

The Square Short Guide

The Square by Marguerite Duras

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Characters

In keeping with the "new novel," this brief story has only three characters, one of whom, the child, appears only at the beginning of each part. He speaks only of his physical needs: he is hungry, thirsty, tired. In the second part, his name, Jacques, is revealed. He is evidently a charming child, for he elicits a sympathetic smile from the gentleman. The child is the catalyst that engages the man and the woman in conversation.

The other two characters have no names; they address each other only as "Sir" (Monsieur) and "Miss" (Mademoiselle). The young girl is in her early twenties, but the age of the gentleman is not revealed, although it is assumed that he is older. The scene takes place in Paris, but the origin of these two people is unknown as well. There is no physical or psychological description.

They reveal themselves only through their conversation. In effect, the reader must get to know them only from the words they say. Thus they are more than just a representation of their respective social classes; they are distinct individuals. The girl is a victim of a social structure in which some people are destined to be the servants of others, but she is also a young woman who sees relief from her fate through marriage. The gentleman is representative of the rootless and hopeless, who see no escape from their monotonous existence.



Social Concerns/Themes

French literature of the 1950s and 1960s is marked by a sense of estrangement and alienation. Writers more outspoken than Duras, such as Camus and Sartre, spoke of the absurd, and felt that human beings were trapped in life with no escape. *The Square* treats the same theme, but with more subtle undertones. The two protagonists, a young domestic servant in her early twenties and a travelling salesman, have no property, no social prestige, and seemingly no hope of improving their situation. The man in particular seems to have lost all ambition, and accepts his work as the sum total of his existence. He has little interest in society and its values.

The young woman, on the other hand, lives a monotonous and meaningless life, minding a child and caring for a senile woman, but hopes one day to escape this situation through marriage. Therefore, she goes to a local dance every Saturday in order to meet prospective suitors. So far no one has come along, but she trusts that "he" eventually will. One critic comments, "Conditions have annihilated her sense of identity. If she is somehow to be recreated as a person, if life is at least to start for her, she must be chosen by someone; this explains the importance of the theme of marriage in the book, the real theme of creation or re-creation."

Duras also addresses the question of the lower social classes. The young girl is a domestic servant, sent off to work at the age of sixteen without much hope of education or social advancement. One detects a note of sympathy for these people, as seen elsewhere in Duras's work, possibly because of the author's own poverty-stricken childhood. The young girl accepts her condition, yet her descriptions of service in the household and attention to the senile woman evoke compassion. In addition, during this period Duras was interested in communism, which is evident in the novel's emphasis on the working class.

The role of women in society has always interested Duras. One critic quotes Duras and comments: "Marguerite Duras's writing is a woman's writing, in this sense: 'For thousands of years, silence has been synonymous with women. Therefore, literature is women. It's women whether it speaks of women or is created by women.'"

Thus the young girl in *The Square* shows a passion in which she loses her own identity.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

Many novelists of the latter part of the twentieth century tend to write what has been termed the "abstract" novel. As Robbe-Grillet explains, there is no omniscient narrator, such as that used by Balzac in the nineteenth-century, who like a god controls his characters and the events that happen to them. Instead, the characters are free to create their own existence, and a certain distance is established between the author and the reader. This enables the reader, in collaboration with the author, to create the story. It also creates a distance between the reader and the characters, thus appealing to the reader's intellect rather than emotions. The absence of place and personal names, of concrete descriptions, and of roots in the past characterize this abstract novel.

In *The Square*, Duras relies almost exclusively on relatively simple dialogue with no profound thoughts, no great discoveries. The two people use the formal "vous" (you), colloquial language, and uncomplicated syntax.

Despite the simple vocabulary and syntax, however, it is evident that Duras has excellent control of language and style.

Finally, in *The Square* as in most of Duras's novels, there is no real denouement, no final conclusion. One may suspect that the two people will meet again and the gentleman may become the relief sought by the young girl. But on the other hand, it is possible that they will never meet again and his refusal to accompany her home is their farewell. There is no action in the novel; it is merely a glimpse of a moment in time, which may lead nowhere.

Duras can be placed in the feminine tradition of French literature, which, dating from Marie de France in the Middle Ages, flourished in the seventeenth century with such authors as Mme de Lafayette and Mme de Sevigne, and was especially strong in the post-war years of the twentieth century with Simone de Beauvoir, Natalie Sarraute, and Franchise Sagan, among others. She was also influenced by Ernest Hemingway and his so-called "American novel," especially in the years preceding *The Square*. The theme of alienation suggests her contemporaries Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre and the subjective quality is reminiscent of Marcel Proust. Her use of dialogue and concentration on the present suggests Alain Robbe-Grillet, in particular the scenario for the film *Last Year at Marienbad* by Alain Resnais. Duras's work also shows echoes of Gustave Flaubert, especially in the absence of denouement and the strong control of language.

Adaptations

The Square was adapted for the stage by Duras and successfully performed in Paris. It appeared in her book of plays, Theatre I, published in 1965.

Related Titles

Duras's previous works were in the tradition of classical and romantic French literature, with characters, names, places, and plot, although her characteristic style was beginning to emerge. It is interesting to note that these earlier works met with little success, except *The Sea Wall* (1950), which Duras would later rework as *The Lover* (1984). With *The Square*, she moved into an entirely new phase, that of the abstract novel. This is a style that Duras later developed and perfected.



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