

The Vagabond Short Guide

The Vagabond by Colette

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Characters

All of the central characters in *The Vagabond* were fashioned after people whom Colette knew. Renee Nere is Colette herself, although she bears some resemblance to the poetess, Renee Vivien, who wrote of lesbian love and who died shortly before the novel was begun. Max was based partly on Auguste Heriot, with whom Colette did have an affair after her divorce from Willy. Renee's fellow performer and mentor, Brague, resembles Georges Wague, an able performer who had assisted Colette to get started in mime (her Burgundian accent was thought, for a time, to be a barrier against vocal roles). Renee's former husband, the portrait painter, Adolphe Taillandy, clearly represents Willy.

This cast of characters, along with Renee's friend Margot, who has also been disappointed in love, are the focus of the novel. The action in this book is not extensive. The stress is on the states of mind of people, most prominently the heroine. It is now a commonplace of Colette criticism that she was not able, nor perhaps eager, to create rounded male characters until later in her career. This claim seems borne out by the story, in which three stages of the plot tell the fairly simple story of Renee's growing association with Max and then her retreat from it.

Renee undergoes what could almost be termed a spiritual crisis. In the Existential sense, she elects not to marry Max and thus chooses who she will be from then on. As a few critics have observed, while Colette never subscribed to any general philosophy, throughout her novels can be found the implication that one is always responsible for one's actions and decisions and must bear that obligation. No one is more aware of this truth than Renee Nere.



Social Concerns

Clearly, one of the most important social phenomena of the early years of the twentieth century was an old one: the subordinate and often terribly suppressed position of women. No one was more aware of this fact than Colette, partially because of the circumstances and events of her life and partly because of her own sensitivity and sympathy. Her experience as the wife of the dominating, worldly Willy certainly intensified her awareness of the grim fact that, until 1893 (the year of her marriage to Willy), a woman routinely was paid half the salary given to a man doing the same job. Perhaps more maddening to Colette was the fact that, until 1907, women were not allowed to handle their own money — a wife's income was managed by her husband. Thus, a central theme of *The Vagabond* emerges as a dual dilemma: the heroine, Renee Nere (critics have noted that the name is almost a palindrome), finds her independence from the enslaving husband but also is thrown upon her own resources to make a living.

The situation mirrors Colette's own, since she had divorced Willy the year before the novel was published and had gone on the stage in order to support herself. While the novel has obvious autobiographical elements, Colette's emphasis on the psychological aspects of her heroine's life and her picture of the life of music hall performers raises the work to the level of an artistic picture of human relationships in a very believable, well-realized setting. Unquestionably the most personal and probably the most analytical of Colette's novels, *The Vagabond* takes up the serious question of what a woman must become in order to live a meaningful life alone in a society that, as Colette once remarked, viewed divorce as a blot on a woman's reputation and in which most honorable professions were simply not available to women.

The principal conflict of the book resides in the mind of the heroine. She must decide whether to accept the offer of marriage of the well-to-do Marquis de Fontanges (Max), following the "feminine instinct of bowing down to worship," as she had called the impulse in *The Retreat from Love* (*La Retraite Sentimentale*, 1907), or to maintain her independence and her career. Here can be seen the current problem of women who must choose marriage or a career, or must balance these two commitments.

The six years that Colette spent in music halls taught her a great deal, since she was writing all the time and attempting to come to terms with herself. The question of whether a woman's need to find her real identity and place in the world is a social concern is difficult; but, in the works of Colette, the most personal and, in a way, private of authors, it rises to an almost metaphysical level of significance. Like Jane Austen, Colette could be said to deal with the essential fabric of society: the relationship of men and women and the place of women in the family and in the world of work.



Techniques

Colette's fictional pieces are notable for their uncomplicated plots; their interesting, though usually not highly gifted or brilliant, characters; their intensely realized settings; and their excellent style. *The Vagabond* illustrates all these qualities. Since the emphasis is on the heroine, the use of the firstperson seems appropriate. Renee tells her story well. Colette employs useful and easily understood and appreciated symbols, such as mirrors. The text opens with Renee sitting before a mirror in her dressing room waiting to go on stage. As she gazes at the "stranger" in the glass, she begins to ruminate on her situation and her identity. Within five pages she has gotten the introductory note from Max, who was in the audience and wishes to meet her, and the narrative is launched.

In an almost anachronistic fashion, Colette also utilizes the device of epistolary communication. Once Renee has left Paris on tour with the theatrical troupe, her exchanges with Max (almost wholly on her side) are by letter.

This device, while hardly new in the history of fiction, develops into a richly significant facet of the novel. In Colette's hands, the letter-writing strategy takes on a greater than usual meaning.

Because Renee is a writer as well as a performer, her letters signify more to her than simple correspondence. As she writes to Max of her experiences and attitudes, she learns more about herself. Near the end of the story, while she still believes that she may accept Max, she composes this revealing passage: "Behind my teasing there's a nasty little desire to simplify you, to humiliate in you the old adversary: that's what I've always called the man who is destined to possess me."

Renee clearly is engaged in the process of discovering more about her own inner needs and wishes. She is moving toward her final resolution to reject Max.

Setting always plays a significant part in Colette's work. In *The Vagabond*, she seems to demonstrate the validity of her claim that her early reading of Balzac was highly influential on her writing — she called him her literary "cradle." As in Balzac's novels, where the characters appear to be principally formed by their environments, so in Colette the settings have a great impact on either the nature of a character or upon his or her state of mind. Thus, when Renee's tour takes her south and she passes through the region where she was born and spent her childhood, her mood changes, and the seeds of her rebellion against the restrictions of marriage are sown. Colette evidently believed, with Proust, that the only true paradises are the lost ones. So, Renee, as she ponders the beauty of the countryside, realizes that the "glory in the flower" can never be actually recaptured — yet, it still has a force in her life, and the memory of it gives her the strength to take the bold step of refusal.

Much has been written of Colette's phenomenal prose style. She admitted working very hard at it, and the effort does what such diligence should do: It never appears.



Generally, the personal essays, sketches, reminiscences, and the like are written in a more elegant, embellished style, while the fictional works are expressed in a language that is more taut, economical, and straightforward. One reason that her texts so readily lend themselves to dramatic adaptation lies not only in their heavy dependence upon dialogue but also in her ability to write clear, direct sentences, with many concrete words. Both styles appear in *The Vagabond*. When there is action, the writing tends to be of the second variety. As Renee contemplates her situation, Colette allows herself the luxury of creating the more lyrical and fully expressive style that marks, especially, her autobiographical titles. Given the closeness of *The Vagabond* to her own experience, this application seems appropriate.

Themes

The foregoing topic also constitutes a major theme of the novel. Renee's problem goes beyond the making of this decision — she elects to remain independent — and encompasses her attempt to choose the sort of person she wants to be. Since she is a writer as well as a performer, Renee has a more than casually complex set of options.

She delights in writing or at least experiences the need (as Colette said of her own feeling) to "seize . . . the iridescent, fugitive, bewitching adjective."

A further dimension of Renee's dilemma is her suspicion of human relationships, largely, of course, because of what she regards as her betrayal by her former husband, so that she tells herself on "lucid days," "Be careful! Keep alert! All who approach you are suspect." The whole question of marriage is seen as deliverance from vocational servitude into another, perhaps worse, captivity: the entrapment of love. A large part of the difficulty, as Colette maintained on numerous occasions, is that the sexual needs of women are such that women can satisfy them only by submitting to a "master" or engaging in irregular erotic activities. In this novel, the conflict starts out as relatively platonic, since she is not at first physically attracted to Max. However, she does come to love him, after a fashion, perhaps because of her loneliness (which is, in itself, a topic of great prominence in nearly all of Colette's fictional works).

Finally, the struggle within Renee's mind comes down to the fact that she is afraid of love. This feeling develops further when Max finally kisses her and she experiences the return of a sensual impulse. In the end, she writes a letter of farewell to Max and returns to her professional life, affirming the thematic assertion that human beings are always at the mercy of their pasts.

While Colette, in dozens of writings, expresses her love for her distant past, the idyllic days of innocent childhood, it is also evident that she understands what a profound influence her own past had upon her actions, her art, and her attitude — especially her view of human relationships.

Adaptations

The Vagabond was turned into a quite successful play by Colette and Leopold Marchand, with whom she collaborated on several dramas, in 1923. The chief differences between the novel and the play are that the stage version is presented as essentially a comedy and that the dialogue is livelier, written in a considerably lighter style and vein. In revivals of this play, Colette occasionally played Renee.

The first film adaptation was done by Colette, who composed the scenario, and Musidora and Eugenio Peregio, in 1917. This version was filmed in Rome and released in Paris in 1918. It adheres fairly closely to the stage play.

Another movie was made of the story.

In this enterprise Colette contributed only some additional scenes; the script was by Solange Bussi, who took some liberties with the novel. The film was issued in 1932.

Literary Precedents

Balzac was a strong literary influence on Colette. One commentator has counted no fewer than fifty-five references to the great nineteenth-century novelist or his work in Colette's writings. However, the most immediate precedent for such a novel as *The Vagabond* was the spate of novels by women about sex and erotic adventures. These, though, had valid bases in works by Balzac and Gautier which contain, for example, treatments of lesbianism. This topic and pederasty had appeared in a number of novels, many of them by female authors around the turn of the century. The difference, of course, is that Colette took the subject seriously.

Despite her admission that, particularly in her earlier titles, she sometimes injected sexual details for the purpose of appealing to readers, she dealt with love on all levels as an important matter.

A striking example can be found in *The Ripening Seed* (1956; *Le Ble en herbe*, 1923), a short novel about the development of love between two teenagers.

When the publishers of the periodical in which it was being serialized realized that the girl and boy were going to unite in a sexual encounter, they stopped publication of the story. The novel, like all the rest of the later ones, has as its intent no light-minded joking about or sniggering at sex. It reveals the author's grasp of the many implications of sexual desire, of the price that must be paid for the "exhausting sexual positive." In this way, Colette has no real precedents, at least not among female authors. As she broke ground in her treatment of the problems facing women who pursued a career as opposed to marriage, so she threw considerable light on the matter of the ways in which the "need for love" can warp or enrich a woman's life. Most of her topics had been presented before, but not with her profundity and insight.

Related Titles

Nearly all of Colette's full novels, as well as many of the novellas — such as *Gigi* — can be related to *The Vagabond*, despite radical variations in plot. Several themes and life situations are repeated or echoed. Women of superior ability and character married to or in a liaison with inferior men are seen in numerous Colette fictions. The glories of nature and youth are contrasted repeatedly with the corruption of city life, especially that of Paris, among adults.

The most relevant title to consider when thinking of *The Vagabond* is *Recaptured* (1931; *L'Entrave*, 1913; also published in English as *The Shackle*, 1964), which is a lesser sequel. The plot takes Renee finally into the arms of a man to whom she is willing to submit.

While the text is inferior, the topics and the conflict are much the same.

Renee still realizes that her union with Jean will be a sort of negotiated compromise with her ambitions and integrity as a free woman.

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