

The Pigeon Short Guide

The Pigeon by Patrick Süskind

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Characters

While a boy during World War II, Jonathan Noel was bereft of parents, who were deported, and raised by people he had never known. These made his decisions for him, sending him off to war in Indochina and marrying him to a pregnant girl, who deserted him. Coming to the conclusion that people are not to be depended upon and that he must hold himself aloof from them, Jonathan left his village for Paris in 1954 to become a bank guard. He compensates for his unsettled adolescence by avoiding people and events that may disturb his equilibrium and well-established routine.

His cell-like room provides security, and there he ensconces himself in protection from life's unpleasant surprises.

An unexpected confrontation with a pigeon on the floor of the hall while he tries to slip unobserved to the toilet changes all this, and his day at work becomes a catastrophe. While on duty he is tormented by unsteadiness, paralysis, outbursts of sweating, and selfloathing.

Asleep that night in a strange bed, he is awakened by a clap of thunder and in his disorientation confuses the room with the cellar of his boyhood home. Feeling once again completely alone, he realizes his need for other people. The sound of rain causes him to recall his whereabouts, and he has the strength to return fearlessly to his own room entering a hall unoccupied by the pigeon and cleaned of its traces.

The only other characters in the work are marginal: the seamstress Madame Topell and the concierge Madame Rocard, who distinguishes herself as the only person to violate Noel's anonymity.

Social Concerns

Whereas *Perfume* (1986) expresses Grenouille's unbridled egoistic excess at the expense of other people, and the work may vent the reader's subconscious desire to revel in the same freedom, *The Pigeon* is a reaction of withdrawal from other human beings. It is a reflection of the routine of self-effacement and anonymity adopted as a response to the tedium of reality and the undependability of fellow human beings.

Techniques

In German the genre of the novella has a history of its own, originating in the eighteenth century and flourishing especially during the hundred years thereafter. The Pigeon is a significant contribution to the corpus of the novella in the twentieth century and bears distinctive features of the genre.

The work is a prose narrative dealing with one particular situation or event, the confrontation with the bird, which occurs as a consequence of chance, striking into the life of Jonathan Noel.

This is something strange or "new," as the term "novella" suggests, and the event provides the turning point both in the development of the work and in the course of Noel's life.

The concept of "the falcon" has a particular meaning when used in conjunction with analysis of the novella form and becomes somewhat ironical when applied to *The Pigeon*. The falcon is featured in a novella from the *Decameron* (1349-1351) of Boccaccio where a youth serves his prized bird for the dinner of his beloved (The Ninth Story of the Fifth Day). The "falcon" is also taken figuratively from the example of this work by Boccaccio to mean a silhouette of the novella, the outlines of which create a characteristic impression on the reader's memory; the "falcon" may also be taken to comprise a concrete object or symbol which distinguishes the novella from numerous others. Suskind's pigeon serves such a role.

The author achieves suspense in the first line with reference to the pigeon affair, about which the reader knows nothing. The narrative voice then moves back in time to tell of Jonathan's youth and forward until that Friday morning in August 1984 when the incident occurred. The voice runs over into the internal monologue of Noel's conversation with himself and in this way emphasizes his introversion.

The opening pages of the work relate how the boy Jonathan walked home through the puddles after a rain storm in 1942 to find his mother missing; her husband would follow shortly leaving Jonathan to the care of strangers for more than a decade. This motif is repeated forty-two years later when Noel walks home through the puddles following a dreamlike recollection of that earlier time that caused him to realize he cannot live without other people; now he is able to face fully the scene of his existential torment the morning before.

Themes

The self-effacement of Jonathan Noel has been nurtured for thirty years by the compulsion to preserve anonymity and avoid the public eye lest he be thought ridiculous. These concerns are paramount in his mind each morning when he peers out surreptitiously from his room to see that the hall leading to the toilet shared with other tenants is free of anyone whom he would be forced to encounter and with whom he would have to exchange greetings and apologies. When in the park, he tears the cloth in his pants, and Jonathan almost dies of mortification, imagining that the tear is heard round the world.

In conversation with the concierge, she addresses him by name and exposes him to the embarrassment of knowing that what he says is ridiculous.



Key Questions

Suskind, in this work, employs a very concrete, precise style and simple syntax which carries the reader along quite rapidly. The effect may be somewhat deceptive since the reader finds reason to catch himself lest he has overlooked something.

1. Is the pigeon, here, something other than a bird, that is, does it stand for something as a symbol? It has been interpreted as the embodiment of chaos and anarchy. Does it pose a threat to the ordered world of Jonathan Noel?

2. The bird, as well as the Clochard on the street, are associated with filth.

Is this what bothers Noel?

3. Have you ever had an experience, possibly confrontational, that caused you to reevaluate or relive an aspect of your existence?

Literary Precedents

The Pigeon follows in the literary tradition of Franz Kafka (1883-1924).

Characteristic of his work is that tension established between two worlds, one represented in naturalistic detail and another that is illogical, subjective, and threatening. The transition from the one world to the other is achieved in a simple line of text. The initial sentence of *The Metamorphosis* (1948; *Die Verwandlung*, 1912) introduces Gregor Samsa suddenly to nightmarish reality when he awakens in bed to find himself transformed into a giant insect.

Similarly the existence of Joseph K. is turned about upon his arrest in *The Trial* (1937; *Der Prozess*, 1925). Suskind achieves the transition suddenly in the first line reading, "At the time the pigeon affair overtook him, unhinging his life from one day to the next, Jonathan Noel ... "

Related Titles

Noel, in the small room to which Suskind alluded in his comments to *The Double Bass* (1987), shares with the musician that security neurosis which the latter feels towards his job. As in *Perfume* we are here concerned with a solitary figure obsessed with his own demands as is the musician. Further, Noel reflects the egocentricity and selfeffacement of this figure.



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