

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

Related Titles

The characters in Dear Brutus are similar to those in other plays by Barrie.

Barrie sometimes finds heroes and heroines among the common people— butlers, charwomen, scullery maids, or starving artists—but in Dear Brutus he explores the strengths and weaknesses of the affluent with similar results. The theme of a second chance at life is raised in his other works, for example, The Little White Bird, The Admirable Crichton, and Mary Rose. The character of Mary Rose is often tied to that of the might-have-been daughter of Will Dearth in Dear Brutus in that both are "delightful creatures" who disappear before they ever grow up.

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