Superior Women Short Guide

Superior Women by Alice Adams

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Contents

Characters

Although Adams has sometimes been criticized for creating only characters from the privileged middle and upper middle class, perhaps only two of the five women whose lives she chronicles fit this description; one of these a frigid bigot and the other a depressed, self-hating martyr who finds herself only by abandoning her life as a suburban housewife, joining a commune of political activists, and taking a woman lover. The other three women are outsiders to the Eastern establishment they have somehow found themselves moving in. Megan Greene, whose consciousness is most central to the novel, is a smart, resourceful (although plump) lower-middle class adventurer from California (her mother works as a carhop); Janet is Jewish; and Cathy a Catholic in WASP territory. In fact, the one character who ends isolated, spiritually barren, and outside the embrace of friendship and rejuvenation is Lavinia, who epitomized social convention, class superiority, and the soul-destroying artificialities of style and narcissistic selfindulgence.

Adams's characters have an emblematic Dickensian quality; they are what they appear to be, like George Wharton: "He looks like what he is, a post-prep school boy from New England. They look the part—Cathy small, dark, and "foreign," Janet "Jewish," Peg large, clumsy, and uncomfortable. Megan and Lavinia, the polar opposites whose antithetical consciousness provides the novel's perspective, are living evidence of their differences—Megan plump, earthy, exuberant, open, and warm, and Lavinia thin, pinched, repressed, devious, and cold— beautiful and remote at first, and then just "Dry. Dry skin, a dry cough, a dry, uh, 'place.'" The "others," however, represent a more expressive sexuality, or at least the mysterious unknown—blacks but also Jewish men: ". . . all dark and brilliant and mysterious. And sexy, all of them: . . . And everyone knows that Jewish boys are smarter; they have to be if they get into Harvard, what with quotas." Although all the women are intelligent, Janet, the Jew, is the most intellectual, "sitting out there alone, smoking, a heavy book across her blue-jeaned knees." Unlike Lavinia, who chooses her own private hell, "the monsters that haunt her mind"—betrayal of her friends, her dislike of her only daughter, Cathy, Megan's "brightest, funniest friend" seems trapped in a series of destructive relationships with men obsessed with themselves and oblivious to her needs.

One wonders what, if anything, makes the five friends superior. Since none are conventional "nice girls" some readers have concluded that the title itself is a misnomer. However, all are superior in their intelligence, perceptivity, reflectiveness, and their inability to settle for less than what all know at some level they need: "Lavinia lives strictly by rules of her own," Cathy adds. "But of course I guess we all do." None is willing to accommodate herself to a life with less than what their own hearts say is good, even Cathy, who chooses single motherhood and a lonely life rather than an easier path, and Lavinia herself, whose strong, if shoddy, values of wealth, power, and social superiority keep her in what she realizes is a travesty of a marriage. Characters such as Megan and Peg, who follow their own hearts fully, even if their choices lead them into lives quite extraordinary, when judged by conventional standards, clearly are superior to the surrounding culture of late twentieth-century America.

The men in the novel, however, might be considered somewhat inferior by these standards. Except for three male characters—Henry Stuyvesant, erstwhile lover of both Lavinia and Megan who gives up his conventional political aspirations to become a radical intellectual, a professor, and civil rights worker; Jackson Clay, whose good heart and artistry redeem him (he recognizes, for instance, Megan's "superiority") and the good-hearted, generous Biff—Adams's men are usually self-centered, self-satisfied, and not very smart, either about themselves or about women. Some, like Adam Marr, are outright misogynists (a "fascist," Megan thinks), most dangerous when most perilously charismatic and perversely attractive, while most others are simply unwilling to accept the complexity and powerful needs of "superior women": "Are some men put off by extremes of intelligence or even attractiveness in women—put off by superior women?"

Megan wonders.

Social Concerns

The major issue in Superior Women, Alice Adams's fourth novel and first best-seller, is how American women who came of age in the 1940s negotiated their limited opportunities and possibilities to carve a place for themselves in the decades to follow. We first meet Megan Greene in California, an emblem of freedom in 1942 from the traditional constraints of class, family, history, and codes of proper behavior. When the scene soon shifts east to Radcliffe College, class privilege and inscrutable rules of decorum are strictly applied by Lavinia, the snobbish Southern beauty who dominates the small circle of Megan, Cathy, Peg, and Janet.

The novel traces the lives of these women from 1942 through the early 1980s, documenting the social constraints and changes they experience. These women negotiate their college years filled with groping, insensitive men, toxically catty girlfriends, and their own inner turmoil. After graduation Megan and Janet, then married to the passionate and charismatic playwright Adam Marr, follow the expatriate road to Paris, Lavinia and Peg marry stupid, rich Republican men whom they do not love (Peg is pregnant as the result of a date rape), and Cathy heads to California to study graduate economics.

Except for Megan and Peg in her more mature years, the superior women share a viewpoint limited by a sheltered upbringing and financial security; they have, for the most part, been unchanged by their education. The narrator acknowledges the most egregious instances of obtuseness with ironic comments indicating the author's own distance from her characters's perception. One coed's flip cliche, "Don't you know there's a war on?" produces an authorial aside: "Actually it could of course be said that none of them did."

Lavinia's unrelenting patter, both racist and elitist, continues despite the training camp death of one of her boyfriends and clear evidence that the world around them is changing, as does the obtuse, unreflecting egoism of Megan's putative beau George Wharton, who personifies examples of some elements that never change but only become increasingly irrelevant. Except for Peg, who becomes active in the Civil Rights movement of the early 1960s, the five women are almost unrelentingly apolitical, even against the backdrop of World War II, McCarthyism, and the silent 1950s, as the post-war decades conflate with the women's full maturity in the 1970s and 1980s. Adams's ironic viewpoint always juxtaposes the constant, pervasive gap between "the obvious hungers that are the lot of every poor but bright young woman" [meaning Megan] and Lavinia's world of automatic priviledge, epitomized in the concepts of style, geography, and class background. "Whatever Megan wore would be just not right, no matter where she shopped or how much she spent . . .

Something to do with coming from California probably, or more to the point, with coming from nothing in terms of family. No real money." Megan and Cathy are excluded from this artificial world by their differences: Megan's lower middle-class California upbringing and Cathy's Catholicism. Peg escapes by leaving her cold, boorish husband for a new

life with the Civil Rights movement and a woman lover, while Lavinia becomes trapped forever in a sterile world of simultaneous self-worship and selfloathing.

The double standard also distorts gender issues, not only for sexual mores, but for pay and opportunity for working women, prejudice against single women which extends even to housing in postwar California, and the strict division of roles, lack of communication, and lifelessness of conventional marriage, especially in the soulless wastes of the suburbs, where Peg is exiled. Although all five women are educated, education itself is suspect for women— Cathy's father, who pays her tuition, is "opposed to graduate schools, for girls," and even the opportunity for graduate teaching is reserved: the preference is to veterans and to men.

Girls can always get money from home, "a girl from a truly poor family goes to work or she gets married very young, she does not go to graduate school." Capitalism is present, too, as Megan's publishing house is gobbled up by an oil conglomerate, and, as Megan tells Bill: "But for me there's the problem of women never becoming senior editors anywhere, anyway." Women with personal difficulties, or those disadvantaged by color or class, are in even more jeopardy from sexist institutions, as when Peg, headed for a nervous breakdown, is advised that her unhappiness is the result of her inability to accept her female role, and Cornelia receives an unwanted hysterectomy in a Texas hospital.

The years after Megan, Janet, and Adam return from Europe are filled with building careers, creating families, and building and breaking relationships. Although their marriage is headed for the pits, Adam is a wildly successful playwright, and Janet a doctor. Megan becomes a successful publisher and agent, a resolute bachelor girl with a long-term sexual liaison with the black jazz musician Jackson Clay; Lavinia, realizing her marriage to be a mistake, embarks on an affair with Henry Stuyvesant, a politician who turned professor when McCarthyism doomed his election hopes, later to become Megan's long-time friend and lover; and Peg, buried in a desperate suburban marriage with her domineering, disdainful husband, struggles, with the help of her black maid Cornelia, her only friend, to raise her children and stay sane. Cathy, repressed, depressed, and alienated, retreats from the threateningly open spaces of California ("she is generally hostile to new impressions, new ideas") into a doomed affair with a Catholic priest, an illegitimate child and a case of terminal cancer.

In most of Adams's novels, characters either grow by embracing new experiences, or decline and die in the claws of old obsessions. Like society itself, characters must struggle to overcome alienation, distance, and self-destructiveness. Indeed, creating bridges between alien groups becomes the dominant motion in the novel as characters venture into unknown times and territories, there to bloom or be overwhelmed. Megan and Peg survive and triumph because they are able to find satisfying work, and because they are able to connect to those of other class and ethnicity. Adams pairs characters from opposite social strata, as between Jewish Janet and Irish Adam Marr, to provide a way around the rigid social divisions. The Civil Rights movement, in which Peg and Henry Stuyvesant become deeply involved, brings diverse characters together in a common effort. Lavinia, sunken finally by her own narcissistic isolation, shoddy values,

and manipulative meanness, is distanced from her four friends; she is tormented by insomnia and contemplates suicide. At the novel's end Peg and Megan are together in Georgia, running a half-way house for homeless people with their extended family, which includes Megan's mother Florence, Henry, Jackson, Peg's children and Peg's Hispanic lover, Vera.

Techniques

Adams's own authorial persona provides insight and context to the interwoven voices of her characters. All the "superior women" tend to be thoughtful and reflective about their own behavior, and share their thoughts with others: "Megan has of course got over her hurt about not going down to Washington—of course Lavinia would never have asked her to. She has even been able to tell Cathy about that ludicrous fantasy, which has become another joke between them . . ."

Characters reveal themselves through their own thoughts and dialogue, but in addition to the dramatic irony created when certain of those thoughts contradict or shed a different light on what has been said or done, Adams's authorial voice lets the reader know when characters are self-deceiving or just plain wrong.

After one of Lavinia's staged departures Adams opines: "The sad part is that for all her cleverness, her assiduous scholarship, in terms of Henry, Lavinia was absolutely wrong. Lavinia had created a certain 'Henry' as her lover from scraps, and from her own demanding imagination. She could not know that as Lavinia left him that day . . ." The primary narrative is interspersed with an old-fashioned epistolary style, letters by which the friends keep in touch with one another and with themselves, even when, as in the case of Peg, the letters are never mailed.

Setting is an important organizing principal, as characters move from East to West, or South to Lavinia's Fredericksburg or to North Carolina and the civil rights movement. Adams's settings are realistic—real big cities and small towns, ivy league universities, Southern California, the Carmel coast and Stanford, Chapel Hill and the small southern town. The Radcliffe setting, complete with dorm rooms, Megan's 12th street apartment, Lavinia's wealthy digs, and the sweltering despondency of Peg's Midland, Texas, suburb are all clearly realized. The details of daily life and style: clothes and hair, fashions, furniture and decoration, and especially flowers, are meticulously described. Food, drink, and idiom are important parts of place as well. The structure of the novel moves between these settings—the superficial openness of the West Coast, the frenetic social demands of the East, the heady liberatedness of postwar Paris, and the South—nostalgic and cloying, as in Lavinia's recreation of her childhood home in Fredericksburg, Peg's nightmarish suburbia, or the alternately threatening and rejuvenating South in which Peg, Megan, and their extended families establish their final home.

Themes

Chief among Adams's themes is that of friendship and the love that comes with it. The convoluted ties between the five coeds, first brought together by proximity and chance, are alternately cemented or fractured by Megan's compassionate warmth or by Lavinia's brittle self-centeredness. Betrayal and deceit prevail as misogynistic domineering Adam Marr nearly destroys whatever autonomy Janet develops. Lavinia seduces Henry as a way of displaying her contempt for Megan, and Janet's priest rejects the emotional demands of his relationship with Janet and her child. Some of the strongest relationships are between heterosexual woman and gay men, and the only longterm romantic relationship seems to be that between Peg and Vera.

The love between men and women, in fact, survives and thrives only if combined with strong friendship, as that of Henry and Megan; it dies when based on self-indulgent romanticism, as that of Henry and Lavinia. Love also dies in marriage when one partner is dominated by the other, or when the marriage is a function of social form alone, where partners "not expecting much ... by way of companionship, much less rapport . . .

can probably remain serenely married forever, to almost anyone." Adams's critique of bourgeois marriage in these eras is strong. No marriage is good, and Janet and Peg survive only by escaping its clutches. Sex, however, is another matter; Adams's frank handling of erotic elements, and her use of sexuality as the means of expression for a range of compelling and vital needs in her characters, is a mainstay of the novel. Peg is brought back to life by her relationship with Vera, and it is only by her sojourn in Hawaii with Jackson Clay—and a lot of drugs—that Megan can experience the metaphorical disintegration of the self ("time of true derangement") in that lush, totally uninhibited environment which can bring her spirit back after Cathy's death. And since all the characters are in their fifties at the novel's end, the tolerance, acceptance, and mellow connections of aging become a theme, demonstrated in the epilogue, where Florence celebrates her eighty-third birthday.

Because the emotional emphasis of the novel is on expressiveness andconnection, a strong tension always exists between these needs and those of the everyday world of work, family, and duty.

The bitter inversion of friendship and love is loneliness and isolation, which Cathy experiences on her own in California and which Megan feels in her bleak little apartment, which does not even have a telephone. Peg's suffers horrible loneliness within her own suburban family, an isolation mitigated only by her friendship with her black maid, Cornelia, and which reaches its epitomy in the disastrous, wonderfully realized Prettyware party she flees.

The family itself is not much of a bulwark against loneliness, either, and may in fact intensify isolation, as children pull away from or are estranged from their parents, only to

be reunited when parents are able to change, or when a child can be himself only when a parent dies, as in the case of Adam and Janet Marr's gay son Aron. Megan, "never a dutiful nor even a particularly affectionate daughter," is reunited with her mother Florence only late in the novel, when both are removed in time and place from the traditional family setting.

Key Questions

Because its narrative follows the five friends for four decades, Superior Women has much to offer a group or class looking for a highly textured novel with many avenues for access. Since it explores the feminist themes of friendship, work, and sexuality, the novel is a good choice for women's studies classes as well.

1. The emergence of female friendship as a literary theme is very apparent in Superior Women. What is the basis for the different relationships between the women, and what does it say about female friendship?

2. How does Superior Women present the development of a feminist consciousness over the decades? How does the characters' evolution mirror attitudes towards women in these different time periods?

3. Megan Greene and Lavinia Harcourt are natural foils for one another. What do their differences say about human nature and the nature of female identity?

4. How does Adams treat the male characters in the novel? Do you find any stereotypes? Which characters are more completely developed?

5. What does the novel say about the relationships between men and women?

What attitudes promote positive ones, and which negative? How does marriage fit in?

6. What is the role of money, power, and social class in the novel?

7. How does Adams's depiction of the Civil Rights movement and civil rights workers compare with similar accounts in the media of the time?

8. Does the end of the novel seem realistic? What is Adams trying to show in this rather "fairy tale" ending?

9. Explore Adams's use of irony in her narrative comment on characters and their actions. How does the irony negotiate the territory between distance and compassion?

Literary Precedents

Adams's characters are great readers, and their choice of novelists gives us an idea of Adams's literary milieu, as well as a key to the characters themselves. Lavinia admires Marcel Proust, especially the Duchess de Guermantes; Cathy and Megan share a liking for Henry James; and Janet reads John Dos Passos. The type of narrative Adams writes, however, is also in the tradition of the Victorians, not only Dickens, but also Mrs. Gaskel and George Gissing; modern writers who may have influenced her include Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bo wen, and Margaret Drabble. The young women themselves joke about how their group resembles those in the girls' boarding school novels popular in their youth, even to the typical characters found there, as in the novels of Rona Jaffe, Marilyn French, Marge Piercy and, of course, Mary McCarthy, whose novel, The Group (1963; see separate entry), is a precursor to Superior Women.

Related Titles

Superior Women did not become part of any series, nor do these characters appear again elsewhere, although some of the settings do. The contrast between the South and the West, here epitomized in Lavinia and Megan, is internalized in the dual personalities of many Adams's heroines, and the way geography is reflected in lifestyle and character is a common theme. The New York and European settings are special to Superior Women, but the transplanted New Englander in California is found in many of her novels, especially in Second Chances, where the denizens of San Sebastian are from New England and Louisiana, and in Medicine Men (1997; see separate entry), where the central character is a Southerner divorced from a New Englander who now lives in California. The comedy of manners set up by Southern, Western, and Eastern lifestyles and cultural differences provides conflict between and within Adams's characters.

The idea of black and white women bridging racial divides to form friendships, and even business partnerships, appears in Southern Exposure (1995). Another novel of the 1940s, this one focuses on the relationship between white women and their black "help," a recurring motif in Adams's fiction.

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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 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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