

The Greengage Summer Short Guide

The Greengage Summer by Rumer Godden

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Characters

Cecil, the thirteen-year-old English girl, is the main character of the novel. We see events through her eyes; she is the one who speaks and understands French quite well; and it is she who carries the main burden of guilt after she has witnessed the true nature of her idolized Eliot. She is on the threshold of maturity and is painfully aware of her shortcomings, especially as she compares herself with her beautiful older sister Joss. Until recently, Joss has been her friend and confidante, but now her sister seems to have outgrown her as she enters the mysterious world of adult women. Joss has discovered her sexual attractiveness and uses it ruthlessly and with an innocent cruelty to achieve her aims.

Caring little about whom she hurts, she first adores and then angrily betrays Monsieur Eliot to revenge herself on him and on Mademoiselle Zizi. After she realizes the damage she has caused, she reacts like a child, unhappily crying for her mother. The other three Grey children are more shadowy and flat: Harriet is practical and honest, Vicky is a cute little girl, and Willmouse, the only boy in the family, is old and wise for his age, with an intense interest in the world of fashion design. He is the loner in the family.

The French are represented by Mademoiselle Zizi, lonely, neurotic, selfcentered and starved for affection; Madame Corbet, straitlaced, hard, and almost bordering on a caricature of a French concierge; Paul, the street urchin, amoral and resilient; and the hotel staff which alternately spoils and neglects the children.

Between those two worlds stands Monsieur Eliot, charming, attentive, sensitive, and mysterious. He is adored by all the females, but only Cecil and the other children realize that he has two sides — a kind one and a harsh and hard one. He creates the suspense of the story, leading to the climax of his discovery as a criminal, yet everyone except the police seems relieved when he manages to slip through their fingers at the end. He, more than any other character, cannot be defined by clear terms of good and evil; but Hester, with the perception of a child says: "Eliot always said, 'I'm sorry. I had to do that.' If you are all right, really really all right, you don't do things that are sorry."



Social Concerns

Although *The Greengage Summer* is a novel for young adults, the theme of growing up is appropriate for an adult audience, one that will pick up on the more subtle nuances of this novel. The story revolves around five English children who are stranded alone at a French hotel after their mother becomes ill and is taken to a hospital.

Cecil, thirteen years old, is an intelligent and observant girl, and through her the reader becomes aware of the cultural differences between the French and the English. The people at the hotel are practical, unsentimental, and realistic, and treat the children as miniature adults or as nuisances. Coming from a sheltered family environment, the two older girls, especially, are exposed to adult intrigues, jealousy, and love. Concerned only with her own feelings, Mademoiselle Zizi, owner of the hotel, resents their intrusion and later sees Joss, the sixteen-year-old, as a serious rival for the affections of the man she loves. Madame Corbet, the hotel manager, is jealously guarding Zizi against Monsieur Eliot and is angry when the Englishman, whom she despises, champions the abandoned children. They, too, become rivals to her love for Zizi. Innocent, yet surprisingly knowledgeable and observant, the five children are quite aware of the events and feelings. Their exposure to the realities of grownup emotions and sexual relations is helped by Paul, a rude but pathetic street urchin who works at the hotel kitchen. Paul is only too happy to open the eyes of the young people to what he accepts realistically without question.

The earthy realism of the French characters is juxtaposed with the simplicity, puritanism, and sometimes banality of the English adults and children. They are generally more honest, blunt but also uptight. They lack the elegance and grace of the French which Cecil comes to appreciate. "The French know how to live," says Monsieur Eliot, but in the end it is the solid, dull but dependable Uncle William of their ordinary, everyday world of Southstone, England, who comes to their rescue, just when the young people need him most.

In spite of contrasting the two cultures and lifestyles, Godden never resorts to stereotyping. The English, with all their common traits, are no more "typical" and uniform than the French. They are individual people shaped by their temperament, environment, and history. The theme of cultural variety that plays a major part in Rumer Godden's India novels, is here placed closer to home with two countries which have common European ancestry yet are separated by more than an expanse of water.

Techniques

Although the events in the novel deal with adult themes — love, sex, jealousy, honesty — the author presents them through the eyes of a child.

Cecil is not always mature enough to really understand what is going on. By looking over her shoulder, the reader draws conclusions and notices details which Cecil misses. This gives the novel an added dimension. The children are overlooked or disregarded by everyone, and therefore are in an excellent position to see things no one else does. With them, Eliot can allow his softer side to dominate — he has no use for them and therefore he does not use them.

Godden is a master of subtle symbolism. The five children come to Les Oilettes at the time the greengage plums are ripening. There is a sensual excess which they have never known, and which mirrors their other experiences. If you eat the overripe, sweet plums to excess, your stomach pays for it. Ripeness is an element that dominates the novel — the ripening and special sweetness of the young girl Joss, the obsessive and voluptuous passion of Mademoiselle Zizi. And for both, their ripeness leads to disaster.

The most remarkable aspect of Godden's book is her vividly descriptive style. Through colorful imagery, she brings the French countryside to life — the romantic chateau, the rich orchards, the ancient monuments, and the elegant, cultured lifestyle of the French people, their parties, fetes, and daily customs.

Themes

Confusion and pain of becoming adult and the resulting loss of innocence are the main themes of Godden's novel. Growing up can be a pleasant experience, but more often it is tinged with sadness and heartbreak. Each of the five children experiences growth in his or her own way. Cecil, at the edge of physical maturity, is the most obvious, especially since we see through her eyes. But there is also Joss, the beautiful sixteen-year-old who plays with the feelings of others and enjoys a sense of power which she, herself, cannot quite understand or control. Yet in many ways she is both child and woman and reacts with jealousy when her feelings are spurned. The younger children are mostly observers, but they, too, grow and mature during the novel. The growing-up of the five English children is contrasted with the same in their French counterparts.

French children like Paul are more realistic and less sheltered; their growing up occurs more naturally, and they mature more quickly.

The pragmatic view of the French is especially noticeable in regards to the attitudes towards sex in the two cultures. While the English children have grown up in a climate of sheltered innocence and puritan standards, French children like Paul react matter of factly, even cynically, to the sexual tensions around them. Paul does not consider sex as either evil or good, but simply as existing. Joss, on the other hand, prepared to hurt Eliot for slighting her by flirting with every man around her, is still uneasy and labels the seductive dress she wears for the party "sin." When she succeeds in attracting the admiration of the male guests, she is almost frightened of the power she has unleashed.

To Cecil and her sisters and brother, good and bad had almost always been defined in clear terms. Their standards, although they do not like him, have been set by their Uncle William and his Southstone attitudes. But when they come to France, right and wrong become relative. Monsieur Eliot turns out to be a criminal, but he is also the only person who befriends and guards the children, and he even risks his life to get help for them. Yet he also murders another child, the boy Paul, in cold blood and drugs Willmouise to keep him from talking too much.



Key Questions

The attitude of the French towards children as small adults is in direct contrast with the British idea that young people are innocent and must be protected from the adult world, and adult concerns. How are children presented in American novels? Is there a cultural difference, in the way children are treated by and as adults? What taboos does the American society preserve? What is considered suitable or unsuitable for children? Are these taboos reflecting the attitudes of the adult society? How do our media reflect children and the children's world?

1. The events are seen through the eyes of Cecil, a young girl. How does this viewpoint affect both the theme and the tone of the novel? Would it be the same if Joss were to tell about the events?

2. Cultural contrasts are strong in this novel. The French allow the children to hear adult gossip, to drink champagne, and the admiration of Joss's physical beauty is freely expressed by the adults at the party.

Does Godden consider this attitude more healthy than the British reticence?

3. "Ripeness" is an important theme in this novel. But ripeness can be delightful as well as cloying and hiding decay. How do the greengage orchard, and the lush French landscape, underscore the theme? Are ripening and corruption by necessity synonymous?

What is the solution?

4. The world of Les Oeillets is one of contradictions, and the greatest contradiction is Eliot. While the author reveals the thoughts and feelings of most of the characters, she does not show the reader his mind, not even her attitude toward him. Is he evil or good, and what motivates his actions? Although he is shown to be a ruthless criminal and even a murderer, everyone, including the reader, seems to be glad about his escape. Why? Is this moral ambiguity a sign of decay?

5. Godden uses symbolism with a very subtle touch. The loss of innocence happens in an orchard, reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. Are there any other literary references and symbolic settings? And who is the serpent in the garden?

6. Why is Eliot so kind to the children? What do they offer him? The only times he acts unselfishly to protect them are the times when he almost is caught. What motivates him? How does his relationship with them differ from his other relationships such as with Mademoiselle Zizi?

7. How does Godden view childhood? Are children perfect? Are they capable of evil? Is Paul wicked or is he a victim himself?



Literary Precedents

The Greengage Summer repeats a theme that surfaces in many of Godden's own novels — the end of innocence and the corruption through maturing. *A Candle for Saint Jude* (1948) is set in the world of ballet, where girls, almost children, first discover love. But Rumer Godden does not view children as pure and good, she believes they also possess an innocent cruelty and selfishness. Like Joss, the children in *The Battle of the Villa Fiorita* (1963) ruthlessly use all means to achieve their ends. The theme of the cruelty of the young, is also reminiscent of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

Thomas Mann's *Unordnung und frühes Leid* (1926) also describes the problems and confusion that are caused by the awakening of sexual passion in adolescents.



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