The Duchess and the Jeweller Short Guide

The Duchess and the Jeweller by Virginia Woolf

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Characters

Oliver Bacon, the jeweler, is really the only developed character in the short story. The Duchess is more of a stock figure, entering Bacon's office with "the aroma, the prestige, the arrogance, the pomp" of any of her kind, explicitly represented as "all the Dukes and Duchesses swollen in one wave." Like an effective political cartoon, she has a dominant feature, in this case the image of the wave, which Woolf, in a metaphoric flourish, uses to convey her presence: And as a wave breaks, she broke, as she sat down, spreading and splashing and falling over Oliver Bacon, the great jeweler, covering him with sparkling bright colors . . . for she was very large, very fat, tightly girt in pink taffeta.

The contrast between the sprawling, voluminous being and the confinement of her garments expresses her lack of inner discipline or firm character, and words like "shut," "subsided," and "sank" convey her generally downward course.

Her accoutrements are similarly corrupted, her purse containing fake jewels likened to a "ferret's belly," and she is ready to sell anything, including her "honor" or her daughters, although she and Bacon camouflage their real intentions with a language of deception. As "the daughter of a hundred Earls" who exudes "the swords and spears of Agincourt" (that is, the long legacy of English triumphalism) she is still a formidable, if hollow figure.

It is Bacon, though, who interests Woolf. The story is his, and Woolf's depiction of the enterprising merchant is tinged with ambivalence. Her distaste for his strutting smugness is evident in her use of animal metaphors to portray him—from his name, to his physical bearing ("his nose was long and flexible, like an elephant's trunk"), to his ambition compared to a "giant hog" snuffing for truffles or a "camel (that) sees the blue lake"—and in the way he reveals his heart's deepest passion for cold stones rather than other human beings, especially since he does not have any real friends in the story. When Bacon opens his safe to relish his treasure, the jewels—"shining, cool, yet burning eternally, with their own compressed light"—his excitement is evident as he gives human attributes to the gems.

"Tears!" said Oliver, looking at the pearls.

"Heart's blood!" he said, looking at the rubies.

But then, he exclaims "Gunpowder!" at the blazing light from the diamonds, "Gunpowder enough to blow Mayfair— sky high, high, high!" and his exultation at this subversive, even revolutionary impulse shifts Woolf's focus so that Bacon becomes not just the mercantile manipulator, but a man justified in his drive by the huge weight of the British ruling structure, an edifice so massive that much of the population remained flattened by its pressures.

Woolf's sympathies are with the man who recalls his youthful self, "you who began life in a filthy, little alley" and who still incarnates the spirit of "the wily astute little boy;" the man who still works in "the dark little shop in the street off Bond Street" rather than in

the world of the Duchess who, for all her dissipation, still covers the jeweler "with sparkling bright colours;" the man who worships the memory of his mother and apologizes to her for paying the Duchess 20,000 pounds for junk, trading his self-respect and honor for the opportunity to consort with royalty. It is this conflict that gives Bacon a degree of integrity, since he is aware of his failure and it is his very human decision to waste some of his wealth to achieve what he wants that makes him at least moderately appealing. At the end of the story, when "again he was a little boy in the alley where they sold dogs on Sunday" Woolf recognizes the fundamental human nature of need and desire, and grants Bacon absolution for his failings.

Social Concerns

As the daughter of two prototypically Eminent Victorians—Sir Leslie Stephen, the editor of The Dictionary of National Biography and Julia Stephen, a member of the prestigious Pre-Raphaelite circle—Virginia Woolf was raised in what Sandra Gilbert calls a "mausoleum of (a) late Victorian household" (No Man's Land, Vol. III, Letters from the Front, 1994), but the death of her father in 1904 when she was twenty-two dislodged her from the restrictions and expectations of some deeply entrenched social conventions.

When she moved into the emerging world of artistic innovation and bohemian inclinations of "loomsbury" she began to fashion her own life as a journalist, essayist, novelist, and teacher, eventually marrying Leonard Woolf (who she described candidly but not critically as a "penniless Jew" in an irrevocable separation from the Hyde Park Gate home where she was raised. The impression of her upbringing, however, remained a significant feature of her writing, as she counterposed in many works the old ways of the English ruling establishment with the transformations of modernist forces, looking toward an uncertain future in which radically different patterns of living might develop. Her short story "The Duchess and the Jeweller" is set during a period of dislocation, when some members of the highest levels of British society—whose royal connections provided the luxury of exceptional privilege and power—have been compelled to deal with people whose occupations and family backgrounds made them previously invisible. The Duchess has to sell her baubles and trinkets to pay gambling debts. The jeweler, who has risen to a position of some wealth and minor power from back-alley poverty, is anxious to move beyond the station he has reached and into the realms of real status.

Neither party has any genuine interest in or desire to spend time with the other, but their needs have put them into a dubious alliance that they pretend is based on "friendship."

Since the Duchess is more an emblem of an age and an attitude than a particular person, the rigid proscriptions of the British social code are presented from the point of view of the jeweler. He has reached his current position by wit, guile, and petty thievery, starting from the bottom by "selling stolen dogs to fashionable women in Whitechapel" and then proceeding, in a classic example of enterprise leading to the acquisition of capital and then the multiplication of capital, to become a very successful jewel merchant, "famous in France, famous in Germany, in Austria, in Italy." Now he has a flat in Green Park decorated "with the proper allowance of discrete net" on the windows, and he wears the right clothing "shapely, shining, cut from the best cloth." In spite of his material acquisitions, the jeweler, Oliver Bacon, is "not satisfied yet." "Was he not still a sad man, a dissatisfied man, a man who seeks something that is hidden?" Woolf asks, suggesting that the obeisance of employees ("Hammond and Wicks, stood straight and looked at him, envying him"), the finery he possesses, the riches he has accumulated, do not provide any real satisfaction for a man who has put all of his energies into the pursuit of commercial success and now is beginning to sense that there may be more to

life, and perhaps more significantly, that his schemes and strategies may not even be the most interesting utilization of his abilities.

Techniques

Her short fiction did not afford Woolf the large field for experiment and innovation that her novels did, but she usually took at least one important element of the singular style she was developing as a controlling facet. In "The Duchess and the Jeweller," it is her concentration on the nuances of the main character that is the predominant feature. As James Wood points out, one of her aims was "to unwrap consciousness." "Character to the Edwardians," he continues, "was everything that could be described. For Woolf, it was everything that could not be described" (The New Republic, Sept. 29, 1997, p. 35). Thus, her employment of a stream-of-conscious narrative permitted her to literally invade the mind of a character and because the mind operates in response to the immediate present and in terms of the accumulations of sensation into memory, Oliver Bacon, the jeweler, is seen both in the unfolding present and in terms of his history to this point in his life. This enables Woolf to suggest the dimensions of a lifetime while concentrating on a key moment. In doing this, she is satisfying one of the classic definitions of a short story: A moment of revelation that illuminates vast stretches in a character's existence.

At times, Woolf's style—particularly in the dense texture of novels like To the Lighthouse (1927; see separate entry) which uses an elaborate syntax that requires (and rewards) close attention—has presented some problems for readers who are not accustomed to reading carefully and relatively slowly. "The Duchess and the Jeweller" has none of these difficulties, as its pace is quick with no interjections or digressions and its tone sprightly, vivid, even biting. She uses a good deal of terse dialogue and luscious description mixed in an unusual amalgam that keeps the narrative moving briskly, and while much is said directly, almost as much is implied but not hidden. As the Duchess offers her valuable jewels, the action is fluid, the pace rapid, the mood electric: . . . .But real was it, or false? Was she lying again? Did she dare?

She laid her plump padded finger across her lips. "If the Duke knew .

. . she whispered. "Dear Mr. Bacon, a bit of bad luck . . ."

Been gambling again, had she?

"That villain! That sharper!" she hissed.

The man with the chipped cheek bone? A bad'un. And the Duke straight as a poker; with side whiskers; would cut her off, shut her up down there if he knew—-what I know, thought Oliver, and glanced at the safe.

The point-of-view is Bacon's, as he takes on the knowledge of an almost omniscient narrator, but this is still within the larger perspective of the author, who knows and sees Bacon, and his world, and much more as well.

Themes

In spite of the relative affluence of her family, Virginia Woolf was aware of the difficulties most British subjects faced in terms of earning a living. As a social activist committed to women's suffrage, as a lecturer at Morley College which drew many working-class men and women, and as a partner with her husband at the Hogarth Press, she moved considerably beyond the economic security her birthright offered. The practicality of her declaration in her famous essay "A Room of One's Own" that an artist must have at least 500 pounds a year is an indication of both her lingering sense of entitlement and her awareness of the crippling effects of constant poverty. As she examines the intricate arrangements of the British class system in the early decades of the twentieth century in "The Duchess and the Jeweller" from the perspective of the ambitious arriviste jeweler Oliver Bacon, her semi-sympathy for Bacon's struggle is ultimately overshadowed by her primary concern, the effect that a total focus on wealth and then status has on a person's soul.

The Duchess, as a kind of caricature of totally self-absorbed royalty, is a ludicrously comic figure, a pampered creature in the latter stages of decadence and decline. She is unaware of any form of life other than the prerogatives of her title, and she has lost any vestiges of admirable human qualities. Indeed, it is likely that they were stillborn, and that she is a replica of previous generations corrupted by all of the things Woolf holds in contempt. Bacon, on the other hand, is much more complex and his striving is understandable. Nonetheless, Woolf uses his desires as the basis for a relatively subtle but still devastating critique of the modern world, where none of the things she values are important and where human beings are encouraged to pursue goals that are likely to leave them empty and confused.

At the core of her critique is the growing void in Bacon's soul. He retains the energetic alertness of the young boy who scrambled out of the gutter but he cannot think of any gratification or satisfaction other than ascending the social ladder, and as he climbs higher, his angle of vision is not increased. Instead of becoming more generous, more reflective, more serene, more philosophic, he has continued to refine the aggressive techniques which led to his earliest success, so that his conversation/negotiation with the Duchess is an exercise in duplicity, deception, and hypocrisy. Under the veneer of good manners and social graces, Bacon and the Duchess are just vicious animals.

Woolf has removed the surface of "civilized" behavior to reveal the lack of civility lurking just beneath. What is the value of something which can be bought but not appreciated, Woolf is asking. Bacon's most fervent desire, to be "riding alone in the woods with Diana!" the Duchess's daughter, debases whatever impulses of actual love it arises from by its contamination with commerce and intrigue. Bacon's vision of "the Prime Minister; and himself too, in a white waistcoat" anticipates his afterthought "and then, Diana" indicating an order of precedence. Without specifically mentioning what she feels are the genuine elements of a sound civilization—something she has done at length in other works—Woolf has drawn a picture of a world where everything is measured as a commodity. Her continuing attack on the patriarchal Oxbridge establishment which

controlled British life in her youth is suspended in this story to consider some of the effects of replacing the university trained arbiters of taste and custom with a new breed of men whose recent acquisition of wealth has left them bereft of any other indices of achievement or self-worth.

Key Questions

Woolf was raised in relatively affluent circumstances and seemed to most people who met her to have the character of a proper "lady." When she chaired monthly meetings of the Richmond Branch of the Woman's Cooperative Guild—an organization for working-class women—she felt sympathetic to but estranged from the "quiet and phlegmatic" people who attended the lectures she planned, while admiring their "good sense." In an essay in 1930, she remarked "It is not from the ranks of working-class women that the next great poet or novelist will be drawn from," although she also expressed her hope that in the future, people like herself would not meet working-class women as "mistresses or customers" and that "friendship and sympathy would supervene." Her attitudes toward royalty were similarly mixed. Stephen Spender mentions how she was "fascinated" by royalty and Clive Bell remembered her bragging about getting a letter from a Duchess, but she responded to the Abdication crisis by, as Hermione Lee concludes, "playing up to her reputation as a snob and a collector of royal stories."

Even as a "left-wing, anti-conservative thinker" (in Lee's words), Woolf was fascinated by the royal family's "immunity" from ordinary life and noted in her diary how the crowds she mingled with around Whitehall on December 10, 1936—the day of the Abdication announcement—seemed to vacillate between sympathy and "sneering contempt." In "The Duchess and the Jeweller," one might trace Woolf's own attitude as it moves along that continuum and also consider her comment on the BBC (in discussing writing) how "Royal words mate with commoners," and her proposal (tongue-in-cheek to a degree) in a 1938 essay that royalty-worship could be replaced now with worship of a panda at the zoo.

1. How old is Oliver Bacon? How can one determine his approximate age in the story?

2. What is the nature of Oliver Bacon's relationship with his mother? Why is it important?

3. How does Woolf use place names to establish a social context?

4. What is the function of the color imagery in the story?

5. Does Woolf give the reader any reason to sympathize with the Duchess?

6. How does Woolf use dialogue to create a psychological mood in the story?

7. In what ways are the attributes of the Duchess still applicable to British royalty?

Literary Precedents

Through most of the nineteenth century, the novel was the dominant fictive genre in the British Isles. Virginia Woolf was one of the earlier practitioners of the short story in England, and her work in "The Duchess and the Jeweller" resembles that of Joseph Conrad in terms of the way in which an individual character is examined in some psychological depth.

The social context is closer to that of such continental authors as Guy de Maupassant, while the powerful descriptive passages and dialogue are reminiscent of some of D. H. Lawrence's stories in his first collection, The Prussian Officer and Other Stories (1914).

Related Titles

In his preface to the first collection of all of Virginia Woolf's short fiction, A Haunted House and Other Short Stories (1944), Leonard Woolf recalled that she had decided to publish a new edition of her short fiction in 1940, including the stories that she had written during the 1930s for magazines like Harper's Bazaar, The Forum and The Athenaeum. "The Duchess and the Jeweller" was originally rejected for publication due to its derogatory references to the main character who was described with several anti-semitic terms. Woolf removed or adjusted the most obviously offensive words, and the story was eventually published in 1938.

The story was included, along with six of the eight stories and sketches from Monday or Tuesday, plus six others from magazines in the 1930s and five unpublished stories, only one of which ("The Searchlight") Woolf had revised at all. Leonard Woolf felt that this was a questionable decision, since Woolf always did "a great deal of work on them" before publication. Nonetheless, he felt that it was a worthwhile compromise since to withhold publication would only have resulted in a delay as almost everything Woolf wrote was to become public.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994