

Gigi Short Guide

Gigi by Colette

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Characters

Only five characters actually appear in the novella, Gigi, and one or two others receive brief mention. Gilberte Alvarez, called Gigi, dominates the work and appears in nearly every scene. She is the illegitimate daughter of Andree Alvarez, whose lover, the father of Gigi, has long since deserted her. They live with Andree's mother, Madame Inez Alvarez, whose surname she took from a now deceased lover and whose first name she adopted because of her Spanish looks. This little "family" lives in genteel poverty. The mother is something of a singer, and Madame Alvarez looks after the apartment and Gigi.

Gaston Lachaille has enormous wealth, made from the sugar industry.

The connection between such a rich and socially prominent man and these relatively obscure women is "an older Lachaille" whom Inez claims to have "known intimately." The only other character of significance (besides Liane d'Exelmans, whose repeated attempted suicides over her affairs with Gaston become a subject of derision by Alicia and Inez and of considerable humor in the narrative) is the formidable Aunt Alicia, the only member of Gigi's family with money. She has a good income, better than she will ever admit; but, none of her lovers had ever mentioned marriage, evidently; so, she lives in lone splendor in a comfortable apartment and insists that Gigi visit her often in order that she may instruct the girl on everything from manners to proper personal hygiene.

The genius of Colette in Gigi is making this sordid-sounding group of characters into an amusing and finally instructive set of persons. The characterization is swift but not superficial (although it does not approach the depth found in Cheri), as when the author comments on Madame Alvarez thusly: "She retained, from her past life, the honorable habits of women who have lost their honor." Fastidious and competent, she loves her irrepressible granddaughter.

From the start, any touch of meanness is removed from the portrayal of Gaston by his habit of dropping in for a cup of Madame Alvarez's camomile tea and a game of piquet with Gigi, who calls him "uncle Gaston," or, more often, simply "Tonton." Such people seem innocent; and, the ending of the story, when Gaston proposes, appears believable. There is some realism earlier in the narrative, also, however. At the instant that Madame Alvarez senses, which she does quickly, that Lachaille sees Gigi as more than a child, she intervenes, preventing their going together to a public place. She has grasped that people will think that Gigi is now just another of Gaston's conquests. The novella abounds with such clever touches.



Social Concerns/Themes

Since the eighteenth century, fictional works, chiefly the novel, had dealt with the matter of younger women and girls having affairs with older men — sometimes with pleasant outcomes, as in *Gigi*, sometimes with unfortunate conclusions. Part of the typical story, as in Choderlos Laclos' *Dangerous Acquaintances* (1924; *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, 1782), concerns seduction. In this earlier novel, a remarkable example of the epistolary form, the relationship between the older man and the innocent girl is a study of the irregular and sometimes sordid friendships of the protagonist with women.

In England, this theme about the abuse of power had occupied the pens of leading novelists, most notably Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding. As a social concern, the subject is simply a matter of whether the girl will accede to the older man's proposition of a liaison or will hold out for marriage, thus risking the rejection entirely by her "lover."

The happy tone and optimistic ending of *Gigi* were surely a reflection of Colette's reaction to the war. She had been turning out what amounted to propaganda pieces, urging French women to stand fast against the invaders and to do their bit for the nation.

As a kind of spur to the feeling of national pride and as an escapist novella (the work is wisely set back near the turn of the century, in a more tranquil and remote era), *Gigi* simply tells the story of a fifteen-year-old girl of courage and high spirits who, while being trained to be a courtesan — or, at least, to please men in the way a professional would — manages to turn, by the purity of her heart and the substantial force of her looks and personality, a friendship with the older, worldweary Gaston Lachaille into a proposal of marriage. This happens, of course, only after Gaston has suggested a liaison and *Gigi* has refused it and then relented in a touching scene in which she admits her love for Lachaille — an avowal that he cannot resist.

As in Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), the point seems to be that a young lady should persevere in her innocence until an honorable proposal emerges. The subtitle of the English novel could well be applied to Colette's tale: "Virtue Rewarded." Although not really intended as a social commentary, *Gigi* indicates the social significance of marriage, preferably early and before any sexual contact — the plot rather contradicts the assurance offered to *Gigi* by her experienced Aunt Alicia, who, speaking of the practices of her social set (essentially, upper-class kept women), tells her niece, "Marriage is not forbidden to us. Instead of marrying 'at once,' it sometimes happens that we marry 'at last.'"

Techniques

Gigi was Colette's adieu to fiction; she never wrote another story. The work, done when the author was nearly seventy, returns in its setting and tone to the vanished era of her youth.

It is based on a romance between an older man and young woman that Colette recalled from 1926. The story is slender in plot, perceptive but economical in characterization, and rich in style. Robert Cottrell compares it to a comedy of manners (one reason the novella lent itself so readily to dramatic adaptation); and, "As is true of any good comedy of manners, Gigi is a triumph of style."

Adding to the lively text, which is mostly fast-paced dialogue, the narrative sparkles with epigrams worthy of Oscar Wilde. Most of them are given to Aunt Alicia and Madame Alvarez. The worldly-wise aunt remarks to Gigi on the necessity of "A pretty little collection of weaknesses" because men "forgive us-oh! for many things, but not for the absence in us of their own failings." When Gigi asks her grandmother to have a telephone put in their flat, the old lady observes, "thoughtfully," that "It's expensive, ... The telephone is of real use only to important business men, or to women who have something to hide." After Madame Alvarez discovers that Gigi has been listening at the keyhole to her conversation with Gaston, she admonishes the child: "You must never listen at keyholes. You don't hear properly and so you get things all wrong."

Such passages contribute to the light tone of a work that was written under the most trying circumstances: the Occupation had been endured for several years, and Colette was suffering severely from the arthritis that forced her to be bedridden toward the end of her life. Gigi is a miracle of high spirits and optimism. By 1949, 130,000 copies had sold in France.

Adaptations

The first film adaptation of *Gigi*, released in 1948, was written by Pierre Larouche, with dialogue by Colette.

Several characters are added, and the plot is expanded to contain more of Gaston's life and activities (his relations with other girls constitute a subplot). The film was quite popular. In 1951, Anita Loos adapted the story for the stage, with Audrey Hepburn in the title role — she had, in effect, been chosen by Colette, as related in the famous incident in which Colette saw the young actress rehearsing for a minor role in a film in Monte Carlo and said, "There is our *Gigi* for America." The play was a triumph.

Colette reached a worldwide audience in a scope she had never attained before with the 1958 American film adaptation of *Gigi*. With music by Frederic Loewe and lyrics and script by Alan Jay Lerner, the movie, directed by Vincente Minelli, won seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Some literary critics did not like the departures from the original story and the new sections created for this cinema treatment; but, audiences reacted very favorably to such additions as the new character, Honore (played with zest by Maurice Chevalier), the uncle of Gaston. Film critics generally agreed with the enthusiastic public response.

It is hard to believe that Colette herself would not have applauded the film, had she lived to see it. Her death, in 1954, was inevitable; but, so is the enduring attention paid to her art.

Related Titles

Gigi is set in "the period of the early Claudines; Colette has returned to her point of departure," comments Elaine Marks. There is no more valid precedent for this sprightly tale than the first published work of Colette. Gigi is a renewed version of the Claudine of the first novel, *Claudine at School* (1900, trans. 1956). These girls both display the same innocence without ignorance, beauty without elegance, and a vigorous spirit that shows them ready to deal with the world on their own terms.



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