Le Divorce Short Guide

Le Divorce by Diane Johnson

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Characters

Isabel Walker, a University of Southern California dropout and the self-ad-mitted product of a happy home, is the central character. She arrives in France already pre-labeled by her family and friends. She is "the pretty one," and the unsettled youngest daughter who cannot make up her mind what she wants to be when she grows up. But she also has a reputation for being practical and analytical, in contrast to her sister's artistic dreaminess.

Isabel herself believes the labels to be fair, and they do accurately describe her, although not completely. Isabel is also intelligent, which she claims she gets little credit for because Roxy "won" that designation first, and she is adaptive and curious.

These traits eventually serve her well, but during her first weeks in Paris they do not seem to help much. Her spoken French does not go much beyond "Bonjour," and she confronts her surroundings with a critical eye. The city is beautiful, she thinks, and the food is great, but why must it rain even in the summer?

And why can they not handle their traffic better? As a California girl, almost the archetypal late-twentieth-century American, she finds an even greater contrast in lifestyles than some Americans might.

But despite her initial distrust (and even fear) Isabel decides she will learn how to live in France. She might as well do something to make her life interesting while she is there. Who knows what the payoff might be?

Roxeanne, Isabel's sister, is five years older than Isabel. The two have liked each other from the time they first met, at the marriage of Roxy's mother to Isabel's father. Close bonds between stepsisters may not be rare in real life, but they are far from inevitable, either. The lack of drama, and the subtle way they seem to challenge traditional family values has kept them even rarer in fiction. So it is an added delight to watch the way the sisters help each other, analyze each other—and even resent each other sometimes, adding verisimilitude to their depiction. The interplay between the two sisters, their contrasting reactions to many things, and their sometimes strained but always trusted ties of family, make the sisters' relationship the most important one in the book.

Roxy is sensitive and intellectual, given to emotional outbursts. She has always seemed to live her life as a series of peaks and valleys. This makes it hard for Isabel to tell if she is truly desperate about her marriage, or just reacting with histrionics as she did to schoolgirl crises. Surprisingly, Roxy works hard at anything she really wants to do. She has learned to speak fluent French and even to fix good French meals (although her husband assured her she did not have to.)

Important to understanding her behavior is the depiction of Roxy's vocation.

She is a poet. As a poet's career goes, she has been fairly successful, with a volume of poems published by Illinois Wesleyan University Press and many magazine acceptances. But as Isabel notes, it is not a calling at which one can make a living.

She was lucky to marry a man from a well-off French family. Roxy has a studio and sends her daughter Gennie to the creche daily, even though she does not have a paying job.

By the amount of space devoted to him by Isabel, the narrator, another significant character is Edgar Cosset.

Brother to Madame Persand and uncle to Charles-Henri and his siblings, Edgar has had a long, distinguished career in the French army and in politics. Now around seventy, he is still an imposing, influential figure who appears on television panels about world events. Edgar is also something of a bonvivant; he has the traditional Frenchmen's appreciation of fine cuisine and pretty women, and collects faience and other antiques.

In Edgar's case, his interest in pretty young women goes beyond watching them: He seduces Isabel with ease. While the elderly French roue is a stock figure in some venues, Edgar's attractions are all new to Isabel. His distinction as a public figure, his still-vigorous bearing and health, his wit, his expensive gifts, his skill at the arts as well as techniques of lovemaking—altogether, she has never known anyone like him before, let alone as a lover. Isabel is no innocent, sexually, and she would say she went into the affair with her eyes open. But the relationship definitely does not fit the new American standard of "sex between equals."

One's knowledge of Edgar becomes fairly extensive, but remains shallow. He is not quite a stereotype or cardboard figure, but the reader never gets a glimpse of the inner man. Men in public life often guard their true selves and feelings, so it is hard to tell if this shallow view is due to Edgar's own nature or to the author's approach.

The other characters are largely types, defined mainly by their social identities and their attitudes. For example, Suzanne Persand is the very picture of a sophisticated but family-centered French matron.

One gets the feeling, though, that with just a few more glimpses, the author (and narrator) could have brought them into full view as individual people. This is most true for Chester and Margeeve, the sisters' parents, whose sketchy portrayal seems due to their distance from Paris during most of the novel.

Most of the abbreviated characters are expatriate Americans. There are Olivia Pace, famous writer, full of secrets about the other famous people she has known, and opinions on every issue; Ames Everett, a wry youngish gay man who makes a good living as a literary translator; Cleve Randolph, a former CIA spook who cannot give up the habit—in fact he asks Isabel to spy when she works on Mrs. Pace's papers (she turns him down).

There is no special need to make these people fully three-dimensional. They play minor parts in the plot and in Isabel's life, so the author simply shows them in that light.

The most underdeveloped character, however, is Roxeanne's husband Charles Henri Persand. He is not even a type; he is a mystery. All one learns about him is that he is a painter, he and Roxy met on a hiking tour, and he has now fallen in love with Magda, a Czech sociologist.

Even Magda's husband Doug appears in the flesh more often than Charles-Henri.

It is hard to know whether his absence is a simple artistic decision—the story flows along plausibly without him—or due to Johnson's unwillingness to explore men's lives.

One more feature related to characters might be noted. The author uses minor characters, especially the Americans, to voice both insights and prejudices. Some of these come across as planned. Mrs. Pace, for example, has a fascinating theory about why the Right has fallen back on the term "draft dodger" to insult the current President. But the same Mrs.

Pace believes women lack a sense of moral responsibility. In a worldly, liberal woman the same age as Gloria Steinem and Jane Fonda, her attitude seems incredible. It is as if Olivia Pace is trapped in a time warp from an earlier era. Likewise, Chester and Margeeve's dismay about their daughter marrying a nonpracticing Catholic seems like a relic of an earlier time.

Social Concerns

Le Divorce is more a novel of manners than of serious social or moral commentary. The novel is set in the 1990s, and many contemporary social concerns flicker across its narrator Isabel's mental screen. Most have been selected, at least in part, for satire or for plot devices.

Hence the book's social focus is wide rather than deep.

Foremost among these issues, as the tide suggests, is divorce. Isabel and Roxeanne grew up in California in a culture where divorce is a familiar aspect of life.

The two sisters are technically stepsisters; Isabel's father Chester and Roxeanne's mother Margeeve were each married to someone else, then divorced, before finding each other. In their world divorce is a frequent rite of passage. Many people, the parents believe, have to marry and divorce at least once before "getting it right." In their case, the process has led to a happy second marriage.

But this has not made divorce an acceptable option to their daughter Roxeanne. When her French husband Charles-Henri announces that he wants one, Roxy becomes very distraught. She stonewalls, persuades Isabel she needs her as a mother's helper and provider of moral support, and at one point attempts suicide. Roxy is in the early stages of a second pregnancy when Charles-Henri leaves.

Aside from the last fact, the reasons for Roxeanne's extreme reaction are never illuminated in the story. Does she simply love Charles-Henri so much? Is it from her poet's hypersensitive nature?

Her newly adopted Catholicism? Or because divorce represents a threat to her status as a real Parisian, something she has wanted since childhood? In any case, Roxeanne's reactions—and later on, her countryman Doug Tellman's—belie the cliche that America is a "divorce culture."

Her husband's family's response is less direct, and perhaps more complicated. By his own admission, Charles-Henri is behaving badly. His mother Suzanne continues to invite Roxy and little Gennie to Sunday family dinners at the Persands' country house. When Isabel arrives, Suzanne includes her too. Suzanne is sure her son will come to his senses and go back to the marriage. But Charles-Henri's absence is seldom remarked upon by any of his relatives. His siblings, one of whom is conducting an extramarital affair of her own with an Englishman, treat their brother's divorce plans with a sort of embarrassed disdain. Possibly some more general insights about cultural differences lurk in these undercurrents. Just as the French are said to deal with adultery with less fuss or family disruption than Americans, perhaps Americans deal with divorce better than the French. If Roxeanne was living in California, with its recognized roles and support groups for divorced young mothers, would she have been so panicked?

Isabel is bemused at other aspects of the "gender wars" on the French scene.

She discovers that unlike American men, French men take an interest in the "furnishings" of domestic life: fine china, decorating, good food. But a Frenchwoman warns her not to be fooled: They are just as caddish as beer-swilling Anglo-Saxon men. In the American expatriate community, it is widely believed that Frenchwomen have a secret which gives them extra femininity. Isabel never figures out what this is and is inclined to disbelieve the theory, anyway. But she does admire their expertise with food.

Even busy women doctors, she learns, come home from the hospital and prepare elaborate dinners. Neither Isabel nor the author considers whether shorter work hours or commutes help make this possible. French women and French society see no reason feminine traits and domestic skills should conflict with equality between the sexes.

Materialism is also examined in this book, with a light touch. Isabel broods about how she cannot tell French people's financial situation by their living quarters or their clothes. Everyone lives in small apartments in old buildings, and dresses frumpily, to her eyes. Yet they are shown to be as materialistic and money-conscious as Americans; it is just that the markers of status are different.

When the St. Ursula portrait above Roxy's fireplace is appraised as a museum-quality La Tour, both families mask their interest in the money with platitudes about Roxy's wishes and "family values."

Finally, the war in Bosnia is woven into the novel. At one point Roxy becomes obsessed with the scenes of carnage shown on television and rants against French and American inattention to the war. Uncle Edgar's public campaign for intervention is what first impresses Isabel about him. Still, it stays a very off-screen tragedy. Isabel suspects Roxy is trying to equate her own troubles with the war.

Perhaps the message here is the inattention on almost everyone else's part, which helps explain how long it took to stop the fighting.

Techniques

In formula fiction, human emotions and motives are usually direct, unmixed, and dramatic. In more sophisticated works, as in real life, the reasons behind someone's actions may be more complex.

People may act from mixed motives, or be driven by a jumble of conflicting emotions. Mixed motives can affect the plot, the theme, even the tone of a novel.

In some novels, the characters' true motives and feelings may be left up to the reader to interpret. In Le Divorce, Diane Johnson has characters who almost always act from mixed motives, and some, like Roxy, exhibit emotions that veer back and forth between extremes. The mixed motives are visible—at least to the reader, and increasingly to the narrator as the story goes along. Yet they have little impact on the plot. For example, Edgar's outrage about the Bosnian war is probably real; at the same time, he is well aware that it keeps him visible on the political scene while he is out of office. He surely also knows how attractive it makes him to idealistic young women like Isabel, whose company he always enjoys.

The story is told by a first-person narrator, and mostly from her point of view. Since the novel is a Bildungsroman, a tale of that same character's personal growth, this enables her to tell us not only what happened, but what it meant to her. Isabel does this constantly. Besides describing how she felt during an event, she sometimes looks back later and puts it in another context, or generalizes from it to draw a lesson about French mores or another person's state of mind. It is a surprisingly lively way to tell the story.

The tone is close to conversational, as if Isabel were back in California and telling a friend (or a therapist) about her year in France.

With first-person narration, some vital facts may not be accessible to the person telling the story. There are various ways an author can handle this. Roxy is taken to the police station while Isabel is still at EuroDisney, at the hostage standoff.

Johnson simply switches to a third-person point of view for the chapter on Roxy's interrogation. This works well, because it is a traumatic and dramatic time; most readers will be so caught up in the terrible events they will not even notice. Or if they do, it is plausible that Roxy would tell her sister about it afterwards, allowing her to describe it.

Among Johnson's other tactics is frequent use of literary allusions. In the preface she invokes the ghosts of Hemingway, Stein, Fitzgerald, Wharton, and several other famous writers whose works are set in Paris. In the story itself, there are other literary allusions. More than once Isabel compares her own reaction to Sartre's Nausea. And she opens one chapter by a reference to Jane Austen: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a young American person not fully matriculated must be in want of a job . . ."

Usually, Johnson quotes an aphorism from a French source at the beginning of each chapter. It is used to set the tone of the chapter's events or to foreshadow them.

Isabel thinks of herself as a film person, and the author uses some film techniques in the novel. The small cameo scenes of two people at a cafe table, crossing the square in front of Notre Dame cathedral, work well. Cut scenes like these often serve as an effective lead-in to a longer scene, also in cinema style. However, the novel's basic approach is conversational rather than visual.

Within the story there are little gems of insights, recognitions to delight the reader as well as to further the story. Few American women who have lived abroad can fail to identify with Isabel's unwilling reaction to a group of Americans gathered to help the hapless Doug Tellman's cause. "I liked the bland and benevolent faces of my countrymen, handsome as pilots or the men in jewelry ads."

Themes

The novel is about a young woman's partial passage into adulthood. Because most of the events involve French people, French customs, and even French food, a second theme, Franco-American culture clash, is interwoven with the first.

A third theme is the ambiguous nature of human motives and emotions. Isabel's recognition of this is part of her matura tion, but it underlies the narrative so deeply that it can be seen as a separate theme.

When the story opens, Isabel Walker, a college dropout, has not yet found any direction for her life. She has vague ambitions of writing a screenplay. Like other young American visitors before her, she comes to Paris hoping it will "buff off the rough edges" of her education and make her more sophisticated. The visit is also a good way to avoid making decisions about her future. It is only by chance that Isabel arrives at her sister's apartment the day after Roxy's husband has left. Roxy goes into an emotional tailspin, but Isabel continues to be viewed as the one who needs help with her life. Their parents think so, Roxeanne hints at it more than once, and the Persands treat Isabel kindly, but as if she were very young and naive.

Naturally Isabel feels some resentment, but she goes on blithely exploring Paris.

She struggles with the French language; she probes the mysteries of French cuisine; she finds small jobs working for fellow Americans, who offer their own explanations of strange behavior and of political issues. After some weeks, she tells herself that she has learned much, and indeed she has. For the first time, Isabel has a life of the mind. She reads Sartre and obscure European authors whose very names would have formerly struck her as funny. Growing up in California, all she needed to attract young men was to be pretty and available; now she discovers the power of also being charming and au courant. It is not that she could not have learned such things in America, but she did not. As a pretty California girl, Isabel found it easier to drift on the surface of shallow commercial and youth culture.

Yet many surprises still await her.

Although she comes through in a crunch—getting her sister to the hospital after the suicide attempt—no one knows if she will be able to meet the demands of adult life, and even Isabel herself is not so sure. Only when, months into her visit, a cabinet minister talks to her, does she feel she is wearing "a plausible expression of sentience" and perhaps can manage to continue to do so. As the narrative ends, she decides to stay in France a bit longer, because she feels her cross-cultural education is not complete. And while she stays she will not have to make any big decisions about her future.

Several first-rank American authors have written about the experience of Americans in France; the theme has appeared in our literature for well over a century. The most frequent conflicts in such fiction are: American innocence against Continental worldliness; American brashness versus French subtlety; and American puritanism meeting European joie de vivre. Isabel and the other Americans in the novel experience repeated culture shock of all three types.

The specifics of what shocks Americans about France have changed over the decades. Isabel's puritanism is not that of a nineteenth-century maiden. As one reviewer said, she sees nothing wrong with sleeping her way across Europe, and admits that if she had used less dope, she might know more about music and literature. But she is horrified at the cheerful way Europeans ruin their lungs with tobacco and their arteries with well-marbled beef. Her innocence shows in the affaire of the antique tureen. Even with overwhelming evidence that it was stolen-to-order by a well-connected burglary ring, she finds it hard to believe, and plans to buy the tureen anyway. She is also baffled when people like Edgar are genuinely and openly religious but also semi-openly adulterous.

Isabel rashly complains to Edgar about the Persands' cupidity in claiming the Saint Ursula picture once it has been appraised at $80,000. Roxy, despite her past heroic efforts to become a good French wife, proclaims that she can never forgive her husband for falling in love with another woman. Both women can usually keep their own counsel, but when emotions run high, in true American fashion they speak their minds.

Their French counterparts, in contrast, behave with more subtlety (or duplicity?)

the higher the stakes become. Suzanne dissuades Roxeanne from an abortion, early on, with soothing words about, "it's very early; you don't have to decide anything yet." Even as he plans to marry Magda, Charles-Henri sees no problem in telling Roxy he still loves her and their daughter Gennie.

But a few unusual twists occur. Sometimes French characters behave like stereotypical Americans, and vice versa.

Roxy takes the stance: "I can't divorce.

I'm Catholic," for weeks at a time.

Charles-Henri's determination to marry his new love seems more American.

These are individual reactions to individual lives, but a fear of their culture becoming Americanized also haunts some French characters. This is symbolized by EuroDisney, forty minutes' ride from Paris, where the novel's climax takes place.

The plot's pivotal events occur when Doug Tellman, a man whose motives seem perfectly clear (if demented) decides to act on them. Because most people are not like Doug, no one anticipated he would take a gun and try to kill his wife and her lover. Afterwards, Isabel broods about how hard it is to know when one's actions might have made things turn out differently. For example, Isabel had earlier met Doug when he was lurking near the mailboxes in Roxeanne's apartment building. She ignored her feeling that he was weird and potentially dangerous because she did not know what to make of him, and she never told Roxeanne about it. Normal people muddling through life may set off something they never could have predicted. If Isabel had not told Stuart Barbee, who turned out to have contacts with a burglary ring, about the Persand's beautiful furniture, would they have been robbed? And if she had not been so wrapped up in her own life, she might have noticed Roxeanne's subtle signs of misery before they culminated in a suicide attempt. Isabel concludes: "The smallest amount of inattention turns out to be the most disastrous," This is a lesson Isabel learns the hard way, as well as a theme of the novel.

Key Questions

Le Divorce belongs in the company of transatlantic novels. So many famous, extremely accomplished novelists have also used this theme that it would be extremely difficult to do any two or three of them justice in a single discussion session. A several-week long discussion series, or a formal or informal class, would be a better vehicle for such comparisons.

Unlike many of these others, Johnson's novel reflects a near-contemporary scene.

A fact-based discussion of what to expect in France, aimed at business or academic travelers or tourists, might include this novel in its "other resources" list. Although the difference between fiction and fact should always be kept in mind, sometimes experiences like culture shock can best be conveyed by fiction. Among other themes which could form a focus for discussion of Le Divorce are: a young woman's journey to adulthood, relationships between sisters, and divorce.

1. In the prologue, the author calls up the ghosts of some famous writers who have also written about Americans in Paris—Hemingway, Edith Wharton, Gertrude Stein, James Baldwin, among others. Do you feel she is pretentious to do so? Why or why not? What purpose do the references serve?

2. Isabel does have involvements with several French and American men her own age, while in Paris. Yet the narrator wastes little time on them. Isabel's affair with Uncle Edgar, on the other hand, preoccupies her mightily. Is this a serious attempt by the author to look at the dynamics of such May-December romances? What other reasons are there for the emphasis?

3. A reviewer has criticized Le Divorce's ending as "the overly dramatic Hollywood finale." Do you agree with this criticism? Would it be different for a novel that is not presented as a "literary" work?

4. Roxy and Isabel's American relatives come across as candid and understandable, compared to the Persands who seem much more subtle and devious. Is this because the narrator knows her own parents and siblings so much better?

Because she knows American culture better? Or are these meant to be actual traits of their respective cultures?

5. Did Charles-Henri's departure hit Roxeanne so hard because she was deeply in love with her husband? How about his death? Is it ever possible to really know such matters for sure about someone else's marriage?

6. Johnson uses minor characters to give views of life and of American culture that she does not want to attribute to Roxy or Isabel. Some seem like brilliant insights; some

seem to come from people caught in a time warp. Which is which may also depend upon the reader's own beliefs. What are some examples?

7. Was Douglas Tellman a madman?

Was he caught in a time-warp, reflecting attitudes suspect even a century ago? Or reflecting America's "culture of violence," as French comments about "they all have guns" seem to imply? Could his stay in France have pushed him past the breaking point, one way or another?

8. Does the novel support the European criticism that Americans are not very family-oriented?

9. Are there minor characters in the novel whom you would have liked to know more about than the author revealed? If so, who and why?

10. Do you think Isabel will return to America and have a reasonably happy life there? What about Roxeanne?

Literary Precedents

The transatlantic theme in France has a long and distinguished history, appearing in works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, and William Dean Howells in the nineteenth century; Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, and Janet Flanner in the early and mid twentieth century; James Jones, James Baldwin, and Norman Spinrad of the post- World War II era. Each has written at least one major work, some authors more, showing an American contending with French culture. Johnson has obviously read most of these books and drawn some thematic material from them. At the same time, her own approach in Le Divorce is different enough that it would take a doctoral dissertation, at least, to trace their influences on her own novel.

Readers seeking to make comparisons might try the following: Hawthorne's The Marble Faun (1860) for its early treatment of American puritanism vs. European indulgence; Henry James's Daisy Miller (1879; see separate entry) or Portrait of a Lady (1881; see separate entry) for other young American women seeking their destiny in France—Isabel Walker's name is almost certainly inspired by James's heroine Isabel Archer in the latter novel; Hemingway's A Moveable Feast (1964) for its picture of Americans enjoying the cultured hedonism which Paris offers; and Wharton's The Custom of the Country (1913; see separate entry) for an earlier view of divorce as an American folkway.

There are also faint echoes of the motion picture An American in Paris (1951) in scenes where the wonders of Paris dazzle Isabel.

The divorce is also reminiscent of Alison Lurie's The War Between the Tates (1974), as both novels use a war as a distant backdrop to a story of domestic warfare. Lurie's novel, set in the United States during the Vietnam War, deals with a war which no one in America could ignore. Most of Johnson's characters ignore the Bosnian war, or think about it only fitfully, in an ironic comment on the 1990s world scene.

Related Titles

Although there are no directly related tides to Le Divorce, Johnson often creates the character of a young woman unsure of how to cope with life. Isabel Walker is not as troubled as her counterparts in Burning (1971) and The Shadow Knows (1974), among others, but her uncertainties are kin to theirs.

Johnson is also known for using violent events as plot builders and pivot points in her novels. Almost a universal practice in Hollywood action films, and usual in genres such as the suspense novel and heroic fantasy, it is not so common among "literary" writers.

Johnson admits to unease about creating male protagonists and the males in all her novels are either secondary characters or entirely flat.

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