A Fairy Tale of New York Short Guide

A Fairy Tale of New York by J. P. Donleavy

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Contents

Characters

As in The Ginger Man, A Fairy Tale of New York is a picaresque novel and the characters are one-dimensional. Howard How and Mr. Mott, the owner of the spark plug company, are caricatures of the complacent, unimaginative man of business. The bigoted admiral who punches Christian in a boxing ring is a stereotypical example of the powerful, authoritarian individual. Vine is an allegorical portrayal of the successful man who believes in his own cliches. That he and How both give Christian repeated second chances are implausible attributes for the materialists Don leavy represents them as being, unless we stretch the satiric point that American business decisions are made on appearance only.

As in The Ginger Man, the women are stereotypes from a sexist male fantasy.

All of them live for the glorious consummation of sex with Christian.

An ex-girl friend, now well-to-do and a member of the snobbish upper crust, cannot resist following Christian over city blocks to make contact and continues to see him after he has outraged a party to which she has taken him; he does not see her for days and weeks, but she eagerly takes him back when he condescends to see her.

A prim and engaged funeral associate, Miss Musk, although recalling Evelyn Waugh's brilliant caricature Amy Thanatopsis in The Loved One (1948) because of her commitment to funerary decorum, is soon rolling with Cornelius in the storeroom, even after he has played a cruel (but funny!) joke on her by draping the hand of a cadaver on her shoulder and leaving the room. The portrait of Fanny Sourpuss approaches pornography in its depiction of women as potential sex-slaves — not in its representation of sexual activity, but in its portrayal of authority and its claims for penis power. Fanny has exploited her sexuality to marry into a great deal of money, and she uses that money to buy Christian. In some scenes she is degraded to humiliating sexual and authoritarian situations, all because she cannot keep her hands off Christian — who can take her or leave her. Fanny's dependence is merely the most extreme instance of a characterization of women as sexual objects and nothing more.

Social Concerns

Throughout much of Donleavy's fiction since The Ginger Man (1955), there has been a constant tension between America and Europe, specifically between Ireland with its repressive religiosity and New York with its bigness and commercialism. In this book Donleavy revisits this notion by tracing the adventures of Cornelius Christian as he returns from Ireland where he, like Dangerfield and Donleavy, studied. Christian is placed in the difficult position of earning a living because of his wife's death on the crossing and the consequent debt he runs up in burying Helen. Hired by the undertaker because of his manners and class, Christian encounters the American variation on the Irish repressiveness Donleavy satirized in The Ginger Man. In his essay "An Expatriate Looks at America," published three years after A Fairy Tale of New York, Donleavy accuses America of exaggerating vices inherent in the human condition: "like anywhere, greed, lust, and envy make [the United States] work. But in America it's big greed, big lust, big envy. Laced liberally with larceny . . . And if it's slow in coming, you can always buy a gun." This tendency toward the big and the vulgar is exemplified in the character Clarance Vine, a Texas oilman turned New York funeral proprietor, who with his influence with the police and the authorities, his willingness to believe in his own cliches, and his mendacity, exemplifies Donleavy's criticism of American life. Clarance's enterprise thrives, and he innovates in burial methods, including a joint burial that attracts attention from competing funeral directors. In one way, then, the picaresque of this novel is really the initiation of Christian into the American way of death and life — and the ways in which someone can make a buck on both.

In Christian's second job in New York, as a member of the advertising think tank at a spark plug manufactory, he encounters the stereotypical American executive in one Howard How, whose redundant name reinforces the author's representation of a man who has thought deeply about nothing at all, whose life, aspirations, and values are formed around what others say and think. How lectures Christian, who is late for work, is hung over, and has been hurt in a fight, on the "real things in life" — like snow tires, storm windows, his herb garden in a neighborhood where he and his and his neighbors have formed a compact never to sell to "undesirables."

Christian twits bigots of all types by saying America would be improved by being taken over by Jews, Africans, or whatever minority the bigot complains about.

For Christian and for Donleavy, violence and cruelty are specifically American vices, engendered of America's greed and lack of restrictive firearm laws. In one chapter Christian watches with fascination as a bully intimidates and humiliates a little man named Sylvester, but is in turn rendered powerless when Sylvester starts crying after the bully insults the man's mother — a most unlikely character motivation. While the bully grovels Sylvester shoots him to death. The woman who lives across the boulevard from Christian's mistress is arrested for murdering her husband, and three men are shot to death outside the posh hotel one evening. In another chapter, Mafia enforcers try unsuccessfully to intimidate Clarance Vine in a protection scam.

For Donleavy as observer, much of what makes America so nasty a place is the prevalence of unchecked violence and greed; but his hero, Christian, uses fisticuffs as a strategy to get what he wants and is engaged in several fights in the story. The novel's distinction between American and European violence is imprecise. Christian's fights and aggressiveness spring from the same savagery and assertiveness as does the pistol in the hands of the insulted little man; Donleavy's point, while valid, is that fisticuffs are a less technologically savage and private form of violence than the armed camp he represents New York as being. His point is that American sanctions and legitimatizes violence among its citizens, and a valid criticism it is. But the representation of Christian as wearing a constant chip on his shoulder and looking for a fight undermines the seriousness with which readers are inclined to take his criticism of American violence as a matter of degree not of kind. When Christian prays to be allowed to return to Ireland, we as readers do not see the verification of an important principle about America and its admitted inclination for violence. Similarly, when Christian condemns American as materialistic and acquisitive, his judgment is subverted by his own envy of the rich and his desire for wealth and power, not entirely cancelled out by his inevitable satiric remarks about all the dull rich people he meets.

Techniques

All the Donleavy signature techniques from The Ginger Man are repeated in A Fairy Tale of New York, with little development or adaptation. The epigrammatic poems at the chapter ends are often clever, at times brilliant, and occasionally dull. The shifts from omniscient to first-person narrative are more frequent and less effective, in part because of their frequency and in part because the character Christian is inherently less interesting than Dangerfield. Although there is much to sympathize with in Christian's predicament, the whining tone of his recollection of his orphan status and the total lack of introspection about his responsibility for himself and to his fellows do little to offset the objective narrative facts that suggest that he represents self-absorption at its very worst.

Themes

Most of Donleavy's novels flush out the quintessential theme of The Ginger Man, existence rendered absurd by the awareness of death. In this book Christian begins as a sympathetic character bereaved at losing his wife on the crossing and landing alone in a city that can be counted on to bury her. He seems overwhelmed by Helen's death and at one point wishes that he himself were dead. His concern for Helen's death recalls his and his brother's being orphans in this very city, so the character seems literally surrounded by thoughts of death. He takes what may be the worst possible job for someone so obsessed, as a functionary in a funeral establishment — in part to pay the debt incurred in burying Helen.

His brief tenure as a mortician ends with his first venture into embalming, when the inevitable conflict between his cynicism and the sentimentality associated with his profession lead to his employer's being sued by an irate "bereaved." In court, Christian brazenly outfaces the plaintiff and her lawyer and the lawsuit, which has a solid basis in an injury to the client, is dismissed. Thus Donleavy satirizes the American legal system, for in his hilarious court scene everyone gets fleas but no one gets justice.

The novel's most explicit association of death and absurdity is Christian's mistress Fanny Sourpuss, whom he met at her husband's funeral and who took Christian as her lover to stave off her own horrors of imminent death. A stereotypical aging gold-digger, Fanny has come to realize that her marriage to the rich Sourpuss was a sightly distinguished form of prostitution and that her supporting Christian as her youthful lover reduces him to a gigolo.

Moreover, Fanny has developed breast cancer, but refuses a mastectomy because she owes all she has to her appearance — thus Donleavy links what he represents as a uniquely American concern with the appearance of beauty with a denial of conditions that lead to death. Believing that her success in escaping a constricting material environment is due exclusively to her physical beauty, Fanny chooses death over the loss of physical beauty.

Key Questions

Any discussion of a Donleavy novel begins with tone. What are we as readers to make of the hero and his response to the world around him? Is Christian's hostility to New York, rich people, and America justified because he was an orphan and an outcast? Does the author intend it to be? What other thematic issues are engaged by the novel.

1. Are violence and crime as exclusively American problems as the novel implies? Is the criticism of American tolerance for violence valid?

2. Should the repeated chances to succeed given to Christian by Howard How and Clarance Vine be seen as satiric portraits of the stupidity of American businesspeople, or are they charitable second chances given to an unregenerate person who seems bent on wasting his own talents?

3. Is Christian's insensitivity to Fanny's impending death to be taken as cruelty, self-centeredness, or dread of the very idea of death?

4. Do you see Christian's departure from America as an indictment of the American way of life?

Literary Precedents/Related Titles

As a satire on the American funeral industry A Fairy Tale of New York joins several distinguished modern novels by Englishmen during this century.

Aldous Huxley's After Many A Summer Dies the Swan (1939) and Evelyn Waugh's The Loved One, like Donleavy's book effectively satirize the euphemism, the morbidity, and the ostentation of the American way of death. The funniest scene, in which Christian faints upon his initiation to the embalming room, is hoisted onto the table, and wakes up wondering exactly what everyone is doing to him, is of the order of Waugh's Juvenalian satire.

Although critic John Harrington recalls The Pilgrim's Progress (1678) by John Bunyan because of the hero's name and the series of episodic adventures that test his character, the books does not really represent Christian as so much tempted as exploitative of the situations that surround and threaten to exploit him.

This material was originally conceived as a play, and thus A Fairy Tale of New York actually reverses the pattern of Donleavy's other plays, which are adaptations of his novels. The play version was completed shortly after The Ginger Man, but had modestly successful runs. At the height of his reputation and influence in the 1970s, Donleavy returned to this satire on New York and American attitudes toward death. One would expect that this opportunity to re-visit the dramatic material would result in highly effective dialogue, which was after all the strongest stylistic feature of The Ginger Man and The Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B. Surprisingly, this does not happen. The only character except for Christian to emerge with an authentic dramatic voice is the mindless How, whose voice is parodic rather than that of a real character. Similarly, the voice of Christian, while recognizable, resembles that of other Donleavy heroes.

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