

THE DUCHESS AND THE JEWELLER

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- Virginia Woolf

Degree - II (English Honors)

Paper - IV

Modern English short stories

"Critical Appreciation"

"The Duchess and the Jeweller". Written by Virginia Woolf, is a typical modern short story. It does not contain the story element in the traditional sense. In this piece the story element is given only through hints and suggestion. The present piece tells us about one Oliver Bacon who starts his life as a street boy selling stolen dogs to fashionable ladies, but who in course of time, becomes the richest jeweller of England. He is a careful man. He is extremely devoted to the memory of his mother. It is difficult for such a man to get deceived in life and yet he gets deliberately cheated by the Duchess of Lambourne for a particular fulfilment of his desire.

The present short story, to say the least, is psychological. "Virginia Woolf does not actually analyse the character of Oliver Bacon in so many words, and yet she tells us everything about him through the presentation of atmosphere". As we go through this story, we find Oliver Bacon remembering his past and examining his present in the light of his past experiences. It appears to us as if he is working in a

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kind of atmosphere that was its own pressure or compulsion. The Duchess and the Jeweller may be called a story of atmosphere in as much as atmosphere plays the role of a character in it.

Oliver Bacon is sitting in his room in Piccadilly. He is all alone and it is natural for him to think about his own life. Through the window he looks down at the road. Although he looks down at the road and the people, he is really not interested in them. Instead he is brooding over the past days of his life - when he was a poor boy, when he had no occupation, and when his mother tried to bring him up by going dirty and means jobs. He remembers that at that time there was nothing about him to command respect from people. He keeps sitting for sometime as if fixed in a dream, when suddenly he gets up, he leaves for his shop in the Bond street. As he walks on the road, he is conscious of his superiority over others. He comes to the shop where he finds himself in the middle of diamonds and jewels several ideas and expressions once again flash through his mind. Oliver Bacon is a self made man and he would not forget the struggle he had to face in his life.

The story moves through different impressions and associations, and for sometime it appears to us as if no other character is going to disturb Oliver Bacon.

It is at this moment that he is informed of the visit of the Duchess of Lambourne to his shop. He knows very well that she must have come to him to sell some pearls and jewels for the sake of money. He keeps her waiting for sometime out of sheer vanity. When she walks into the room, she places ten pearls on the table and demands twenty thousand pounds for them. Oliver Bacon knows that the pearls must not be genuine and for sometime he hesitates in coming out with the money. But the moment the Duchess speaks of her daughter Diana, whom he loves, Bacon pays the full amount without realising the consequences. Later he feels guilty and weeps before her mother's portrait but he accepts his helplessness.

The Duchess and the Jeweller is a complex story. Virginia Woolf adopts the flash-back method in it with considerable success. It is somewhat difficult to explain Oliver Bacon's mood in definite terms. Still this much can be said that he has been so much hated in his early days and has suffered so much in his life that he gets a peculiar kind of satisfaction in the company of aristocratic ladies. This story deals in fact more with the past than with the present of Oliver Bacon's life. It is a story of character even though the analysis of Oliver Bacon's character is

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presented in terms of expressions and associations. The language of the story is an added beauty because it implies expresses the different and differing moods of the central character of the story. The picture of Love and Hate, of wealth and poverty, of humiliation and satisfaction is rendered in an artistic manner.