

My Uncle Oswald Short Guide

My Uncle Oswald by Roald Dahl

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Characters

When the novel begins, Oswald is a strikingly handsome seventeen-yearold who has become bored with the girls of London, having bedded more than sixty of them. Feeling in need of wider experience, he travels to Paris, where he learns of the powerful aphrodisiac made from crushed North African blister beetles. A pinhead of the powder is said to drive a man wild for sex and to allow him to maintain an erection for hours. Seeing an opportunity to combine his two chief passions in life, sex and money, Oswald travels to Egypt, buys five pounds of the stuff, returns to Paris, and sets up business selling pills he has made of the powder to wealthy Parisians and diplomats. In the process, he finds that the aphrodisiac works on women too, making them into powerfully demanding lovers.

This opening tale is told to set up the main plot of the novel, in which Oswald, now a Cambridge college student, learns of the process for freezing bull semen invented by chemist A. R. Woresley. He concocts the idea of selling the semen of brilliant men to wealthy women for millions of pounds, persuades first Yasmin then Woresley to participate in the scheme, and then sets out across Europe to gather the semen he hopes to sell. So obsessed is Oswald with the chase that it never occurs to him that after having forged the handwriting of King George V, he could forge the stationery and signatures of all his victims and use anybody's semen, attributing it to any famous person.

Oswald is a thoroughly dislikable man. He is vain and always ready to take advantage of women, who mean no more to him than a cow does to a bull. For him, sex is a game in which one keeps score, with quantity of encounters worth more than their quality.

He maintains that the quality of sex begins diminishing with the second bedding of a woman, but he leaves the impression that he is too shallow a personality to understand the richer aspects of sex. Perhaps his only positive quality is his sense of humor. He is a witty man, and like a degenerate raconteur he regales his audience with funny anecdotes about famous people.

This humor redeems him to a small degree because at the novel's end it turns out that the biggest joke was on him. After all his scheming, he is outwitted by Yasmin and Woresley. Still, Oswald is a scoundrel.

Yasmin Howcomely's name is one of the many jokes of My Uncle Oswald, which abounds in wordplay. She is partly of Persian descent and is a stunningly sensuous beauty. Oswald regards most of the Cambridge college women as ugly, but Yasmin, who is studying biology, stands out. His seduction of her is soon followed by his bizarre business proposal: that he, she, and Woresley set up a genius insemination business. Once she agrees, she uses the aphrodisiac to seduce the prim Woresley, convincing him that she and Oswald could gather semen from the great men of the world. Hers is the hardest job in the venture; she has to give the aphrodisiac to the men, slip the condoms on them, and then have sex with them. She often enjoys herself, finding



painters to be particularly wonderful lovers. That she chooses to marry dull Woresley is puzzling, but the marriage works out. Oswald eventually learns that they have become millionaires living on the French Riviera. Yasmin is admirable for her cleverness and daring, but as a personality she is as arid as Oswald; he is her pimp and she is his willing prostitute, eager for ill-gotten wealth.

The other figures in the novel are only sketched. The famous real-life figures such as Einstein and Monet serve primarily as sources of humor.

For instance, Einstein tries to intellectually analyze why he suddenly wants to ravish Yasmin before giving in to his passions. Dahl's erudition about who was where during the period of the novel is impressive, although most of his accounts of their sexual behavior is conjectural. He knows enough of the sexual history of some of the victims to lend an air of verisimilitude to the imaginary behavior of the others, enhancing the humor of their bizarre conduct.

Social Concerns

My Uncle Oswald is a sex farce that satirizes one of the modern developments in eugenics. There is a sperm bank in the United States that gathers semen from men who are supposedly geniuses — Nobel Prize winners and famous scientists — for the purpose of selling it to women who want to breed geniuses of their own. Dahl takes this idea, puts it in the mind of Oswald Hendryks Cornelius in the 1920s, and then shows it to be absurd. With the help of a fast-acting aphrodisiac and a scientist who has invented a way of freezing bull semen for the insemination of cows, Oswald and Yasmin Howcomely wander around Europe gathering semen from artists, writers, scientists, and royalty. The whole idea of a genius sperm bank is ridiculed, reducing human mating to the level of breeding cattle. In fact, as Oswald himself notes, the genetic heritage of people is too complex for such simplistic efforts to guarantee results. But, he reasons, there are plenty of bored people foolish enough to pay heavily for the chance to breed another Einstein or Puccini.



Techniques

The novel is a long sexual joke with a surprise punch line. It features witty word play, such as referring to writers as having thin pencils, and frequent sexual encounters. The account of Yasmin's many seductions of the brilliant and famous becomes tedious, which Dahl seems to recognize when he stops the accounts and simply summarizes much of what Yasmin does before visiting the King of Norway in her last, nearly disastrous attempt at seduction.

The novel is supposedly taken from Oswald's diaries, and thus it is told primarily in the first person by Oswald himself. Oswald does not take his adventures seriously; he regards his life as an inconsequential search for pleasure. He merrily leads his readers on a shaggy dog story, promising to tell them how he became rich and then spending nearly all the novel telling them a story of how he did not become rich. The satire of showing significant historical figures with their pants down is mild, and the humor, while broad, is similarly light, with most of the sex scenes being kept remote by having Yasmin describe them to Oswald. Neither the satirical portraits, the sexual humor, nor the sexual encounters themselves ever become pornographic.

Themes

Fornication is the theme of *My Uncle Oswald*. Oswald regards sexual intercourse as the center of his life. He wants to be rich so that he can at his leisure use his extraordinary good looks to bed as many women as possible. He has even made it a rule that he should bed no woman more than once.

A clever man, he wastes his talents on pursuing relationships of no value. His partner Yasmin uses her beauty and a powerful aphrodisiac to entice famous men into sex; she often has to wrestle with the men to put a condom on them that will hold the semen.

The plot follows Oswald and Yasmin as they romp across Europe, gathering semen as they go. Much of the humor lies in the portraits of famous men in awkward situations. For instance, the notoriously asexual playwright Bernard Shaw is shown running half naked down a street after Yasmin. Some critics have likened Dahl's sex-farce short stories to long dirty jokes, and the description seems apt for this novel, as well. The humor focuses on sex and remains lighthearted throughout the book.



Key Questions

My Uncle Oswald is a slight book, lacking the thematic or stylistic complexity that would lend it easily to discussion. A discussion might best approach the book as a satire on modern cultural mores and practices. The silliness of trying to breed geniuses through artificial insemination is ripe for satire, especially since many people take it seriously. Satire often has a serious purpose, may be seen as an expose of the irrationality of eugenics, which had horrifying consequences in Germany and Japanese occupied Manchuria in the 1930s and 1940s, not long after the events in *My Uncle Oswald* take place.

A sex farce should be funny. The humor can be very sophisticated or it can be obscene or somewhere in between. *My Uncle Oswald* seems intended to be primarily light reading, with its serious themes deemphasized in favor of lighthearted pleasure. Discussing how well the novel entertains could be a good way to work into studying it. Some people are likely to find the novel hilarious while others will find it unpleasant. Sorting out what makes the book funny to some and not to others may lead to a discussion of what audience the book was intended for and how well Dahl fulfills that audience's desires. Is it okay for a work of fiction to satisfy the tastes of a distinct audience while offending another audience?

1. Oswald could take anybody's semen and pretend it was from any genius he chose. Why does he go to the considerable trouble of gathering the real stuff?
2. What are Oswald's redeeming qualities?
3. One of the purposes of satire is to show ridiculous something people take seriously really is. Does *My Uncle Oswald* succeed in this regard?
4. Is *My Uncle Oswald* just one long dirty joke?
5. What are the ethics for depicting real-life figures in fiction? How would those ethics apply to *My Uncle Oswald*?
6. Is *My Uncle Oswald* pornography?
7. Do sex farces such as *My Uncle Oswald* serve a social function?
8. Why are sexual habits and mores funny?
9. Dahl is best known for his children's books, such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964). Is it surprising that he would write a novel like *My Uncle Oswald*? Are there any similarities (themes, characters, techniques) between his books for children and adults?

Literary Precedents

In an interview, Dahl remarked that his earliest stories had been sexually tasteful, that only in midlife did he start writing about sex. This is not entirely true; in the short story "Madame Rosette," from the short-story collection *Over to You* (1946), sex is a prominent theme. On the other hand, in the 1960s Dahl became one of numerous writers to take advantage of the loosening of censorship laws and greater public tolerance to write sexually explicit fiction. Already a well-established writer for "slick" magazines, Dahl would have found writing a sexy tale for *Playboy* to be a natural extension of his market. His first Uncle Oswald story for *Playboy* was "The Visitor," which resembles his eerie gothic tales more than the novel *My Uncle Oswald*. This story was a big hit with the readers of *Playboy*, and with additional sexual stories, Dahl built an important new audience for himself. By the 1970s, he had joined numerous other important authors such as Gore Vidal and Philip Roth in the writing of sex farces and sexual satires.



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 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994