Shopgirl Short Guide

Shopgirl by Steve Martin

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Shopgirl Short Guide....1

Contents....2

Characters....3

Social Concerns....6

Techniques....8

Themes....9

Key Questions....12

Literary Precedents....13

Related Titles....14

Copyright Information....15

Characters

Mirabelle is the focus of Martin's narrative. Each event of her life is detailed, from her lunches to her depressive crashes, to show her insular life. Depressive Mirabelle "worries about unforeseen events like the doctor suddenly having to be out of town, leaving her short" of medicine. Although she has a master of fine arts degree, she works at the Beverly Hills Neiman Marcus, selling gloves to "the Wives of Important Men." Everything about her seems awkward, from the way she stands to the way she walks, she resembles "an attractive wallflower."

Mirabelle is not unattractive, although she "never takes credit for her attractiveness." In fact, at an art opening she does not realize that men are attracted to her, even when so many pay attention to her. She does not even notice that all this attention has triggered her coworker Lisa's jealousy.

Mirabelle lives in an artsy neighborhood that borders on being dangerous. When she is inspired, Mirabelle makes intricate, tiny black and white pencil drawings, although not very many and not very often. She has two cats, and even they are isolated. One almost never comes out from under the sofa, giving Mirabelle "the feeling that there is a mysterious stranger living in her apartment whom she never sees but who leaves evidence of his existence by subtly moving small, round objects from room to room."

This description also could apply to Mirabelle as well—it seems the part of her that is creative and productive is elusive and rarely seen.

Mirabelle's only friends, Loki and Del Rey, "were obviously named by parents who thought they would never not be infants." She calls them her friends, but is not surprised when they make plans with her on Thanksgiving, but never call. She rationalizes wanting to remain friends with them by remembering the times they have laughed together about their own loneliness. Although the two have a history of excluding her and ignoring her, Mirabelle considers them her friends because she cannot seem to find other friends.

Ray Porter, who is rarely just called "Ray," is just an average man, somewhere around fifty years old. The narrator describes him this way: "He is single, he is kind, he tries to do the right thing, and he does not understand himself, or women, or his relationships with women." To him, Mirabelle is "a feminine object that tweaks him at his animal best."

In an interview in a Writer's Guild of America publication, Written By, Martin told interviewer Martin Stayton, "Ray wants Mirabelle—wants a specific part of her. But because he can't admit that, because he denies his desire, he has to include all of it."

Ray does not understand that his desire for Mirabelle has to do with his latent need for human contact. He will not show her affection in public, but when they sleep together, "his body mistakes her flesh for mind." Ray does treat Mirabelle with compassion. For

example, when her antidepressant stops working he takes her to the psychiatrist and takes care of her afterwards.

But while the caring is genuine, it is at the same time "a potion, mixed with one part benevolent altruist and one part chimpanzee penis."

Ray does not know that to emerge from his lengthy adolescence, "he needs to be killed off several times by getting in too deep with the wrong person." Unfortunately for Mirabelle, she is that wrong person, the catalyst upon whose broken heart Ray will step into adulthood. The insular existences of both Mirabelle and Ray prevent them from knowing the relationship will end sadly, before it is too late.

Jeremy "grew up in the slacker-based L.A. high school milieu, where aspiration languishes and the lucky ones get kickstarted in their first year of college by an enthused and charismatic professor."

Mirabelle does not mind Jeremy's superficial thinking; she only cares that he likes her. Mirabelle knows she will continue to date him until she can find someone better.

Simplistic in thought, and completely absorbed in himself, Jeremy finds himself attracted to Mirabelle solely because she reminds him of his childhood crush on the cartoon character, Olive Oyl. However, unlike either Mirabelle or Ray, Jeremy grows out of his shallow thought, if only slightly.

In his newfound success, Jeremy rides on the tour bus of one of the bands he works for. There, he is exposed to Buddhism and the art of meditation. Although the authenticity of any real enlightenment is questionable, Jeremy turns into someone a great deal more appealing than his original slacker self as a result of this experience. Buddhism allows him to look outside himself. Perhaps Martin exaggerates the nature of Jeremy's enlightenment for the sake of comedy, but clearly Jeremy has changed. Later, "Jeremy surpasses Mr. Ray Porter as a lover . . .

because as clumsy as he is, what he offers her is tender and true." Thus, Jeremy's selfdiscovery, combined with the pain Mirabelle has experienced from her relationship with Ray, is the catalyst for the ending of both of their insular existences.

A true antagonist to Mirabelle, Lisa is her "exact inverse . . . as though her every thought, trait, and belief had been turned out and decorated with a red wig." When Mirabelle tells Lisa about having received gloves from Ray, "the story sickens [Lisa] because it happened to someone else." She decides that Ray will be her next conquest.

Lisa "wears high heels even to lunch. In fact, she overdresses for every occasion," because she thinks that no man will like her unless she appears perfect. Lisa's "philosophy of life" is that she knows when a man approaches her, "I know exactly what he wants." Lisa's idea of a good time is "going to bars and taunting college men by making them believe she is available."

Mirabelle does not notice Lisa's competitiveness. For example, after Lisa intrudes into a conversation Mirabelle has with an artist at a gallery and ends up giving him her phone number, she does not see that she has been "defeated by an opponent." In fact, the only reaction Mirabelle has is, as she is drifting off to sleep that night, she has a terrible thought that is so vague, she ignores it.

When Mirabelle meets the reformed Jeremy, he walks her into the opening at the Reynaldo gallery. On her quest to steal Miranda's boyfriend, Lisa mistakes Jeremy for Ray. She goes after him, laughing at every joke and flirting, relishing the fact that it must be insulting to Mirabelle. She whispers in his ear "I know who you are."

Jeremy thinks "an attractive redhead has been informed of his savvy entrepreneurship," so he accepts her offer to go on a date. Lisa gives Jeremy "the works" and he is "shown the illustrated Kama Sutra of Lisa Cramer."

As he leaves, she tells him to call her, enthused that she has succeeded in stealing Mirabelle's boyfriend. Meanwhile, Ray has met Mirabelle at the party and taken her to dinner. The next day, "something all wrong dawns on Lisa," when someone named Jeremy calls her. "Oh Ray," she says, "you are Ray, aren't you?" Lisa's malicious quest to hurt Mirabelle is made all the more tragic by Mirabelle's complete ignorance of it. But Lisa's antics are evidence of the insularity her vacant materialism causes her.

Social Concerns

The main social concerns of Shopgirl are the isolation of modern life (and its resulting depression) and the lack of insight men and women have in their relationships. Two of the main characters in Shopgirl, Mirabelle and Ray Porter, are both literally and figuratively isolated from others. Mirabelle lives far across the country from her family. She moved from Vermont to Los Angeles seeking excitement, and finds herself "stranded in the vast openness" of the city. Her existence consists of working as a retail clerk, drawing at home, and going out occasionally with two female friends who do not seem to like her. Mirabelle frequents bars alone and finds herself unable to make friends. She does not associate her loneliness with the depression for which she takes medication, noticing only the times when depression incapacitates her.

One of the men Mirabelle dates is Ray Porter, a businessman who lives both in Seattle and Los Angeles. Ray tries to schedule dates as frequently as possible with as many women as he can, for although he lives comfortably, he finds that he cannot tolerate being alone with his own thoughts, which are merely "streams of logical chains, computer code, if-then situations."

The characters that surround Mirabelle and Ray are isolated as well. Jeremy, another man Mirabelle dates, considers his second date with Mirabelle to be the time he waved at her across the room when they met by accident in the laundromat. After he and Mirabelle made love for the first time, Jeremy could not seem to talk to her about anything other than "the sphere of Jeremy."

On the other hand, Lisa, Mirabelle's coworker, allows her obsession with labels, brands, and bank accounts of the people she sees to isolate her in her own shallowness. Lisa begins to take more interest in Mirabelle when Mirabelle starts wearing Prada clothes, but, although the designer clothes bring Lisa closer to Mirabelle, it is for the purpose of taking what Mirabelle has rather than any actual desire to know her or to escape loneliness.

Even Mirabelle's family is isolated from those they love. For example, Mirabelle knows she loves her brother, but she cannot ever remember having a real conversation with him. She knows her father was in the Vietnam War but can never coax him to explain what happened to him there. At home in Vermont, instead of feeling comfortable and loved, she feels that "everything is present but untouchable."

The loneliness that arises from misunderstandings inherent in romantic relationships is tied in with isolation as a social concern in Shopgirl. Jeremy seems to think that talking endlessly about himself is the way to establish intimacy with Mirabelle.

Mirabelle and Ray live in a "temporary and poorly constructed heaven," a relationship built on misunderstandings. Whereas Ray thinks he has been honest with Mirabelle about dating other women, Mirabelle thinks he has told her that he is falling in love with her. A divorced man in his early fifties, Ray has absolutely no insight into relationships,

and only near the end of his relationship with Mirabelle does he begin to realize that he will have to build a bridge in his subconscious "to a very different eternal city . . .

where his true heart will live." In other words, he realizes that,for him to remedy his relationship problems, he will have to search for the self he has isolated almost out of his own reach. Another relationship casualty, Lisa, believes that the only asset she can bring to a relationship is her expertise at oral sex.

These misunderstandings result in the insular existence of the characters. One reason, perhaps, for the popularity of Shopgirl is that Martin taps into an important social concern of the twenty-first century—the concern about the effects on society of an increasing modern-day isolation.

Techniques

Fans of Steve Martin's stand-up comedy and movies might be disappointed that the overall tone of Shopgirl is not overtly comedic, but they may still recognize his mocking humor. Martin specializes in making us laugh using the humor of recognition. For example, when Mirabelle nervously enters the restaurant, she tells the maitre d' that she is meeting Ray Porter. "Ah. Nice to see you again," the man exclaims. The insincere maitre d', who in claiming to be on familiar terms with Mirabelle unknowingly reveals that she is not the only woman Ray is dating. Martin told Time Magazine's Richard Corliss that in writing Shopgirl, "I never led myself into jokes. Also, I worked very hard to establish the tone in the opening paragraphs . . . I also like to think that after the first paragraphs you forget about searching for jokes."

The most noteworthy technique used in Shopgirl is its direct violation of Whit Burnett's literary edict, "show, don't tell." Martin's third-person omniscient narrator not only knows what the characters are thinking, but also he knows what they do not know about their own behavior. This narrator purposefully tells us his character's state of mind and intentions rather than hinting at them in scenes. While in another type of literary work, this technique might have a distancing effect, in Martin's novella it highlights the intellectualization the characters exhibit, the dependence they have on thinking as opposed to feeling, to superficiality as opposed to actual emotion.

Themes

The themes in Shopgirl echo its social concerns. The guiding theme is revealed in a phrase Mirabelle overhears: "just remember, darling, it is pain that changes our lives." One avenue for pain lies in modernday isolation and its companions, depression and loneliness. Martin shows the effects of Los Angeles-style superficiality on lonely people. He describes Beverly Hills as a place where "young men, searching for young women who remind them of their face-lifted mothers, are stranded and forlorn in a sea of natural-looking twenty-five year olds." In this world, superficiality replaces genuine human interactions.

Mirabelle sees the emptiness in others.

Describing the salesgirls in the cosmetics department where she works, she disdains their application of lipstick, comparing them to "Man Ray's disembodied lips floating over a landscape of boxed perfumes."

Mirabelle's isolation amplifies her own awkwardness, too. At an art opening, she drinks a glass of wine while she waits for her friends to show up, ordering the wine not because she wants a drink, but only so she will have something to do with her hands while she stands there.

Mirabelle is careful to schedule weekend events, understanding that the loneliness can be unbearable if she stays there alone for forty-eight hours. Even after she meets Ray, Mirabelle knows enough to hate holidays. Although she plans to go home to Vermont for Christmas, she worries about what she will do on Thanksgiving, which she knows can be "a kind of death sentence" if spent alone. However, the insular existence of Mirabelle and Ray do not intersect. As she thinks that Ray will be out of town, she is not expecting his call, which comes late on what has been a lonely Thanksgiving Day. He tells her he has decided to come back to Los Angeles, without explanation. Neither Ray nor Mirabelle can stand being alone.

Mirabelle's isolation is compounded by her depression, "bleak stretches . . . when she is unable to move from her bed." She takes antidepressant medication, but although "the drug distances the depression from her . . . [her depression] is never out of sight." The bleakness of her life, the boredom of working in a department store, and her lack of connection with others most of her life is sad, as is Ray's insular existence.

However, it takes the pain of a failed romantic relationship to bring them the insight they need to develop as human beings.

Steve Martin's Los Angeles is a place where it might be a miracle if two people who are suited for each other actually recognize it. The universal struggle of people in romantic relationships in this lonely place is the point that connects Shopgirl's main characters. Mirabelle's relationship with Ray Porter ultimately is doomed by his consuming need for

serial, random conquests and her obsessive need to be with someone exclusively—both the results of loneliness.

However, even as this becomes obvious to both of them, they find it hard to end the relationship, be alone again, and feel even more isolated than before.

Before Mirabelle met Ray, she decided to sleep with Jeremy, who has few redeeming qualities. However, as Mirabelle finds herself overwhelmed with a need for contact, she is hoping that if she has sex with Jeremy, he will give her the "complete surround" with his arms, or at least fall asleep with an arm around her shoulder. Mirabelle invites him over, and they have awkward sex.

Afterwards,"the distance between them is awful."

Ray Porter then asks Mirabelle to dinner.

He views the women he dates not as romantic engagements but as evenings with friends. Although "romantically he is an adolescent," Ray impresses Mirabelle, who agrees to go out with him after asking him a few screening questions, such as whether he has been married and if he has children.

Her need to be with someone is greater than her ability to choose a suitable mate. She drives on their first date, using her car as an escape route, in case she needs some reason to leave.

Ray believes he can compensate for his inability to form mature emotional bonds with women by sleeping with as many of them as possible. He has no intention of having a long-term relationship with Mirabelle, whereas she finds herself falling in love with him not long after they sleep together the first time. The reader may see the seeds of disaster in this relationship, so rife with misunderstanding, but it will only be the pain of ending it that gives Ray and Mirabelle the insight they need.

A less obvious theme in Shopgirl is the effect of economics on the power dynamics in human relationships. It is another cause of isolation for the characters. Socioeconomic status can be an excellent predictor of self-confidence, as illustrated in Shopgirl.

For example, Mirabelle is poor. In earning a graduate degree, she incurred a sizeable student loan debt that is difficult to pay off at a shopgirl's salary. So, Mirabelle is necessarily frugal, carefully budgeting every purchase, even her daily lunch at a diner.

When Jeremy takes her out the first time, he expects her to pay her own way, and she realizes that she cannot afford to date someone who is as poor as she is. However, on her first date with Ray, who she knows will at least buy dinner, Mirabelle is nervous about being able to pay a modest sum for valet parking.

Money is not a concern for Ray. Martin points out Ray's comfort level by describing the lighting in his home, noting spotlights that "alternate with warm lamplight, creating a soft yellow glow that implies 'decorator.'" His house has a quality "like being on vacation in

an expensive hotel room." Martin illustrates the contrast between Ray and Mirabelle in wardrobe. While they both like designer clothing, she has to buy her sweaters when they are marked down to half price, yet Ray can afford to have different sets of clothing in both houses in Seattle and Los Angeles. He has the luxury to have "an aversion to carrying luggage." When he is feeling guilty about hurting Mirabelle's feelings, he buys her clothing and books. Having financial freedom gives Ray the leisure to be confident, to know that he can conquer Mirabelle without worrying about her feelings. But money is one more reason they do not understand each other.

Ray and Jeremy are "nearly indistinguishable" in their television watching habits, "except that one man stands in the kitchen of a two-million-dollar house . . .

and the other in a one-room garden apartment." On their first date, Jeremy asks for Mirabelle to pay her share, and the next time, after she tells him she cannot pay, he still makes her pay for the rental on her bowling shoes, since, he reasons, "bowling shoes are an article of clothing, and he certainly can't be expected to pay for what she wears on a date." When Jeremy calls her after her first date with Ray, Mirabelle is relieved not to feel obligated to talk with him. She feels taken care of, so she does not need Jeremy anymore.

After Jeremy and Mirabelle stop dating, Jeremy becomes successful selling amplifiers to musicians in rock and roll bands. As a result of his newfound success, he reads a number of self-improvement books and evolves "from ape to man." Mirabelle thinks, "It would take three Old Jeremys to trade in for one new Jeremy, as the new Jeremy is the sleeker, better model, with many desirable features." She observes his "sumptuous leather shoes and the precise fall of his pant legs draping over them." Jeremy is suddenly more appealing and confident, because he is richer. After her breakup with Ray, a wiser Mirabelle has more in common with Jeremy: both have gone through an enlightenment of sorts and they are able to love each other.

Key Questions

In discussing Shopgirl, it is important to focus on the characters, since the characters drive the plot. Specifically, consider how well (or poorly) the characters understand themselves and how each grows as a result of their association with the others.

1. In Shopgirl, Martin depicts the misunderstandings that ultimately end the relationship between Mirabelle and Ray Porter. For example, when Ray tells her that he will continue to date others, Mirabelle believes him to mean that he is falling in love with her. Do you believe men and women truly misunderstand each other to this extent, or do you find this portrayal to be an exaggeration? Why?

2. When she visits her parents at Christmas time, Mirabelle tries to talk with her father about his experiences in Vietnam. Why does she want him to talk about it? Why does he not want to talk? How is this misunderstanding related to Mirabelle's relationship with Ray Porter?

3. In Shopgirl, both Mirabelle and Ray Porter change significantly, but the character who changes the most is Jeremy.

What makes him change? Why do you think he changes more than Ray?

4. When Ray Porter finally apologizes to Mirabelle about the way their relationship ended, she tells him, "'it's pain that changes our lives.'" Is Mirabelle right? How did the pain of their relationship change Mirabelle? Ray?

5. Almost every time Martin refers to Ray Porter, he does so by his first and last name, whereas he refers to Mirabelle, Jeremy, Lisa, and the other characters by their first names only. Why would Martin do so? What might this distinction have to do with the economics involved?

Literary Precedents

While it may not be possible to determine Steve Martin's actual influences, a few certainties may be stated. For one, Martin's previous works have been influenced by his wide readings. Martin, who studied philosophy in college, is widely read, and knowledge of his exposure to various classics is seen in Shopgirl. For example, in comparing Lisa with Mirabelle, he told Time Magazine, "If Immanuel Kant had stumbled across this luncheon after his Beverly Hills shrink appointment, he would have quickly discerned that Lisa is all phenomena and no noumena, and that Mirabelle is all noumena and no phenomena." Similarly, Martin's film Roxanne was a modern adaptation of Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac.

So, although a precise literary precedent is not known, the reader might presume that Martin's writing is informed by his familiarity with other literary works.

Martin's theme of isolation and loneliness in modern times has any number of precedents. Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary, examines the lonely life of a single woman and the relationship problems that arise from modern-day romance. Bridget Jones's lonely weekends are similar to those Mirabelle dreads spending alone. However, Martin's exploration of loneliness is not solely an examination of modern relationships. Philosophically, Martin's work echoes the work of such contemporary writers as Walker Percy and, in some cases, Kurt Vonnegut. Like Martin, both Percy and Vonnegut use humorous situations to demonstrate the loneliness and isolation of their characters. For example, in Percy's The Moviegoer, Binx Boiling must undertake a quest to escape his sense of isolation from the people around him. Because of his focus on the quest, Binx, like Mirabelle and Ray, misunderstands the motives of those around him and must nearly lose the friendship of those around him to evolve as a human.

Similarly, the characters in Vonnegut's novels feel isolated from others around them.

In Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five, Billy Pilgrim finds himself "unstuck in time," traveling out of sequence from event to event in his life. Since this time travel is utterly out of his control, Billy often leaves and enters situations abruptly, with humorous results.

While the cause of his isolation—war trauma—is more concrete, Billy's difficulty adapting and relating to others is similar to Mirabelle and Ray.

Related Titles

One factor not to be ignored in the success of Steve Martin's novella is his popularity as a comedian, as a solo act, in skits on television's Saturday Night Live, and as an actor in numerous movies such as The Jerk, Planes, Trains & Automobiles, Father of the Bride, and Bowfinger. As a result, it would seem that name recognition alone might have caused Martin's book to gain bestseller status. However, while the general public can identify Martin as a comedian and as an actor in feature films, even his fans might not readily identify him as the author of those same films they enjoyed, an essayist published in the New Yorker, or a playwright. Steve Martin's finest work has been as a writer, so Shopgirl's success should be no surprise.

Steve Martin's fans also may enjoy, Pure Drivel, a compilation of his essays that originally appeared in the New Yorker and the New York Times Magazine.

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