The Lady Who Liked Clean Restrooms Short Guide

The Lady Who Liked Clean Restrooms by J. P. Donleavy

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Contents

Characters

The other characters in The Lady Who Liked Clean Restrooms are plausible enough for Donleavy's purposes, but only Jocelyn, the Lady of the tide, is a fully developed person. Her husband is a reduced version of the ginger men whose self-centered antics have captivated readers in other novels. He is devastatingly dismissed as an "homme nul" by a Frenchman. Her children appear briefly before their "permanently last visit" as ungrateful wretches. The husband of one of her "friends" attempts to seduce her in a hilarious scene where Jocelyn reveals the true nature of loveless lust as a pecuniary transaction, exposing him as another deteriorating ginger man. The people she turns to for financial or psychological assistance are hucksters fluent in various forms of the language of persuasion and deception. Only the genuinely gentlemanly representative of an old law firm behaves with any kind of honesty or decorum, and even he is essentially a caricature. The Lady's character must carry the narrative, and Donleavy accomplishes this by combining the attributes of someone who is convincing in her enthusiastic responses to artistic accomplishment; startling in her facility with a rugged, take-no-prisoners vernacular that cuts through layers of smirking pomposity; touching in her sensitivity to the pain inflicted by a brutal world and bracing in the authenticity of her refined manners and graceful demeanor when that is required.

As a child, Jocelyn has an insight that seems to structure her life. Looking through the social register, it occurs to her that "some people with more money than anybody else could have the world their own way." Through the course of the narrative, Jocelyn discovers that this is not necessarily so, and perhaps more significantly, that having one's "own way" is not an entirely satisfactory way to live, especially if one, like Jocelyn, embodies with grace and elegance the traits which ought to qualify a person for the social register but which generally are subsidiary considerations to such crass but forceful determinants as money, status, and social power. The poignancy that results from the incongruity between what Jocelyn seems to deserve and what she ends up with is an important element in the sympathetic response that Donleavy evokes from the reader, but by employing his caustic wit to almost every situation, Donleavy avoids the sentimentality that could easily wreck a story about a person who for much of the narrative is, "silly sad and sinking."

Social Concerns

Ever since the appearance of The Ginger Man in 1955 (see separate entry)—a book that has sold more than 5,000,000 copies and which his publisher describes with some validity as a "beloved classic"—one of the governing precepts of J. P. Donleavy's work has been his assumption that there is a small group of particularly discerning, perceptive people whose taste, wit, and style are qualities vastly superior to the traits of the masses who control social commerce and public procedure. Sebastian Dangerfield, the protagonist of The Ginger Man, established an anarchic pattern of subversion and resistance as a means of dealing with a world dominated by greedy vulgarians and even in his worst moments of debauchery and self-indulgence, he exemplified Donleavy's fundamental conviction that there is a proper form of behavior that distinguishes a true gentleman. In subsequent novels, Donleavy explored the manner in which other men struggled against the vicissitudes of fortune in domains that rarely acknowledged their admirable characteristics, and in his aptly titled The Unexpurgated Code: A Complete Manual of Survival and Manners (1975), he sketched in great detail instructions for responding to a vast variety of potentially awkward social situations. The somewhat bizarre circumstances, arch tone, often preposterous suggestions and multiple levels of irony that informed The Unexpurgated Code did not entirely undercut Donleavy's implication that while he knew that not everything he said ought to be taken with total seriousness, he was eminently qualified to be both an arbiter of right action and an acute judge of a person's refinement and manner.

Techniques

Since the first four decades of her life have passed without any major setbacks or traumatic events, Jocelyn has not been particularly introspective, using her im pressive mental faculties for analyzing the ways of the world. When her marriage (and settled life) suddenly collapses, she is thrust inward, and Donleavy structures the narrative focus of the novel so that it moves inward with her thoughts. The novel begins with a traditional omniscient narration which describes Jocelyn's reactions to the news of her husband's desires and her attempts to maintain a degree of order, interspersed with occasional brief bits of cutting dialogue. Then, as Jocelyn's fortunes decline further, the narration moves closer to the flow of her thoughts, so that a descent into the subconscious parallels the descent from psychic certainty toward mental instability. As a turning point, there is an extended conversation between Jocelyn and Clifford, a man calling late at night with the expectation of some sexual favor.

Jocelyn's curt, frank and witheringly intelligent responses to his pathetic entreaties reveal an acute intellect previously concealed behind the expected modesty of "proper" feminine discourse. Although Jocelyn is able to handle Clifford's seductive routine with devastating candor, she is unsettled by the encounter, and the narrative plunges completely into her consciousness as Donleavy removes, for the moment, any distance between the author and the subject of the narration.

As Clifford drives away, she thinks: His car starting and roaring away with a squeal of tires on the pebbles.

A crash. O christ the drunk bastard has hit the nice maple tree hidden around the elbow of the drive. O lordy sakes is he dead. Or worse has he killed the tree. His friends from the fire department having to come and cut him out of the crumpled wreck. O god thank the god I don't believe in. The car is starting again.

And it's about time I made hot cocoa and retired to bed where my tiny room ever seems tinier every time entering it and reminding me of the spaciousness of the house on Winnapoopoo Road.

Time, space, emotion, and reason are mingled in an on-going present tense.

This form continues as Jocelyn takes the train from the suburbs into the heart of New York City, and this trip from a wealthy suburban community through steadily more dilapidated neighborhoods, then into the dark city as the tracks plunge into a tunnel and finally out into Grand Central Station, is like a recapitulation of her life. Jocelyn recalls places where she had an inspiring experience ("Surprised at the sylvan beauty when one day I went to visit Herman Melville's grave") and now sees them in contrast to the harsh realities she faces living alone in the city ("A gang of scattering kids running around a bonfire in a debris strewn street"). The extended interior monologue concludes when Jocelyn, as if seeking sanctuary, steps away from the high energy and tension of the city streets and visits one of her most prized restrooms in a funeral home.

From this point, the narrative focus gradually returns to the omniscient voice that initiated the action. As another radical transformation occurs, Jocelyn finds that she is about to become wealthy almost beyond understanding. She has emerged, it might seem, from an archetypal "Dark Night of the Soul," now able to fully appreciate her good fortune after her trials. However, Donleavy is not interested in a conventional cheerful conclusion, or even in a neat conclusion of any sort. The narrative tone of the last pages is ruminative, as if Jocelyn has been permanently separated from the immediate clash of day-to-day existence. This sort of freedom brings with it a sense of almost cosmic loneliness, a larger version of the human loneliness that Jocelyn came to know when she realized that she had no friends, no family, and no person she was interested in. While she feels some degree of relief that her obligations and responsibilities to the world can now be discharged with appropriate ladylike efficiency, she is also "terrified with the barren emptiness of her thoughts." This does not necessarily mean that she will chose to end her life, as she can still imagine that she could call "the sad man who lost his family in the plane crash" and that he would assuage her yearning by saying "why hello, I was just about to ring you." Donleavy emphasizes the frightening and exhilarating aspects of her future by slowing down the tempo of the narration, moving toward a contemplative mode that restrains the frantic pace of what has been a headlong rush so that Jocelyn seems momentarily poised on the threshold of infinite possibility. To underscore the potential of this position, he closes the novel with a brief poem that, paradoxically, leaves everything tantalizingly open. "And its all amazing," the storyteller says, "Albeit on a lighter note.

How when one is able to indulge the luxury of beginning one's life again.

All one thinks To do Is end it Conspicuously, there is no period, or any other punctuation after the last word.

Themes

Sebastian Dangerfield's appeal is that of a charming rogue, but as critic William Nelles has pointed out, he also "is something of a snob"; and Donleavy agrees with the point made by William Grant that Dangerfield is "a failed conformist rather than a romantic rebel." Donleavy's novels frequently cross a line separating social satire from a kind of sneering cynicism which gives a characteristic edge to his work, but sometimes makes it difficult to feel as sympathetic toward his protagonists as the author seems to. The Lady Who Liked Clean Restrooms continues Donleavy's concern for the necessity of "facing life's adversities with grace and style," but differs significantly from much of his previous work in that the narrative focus, for the first time, is a woman. This transformation enables Donleavy to reconsider some of his implicit endorsements of the behavior of his male protagonists, and then to go further to question some of his basic assumptions about style itself as a means of salvation.

Jocelyn Guenevere Marchantiere (whose name reverberates with custom and convention, like Clayton Claw Cleaver Clementine of The Onion Eaters [1971] or Darcy Dancer of The Destinies of Darcy Dancer, Gentleman [1977]) is married to Steve Jones, a television executive. Their children are at prestigious colleges, their home is in the posh Scarsdale suburb north of New York City. Joy, as she is familiarly (and quite ironically) know to her "friends," is an appealing representation of Jefferson's idea of an American aristocrat. Her instinctive intelligence and inherent decency have been honed by her wise grandmother in South Carolina, then enhanced by the egalitarian emphasis on humane letters at Bryn Mawr. Fit and beautiful, she seems at age forty-two to have reached a level of satisfaction and serenity rare in the modern world. However, when her "strong, silent husband who wasn't so strong nor silent" demands a divorce to marry a younger woman, the rapid decline in her economic, social, and then psychic condition reveals the hollowness at the heart of everything that she has built her life on.

She has always been able to see through the pretensions of people who depended on status and privilege for their sense of self-worth. Now, with the facade of modest wealth and social acceptability removed, she is compelled to examine the foundation of culture, etiquette, standards and personal conduct that are the legacy of her grandmother, the "Lady" who is the model for her own character.

Donleavy's beleaguered protagonists have generally been able to find a comforting security (if not superiority) in their innate sense of decorum and breeding—a sensibility that is made clearly admirable to the reader. Jocelyn instinctively relies on this capacity too, but finds that it is not sufficient to keep her "as night fell" from "moments teetering between choosing life and death."

Throughout his writing life, Donleavy has placed his protagonists in an environment that leaves them, beyond whatever their individual faults might produce, "leading marginal lives as cultural outsiders," as Nelles has it. While not necessarily blaming all of their troubles on a hostile society, Donleavy has made it clear that the modern world, especially the United States, is not a congenial place for the men he has written about.

In the 1950s, while he was trying to find a publisher for The Ginger Man (which was eventually issued by the semi-notorious Olympia Press of Paris), he described America in a letter as a country "undergoing a rigorous censorship. I want to go back to Europe where I can regain my dignity."

Living in a suburb just north of New York city, Jocelyn Guenevere Marchantiere Jones, when she is compelled by a radical change in the circumstances of her life to look closely at many of the things she has accepted as natural and fitting, finds that the national ethos has not improved. "What a god damn smug and insultingly snobbish country America was underneath it all," she thinks during a typically long night of worry and introspection, unable to find oblivion in forgetful sleep. As Donleavy, in his later work, has turned increasingly toward the themes of the elusiveness of love and the inevitability of death, his characters have kept despair at a distance in a bleak landscape through an adherence to some personal version of the "unexpurgated code" that he has somewhat sardonically described. For Jocelyn Jones, this is not sufficient, although she has the qualities of character Donleavy endorses in his male protagonists.

The essential theme of The Lady Who Liked Clean R.estrooms is a descent into the deepest core of consciousness as Jocelyn attempts to find out who she is and whether there is a place in the world for the woman she has become. She realizes that being "Mayflowered and in fact half assed socially registered" does not matter much; that "having a mind of her own" can result in isolation; that being sexually attractive almost reduces everything to a sort of prostitution; and ultimately, that even the consolations of culture might not be sufficient to prevent her from sinking "down so deep into the doldrums" that ascent is no longer possible.

She is at a point where everything is called into question, but this does not mean that nothing remains. Jocelyn has been forced to test the components of her character against a severe standard.

Only what is genuine can endure.

The seriousness of Donleavy's exploration can be ascertained by his readiness to question the value of the cultural accoutrements that have been the most prominent features of the civilized realm which he juxtaposes against the base grossness of the world. Jocelyn's cultivated tastes in music, culinary affairs, painting, architecture, and good manners—epitomized by her search for "clean rest rooms," actual as well as symbolic refuges or oases amidst the urban desert—offer a degree of relief, but do not provide a completely reliable foundation for her to rebuild her life after its customary elements have been removed. Early in the book, Jocelyn muses: She felt she owed her spiritual survival so far to a twice monthly visit to antique auctions and the art galleries downtown.

Although Donleavy characteristically undercuts this insight by juxtaposing it with Jocelyn's similar reliance on "watching local squirrels romping all over the place" in order to avoid too obvious moralizing, the emphasis on spiritual survival is clear. The pursuit of "fresh flesh" that leads her husband toward a divorce is a familiar sybaritic

symptom of a male survival strategy in Donleavy's novels. Jocelyn does not deny this sensual impulse, but her needs are located toward another dimension which requires more than the transitory narcotic of physical gratification and which, while linked to a connoisseur's appreciation of artifacts of cultural endeavor, cannot be solely satisfied there either. Approaching the subject almost obliquely, Donleavy in The Lady Who Liked Clean Restrooms has given the spiritual dimension of his protagonist's existence a more prominent place than in much of his other work.

Key Questions

By placing so much emphasis on matters of manner and social status, Donleavy has drawn the displeasure of some commentators who have accused him of a "tweedy smugness" and have described his writing as dominated by "a high Augustan and mock-Irish aloofness" which tends to hide behind "pluperfect wordsmanship." Donleavy, in his The History of the Ginger Man, expressed his devotion to words in a different way.

Recalling the people he associated with while he was composing The Ginger Man, Donleavy said that they "savored language, rolled it about on the tongue, tasted for its vintage and measuredly rationed it out to the waiting ears." Even in his explanation, however, Donleavy's determination to reach for a distinctive style is evident, and the combination of a sometimes arch tone with an almost hyper-sensitivity to the nuances of etiquette and decorum have made him vulnerable to charges of social snobbery.

His The Unexpurgated Code (1975), pointedly subtitled A Complete Manual of Survival and Manners, deflected that type of criticism by using examples that were so absurd, bizarre, and exaggerated that the comic touch balanced any pretensions that the subject suggested. A decade later, though, his De Alfonce Tennis: The Superlative Game of Eccentric Champions, Its History, Accoutrements, Rules, Conduct, and Regimen (1984), with its esoteric, even top-heavy subtitle, was accurately identified as a parody of conventions, but as Nelles notes, "baffled critics, who found the book pointless and unreadable." A discussion of the way in which Donleavy, in The Lady Who Liked Clean Restrooms, endorses the matters of style and grace that he feels are at the core of a civilized society while satirizing the people and institutions which ultimately betray these qualities might be a useful point of departure for approaching his work.

1. How does Donleavy feel about the various characters in the book? How close is he to Jocelyn, and does this narrative distance vary throughout the book?

2. Since Donleavy has generally concentrated on male protagonists, does his negative portrayal of most of the men mean that he has altered his position?

Consider the faults and virtues of the men in the novel.

3. In characteristic fashion, Donleavy has given the book an extensive subtitle: The Chronicle of One of the Strangest Stories Ever to be Rumoured About Around New York. What is the purpose of this subtitle and how well does it work?

4. In what ways is this a novel of the city? How does Donleavy use different regions of an urban landscape to express the themes of the novel?

5. Ever since The Ginger Man, Donleavy has had a reputation for what his publisher calls—with relish—a decidedly scatological streak. When, to what effect and how well does Donleavy use this mode in the novel?

6. The women in Donleavy s work are often very attractive, even admirable, but not usually presented in much depth. In his study of Donleavy (J. P. Donleavy: The Style of His Sadness and Humor, 1975), Charles Masinton has observed: ... a man's happiness comes not by way of mutual sharing and sacrifice so much as through the reassurance and consolation given by a woman.

The presentation of Jocelyn s character seems totally contrary to this assumption.

What is Donleavy saying about the relationship between women and men in the book?

Literary Precedents

Donleavy has cited James Joyce as one of his formative influences, and the use of the Joycean interior monologue, as well as the wordplay, comic moods, social commentary (akin to Joyce's Dubliners, 1914) and mixed feelings about religion are all elements that have their parallel in Joyce's work. Some critics have also cited Samuel Beckett, another writer with an Irish/ elsewhere background, as a significant predecessor, noting Donleavy's own description of his "characteristic mode" as one of "tragicomedy" which echoes Beckett's subtitle of Waiting for Godot, "a tragicomedy in two acts." The void that has appeared in the place of traditional spiritual values in Beckett's plays resembles the condition of spiritual emptiness that hovers over some of Donleavy's characters and is a prominent factor in The Lady Who Liked Clean Restrooms. The single use of short verse to conclude the final episode of the book is a technique that is familiar in Donleavy's work, a brief lyric moment (modeled after Chinese proverbs according to Nelles) that tends to alleviate the grimness of a situation.

This is a part of a basic component of Donleavy's style, the sudden shift in tone that realigns the perceptual response of the reader. It is an aspect of a postmodernist aesthetic which is designed to undercut the certainty of any philosophic position, including the traditional authority of the "author" no matter which narrative perspective is employed. And as has been often observed about Donleavy's work, he has a predilection for the scatological that is part of a literary tradition extending through writers like Rabelais to "classic" writers like Catullus, Horace, and Petronious of pre-Christian times.

Related Titles

Donleavy's career stretches across four decades, and although there are themes and motifs that recur, his work is much more than a repetitive turn on a few familiar ideas. Nonetheless, the striking (and continuing) success of The Ginger Man has certainly been a factor both in sustaining Donleavy's reputation and in continuing to draw the interest of readers. Donleavy has acknowledged this by exploring the place of that book in his life in The History of The Ginger Man (1994).

His reflective considerations in preparing The History of The Ginger Man may have been a part of the genesis of The Laay Who Liked Clean Restrooms since the consequences of the actions of Sebastian Dangerfield and of other ginger men might not appear as amusing in 1995 as in 1955.

Without removing the appeal of men like Dangerfield, Donleavy has been willing to recognize the repulsive, remarkably self-protective tactics and sometimes spurious "charm" that these characters have depended on, and The Lady Who Liked Clean Restrooms is an honest and admirable attempt to see them from a much less sympathetic point of view than the one he has taken in many previous books.

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