
ABSALOM ABSALOM!

William Faulkner

1936

Novel

Southern Gothic, African American

Two young men in 1909 try to understand a murder which took place during the Civil War in Mississippi.

Quentin Compson—shortly before he goes to Harvard University where (according to *The Sound and the Fury*) he will commit suicide after his first year, learns from Rosa Coldfield and his father much of the story of Thomas Sutpen.

Sutpen appeared at Jefferson more than 20 years before the Civil War, quickly established a vast plantation, and married and fathered two children.

When his daughter, Judith, grew up, she was courted by Charles Bon, friend of her brother, Henry. Sutpen forbade them to marry and, as a result, Henry rejected his father. The boys soon joined the Confederate army. Near the end of the war, Henry and Charles appeared at the plantation, and Henry murdered Charles. Upon returning from the war, Sutpen attempted to reestablish his dynasty, including a proposal to Rosa, but he failed. He was killed by the father of a girl he had impregnated but whom he refused to marry when she bore a daughter.

At Harvard, Quentin and his Canadian roommate, Shreve, try to piece together this puzzle in order to explain several mysterious events, but the main one is why Henry killed his friend Charles at the gate of Sutpens plantation near the end of the war.

This explanation leads to a main theme of the novel, for it appears that the murder was racially motivated. Slavery and the racism it produces create barriers between people who ought to love each other, especially when, because of accident or irresponsible behavior, members of different races find themselves sharing family blood. Racism proves to be at the center of Sutpen's drive for power, and his failure to understand either racism or family love contributes to his fall.

ABSALOM AND ACHITOPHEL

John Dryden

1681

Poetry

Satire

An extended and freely adapted analogy employing the biblical account of Absaloms rebellion against King David serves as a satiric rejection of the Whig opposition to King Charles II.

The poem opens with a depiction of the Jews beset by fears and rumors of plots against King David by a discredited sect. Achitophel, leader of the king's opponents, inflames the crowd against their monarch with a view toward replacing the rightful heir with Absalom, the king's illegitimate son. Though reluctant to challenge David, who insists on the succession by established tradition, Absalom finds the attention and the prospect of power appealing and leaves the capital to gather support among the people.

After a lengthy discussion urging avoidance of extremes in government, the poem praises the king's allies. David himself brings the poem to a close with an oration strongly condemning factionalism and warning of punishment for those guilty.

The poem presents memorable satiric caricatures in heroic couplets, discrediting opponents of King David (Charles II): Achitophel (the Earl of Shaftesbury), Corah (Titus Oates), Zimri (the Duke of Buckingham), and others. Despite the biblical names, readers of the time easily recognized the objects of the satire, who are ridiculed by being portrayed as reckless, extravagant, and extreme. The heroic couplet, permitting easy antithesis, represents an effective metrical form for calling attention to contradictions inherent in human beings. Caricature and an analogy or parallel to biblical history represent two of Dryden's most effective satiric techniques.

In his memorable essay on government, Dryden identifies the norm with the status quo, but the poem is faithful to history in leaving the conflict unresolved at the end. Basically but not entirely a satire, it praises the king and his supporters and provides a defense of the English monarchy as it then existed.

ADAM BEDE

George Eliot

1859

Novel

Victorian

Set in rural England at the end of the 18th century, the novel explores the effects of a self-indulgent love affair on an almost idyllic pastoral community.

Although Adam Bede (a young carpenter who is a model of rectitude and diligence) is the titular hero of this novel, the principal actions that develop the plot of the novel are those of Arthur Donnithorne. He is the heir to a large country estate which is the source of income and employment for many of the characters in the novel. A handsome young man whose glamour is enhanced by his being a captain in the local militia, Arthur dreams of the time when he will inherit the estate and win the adoration of his tenants by his wise and generous policies. In spite of these lofty intentions, Arthur begins an affair with Hetty Sorrel, a dairy maid who is the niece of one of his principal tenants.

As infatuated by Arthur as he is by her, Hetty entertains naive fantasies of marrying across the social chasm that separates them and becoming a great lady. Adam, who also loves Hetty, discovers the affair and forces Arthur to break it off before he rejoins his regiment. By this time, however, Hetty is pregnant and desperately follows Arthur until she discovers that he has been sent to Ireland. When her baby is born, she abandons it and is subsequently tried for child murder.

Although Arthur—somewhat melodramatically—wins Hetty a reprieve from hanging, and Dinah Morris, a young Methodist preacher, moves her to repentance, the evil consequences of Arthur and Hetty's affair cannot be undone.

George Eliot's first full-length novel, *Adam Bede* has been admired for its rich descriptions and incisive characterization, especially of the often humorous minor figures. Her handling of the plot, however, seems less assured. Despite her psychological insight into Arthur and Hetty as they yield to infatuation, the final disposition of these characters is unsatisfying and the marriage of Adam and Dinah seems largely a concession to the Victorian taste for a happy ending.

ADONAIS

Percy Bysshe Shelley

1821

Poetry

Elegiac

This brilliant elegy on the death of John Keats begins with sorrow for the premature loss of a promising poet but concludes with a triumphant affirmation of immortality through art.

Adonais, like Milton's *Lycidas*, is a remarkably successful English adaptation of the classical elegy form perfected by the Greek poets Bion, Moschus, and Theocritus. Keats, whose early works Shelley had greatly admired, had died

at Rome in 1821. The cause of death was tuberculosis, but Shelley believed that a hostile review of Keats's *Endymion* had crucially contributed to the poet's death. Thus the poem's allusion to Adonis, a beautiful youth loved by Venus and killed by a savage boar, is aptly ironical as well as conventionally classical.

Shelley's poem, written in 55 Spenserian stanzas, closely follows the pattern of the pastoral elegy. The mournful beginning includes a reproachful invocation to the muse Urania, the natural world's sympathetic participation in the bereaved poet's sorrow over Adonais, a procession of mourners (among them Shelley depicts himself and Lord Byron), and the obligatory attack on debased literary practitioners, the specific reference here being to Keats's harsh critic, John Wilson Croker of the *Quarterly Review*.

At stanza 38, the mood shifts from grief to comfort. Keats's spirit has become part of the Eternal, made one with nature and immortalized through his enduring works. Toward the end of the elegy, after the view of Keats's grave at Rome's Protestant Cemetery, Shelley offers one of the finest English analogies for Plato's doctrine of the ideal: Life, like a dome of many-colored glass/ Stains the white radiance of Eternity/ Until death tramples it to fragments.

THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH

Saul Bellow

1953

Novel

Picaresque

Augie March grows up poor, fatherless, but streetwise in the Chicago of the 1920s and 1930s and learns to reject middle-class respectability. He spends his life looking for something either more idealistic or more risky.

Like Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, *Augie March* is a picaresque hero, a restless wanderer who refuses to be civilized, a permanent outsider. He pursues innocence while renouncing possibilities for power, success, and commitment.

Augie's adventures take him throughout Chicago and its environs, to Mexico, to the North Atlantic during World War II, and to exile in Paris after the war. He works at an endless series of jobs, including doing research for an eccentric millionaire, who is writing a history of happiness. Drifting from one level of society to another, Augie has no idea where he should fit in. Several people try to take him in, but he always breaks away.

Augie is drawn to several father substitutes and eventually sees himself as a father figure, yet he has no one to whom he can be a father. He is equally unsuccessful in several love affairs.

Augie is, however, successful at minor criminal activity, finding crime attractive because it is a break from respectability. He understands the difference between right and wrong, but somehow good does not seem good enough. Augie therefore may be seen as alienated from his true self.

This plotless, deliberately formless novel has no obvious theme. Bellow's point may be that because of modern man's restlessness, his life cannot have a theme imposed upon it; no such order exists. Augie March searches for something to give it all meaning, but such is unlikely to appear. The real value comes in the striving. The life worth living is one which embraces all of experience.

THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

Mark Twain

1884

Novel

Historical, Adventure

Probably the most influential novel ever written in America, and one of the greatest, this book follows the adventures of an outcast boy and a runaway slave, as they float down the Mississippi River on a raft.

Huck Finn, the young hero and narrator, is innately good, but his values have been formed by the deeply corrupt, slave-ridden society in which he lives. At the climax of the novel he refuses to betray his friend Jim, the runaway slave with whom he has been traveling, despite his belief that he has thereby condemned himself to Hell.

The story is set in the 1840s. Huck, the son of the town drunkard in St. Petersburg, Missouri, has been adopted by the Widow Douglas. To escape his father's bullying and the widow's misguided kindness, he runs away, and on Jacksons Island meets Jim, a slave who has also run away—to avoid being sold down the river. They set off together on a raft that they find, planning to float downstream to Cairo, Illinois, and there work their way up the Ohio River into the free territory. But they miss Cairo in a fog and end up at a small plantation near Pikesville, Arkansas. Jim has now been recaptured. Tom Sawyer arrives on the scene and masterminds a wildly romantic plot to set Jim free again, only to reveal at the end that Jim was freed when his owner died two months earlier.

Of central importance is the river, at once Twain's major structuring device and a source of spiritual freedom, which transcends freedom from institutional slavery. On the river the fugitives are happy and unfettered, even as they drift ever deeper into slave country. Frequently, however, they have encounters ashore—encounters which invariably involve violence or fraud, or both, and reveal the iniquity of a society which is itself enslaved.

Huck tells the story in his own words—a radical narrative technique at that time—and the gulf between what he sees and what he understands produces a richly ironic indictment of slavery in all of its forms.

THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER

Mark Twain

1876; illustrated

Novel

Historical, Adventure

Mark Twain used characters and events from his own boyhood in Hannibal, Missouri to create this children's classic.

Tom Sawyer is the American prototype of the good bad boy. Unlike his friend Huck Finn, a genuine outcast, he is always into mischief but never in real trouble. He is a member of society and shares its values—at the end of the novel, he will not let Huck be a member of his robber gang until Huck agrees to live a respectable life with the Widow Douglas. And despite the mean trick Tom plays on his Aunt Polly, (that is, pretending to be dead so he can attend his own funeral), his place in her family is never in doubt.

Tom Sawyer is episodic and open-ended, as much a series of loosely connected short stories as a novel. Tom plays hooky from school, and, condemned to spend Saturday whitewashing a fence as punishment, tricks his friends into doing it. He wins a prize at Sunday school, not by memorizing Scripture but by trading for the tickets issued to children who did memorize it. He plays pirates and robbers, then gets a taste of the real thing when he sees the outlaw Injun Joe committing a murder. Having fallen in love with Becky Thatcher, he accompanies her on a picnic that her parents give for the village children, and the two get lost in a cave. Finally—a touch without which no boys adventure book would be complete—Tom and Huck explore the cave again and find the treasure Injun Joe had hidden there.

Tom Sawyer is all innocent nostalgia, a rhapsodic memory piece. Told from an adults point of view, it is weakest where Twain intrudes and moralizes. At its best, it lacks the seriousness—the constant underlying awareness of the dark side of life—of *Huckleberry Finn*, its famous sequel. As an unpretentious boyhood idyll it is unsurpassed.

AENEID

Vergil

29-19 B.C.E.

Poetry

Epic, Mythology

Virgil's Aeneid describes the Trojans search for a new city in the years following Troys fall. Their eventual settlement in Italy establishes the antiquity of Imperial Rome and the nobility of the Roman race, special concerns of the Emperor Augustus who commissioned the poem.

The Aeneid emphasizes that warfare, suffering, and selfless piety established a new Troy at Lavinium, allowing Rome itself to eventually arise.

Fate prevents Aeneas from establishing a city anywhere except Italy, and the goddess Juno is determined to delay its founding. The storm which she inspires drives the Trojans to Carthage, where they are befriended by Dido, its widowed queen.

Venus, goddess-mother of Aeneas, rouses Dido's instant love for Aeneas, and the lonely queen offers Aeneas a home and equal power at Carthage. Destiny, however, requires an Italian bride for Aeneas, and Dido is left, forsaken and a suicide, as the Trojans depart.

The Trojans eventually land at Cumae near Naples. Apollo's priestess, the Sibyl, guides Aeneas through the Underworld to the ghost of his father, Anchises. Anchises reveals destiny for his son, a procession of as yet unborn notables (including Augustus) who will ensure Rome's greatness. Reassured of his mission, Aeneas continues northward on the Tiber, lands at Lavinium, but must fight a second Trojan War to obtain his fated Italian bride, Lavinia. This second war brings Trojan alliance with Evander, King of Pallantium, an Etruscan city on the site of Rome. It also allows Aeneas son Ascanius (Iulus) to distinguish himself in battle.

The Aeneid was written as a Latin odyssey-iliad, combining Homeric elements with Italian settings and imperial Roman emphasis. It implies that the Roman race is both ancient and blended from the best Trojan, Italian, and Etruscan stock, that endurance, piety, and selflessness produced the Imperial City. This was the vision Augustus had of Rome at the dawn of the Empire.

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

Edith Wharton

1920

Novel

Victorian

This work presents a satirical but sympathetic view of old New York, the aristocratic society in which the author grew up in the 1870s and 1880s.

The central character, Newland Archer, is a well-to-do young lawyer who is connected with most of the city's leading families. Sensitive and intelligent, he prides himself on his ability to distance himself from the narrowness of his social circle. As the novel progresses, however, he realizes that this society he views so critically is a powerful force conspiring to confine him within its limits.

His conflict is embodied in the two women he loves. May Welland, who becomes his wife, is handsome, placid, and sheltered—the ideal bride of her class. Her cousin, Ellen Olenska, represents for Newland freedom and the life of the spirit. Although he initially disapproves of Ellen, who has returned from Europe to escape her dissolute husband, a Polish count, he soon falls in love with her. Ironically, their relationship begins after May's family asks him to help Ellen with her legal problems.

As Newland's love for Ellen develops, May and her family recognize the threat. Without a direct word or an overt act, the tribe, as Wharton calls it, closes ranks. Ellen is persuaded to return to Europe, though not to her husband, and Newland is absorbed back into the family as a prospective father.

Newland's story is not altogether a tragedy. In leaving, Ellen affirms the values of honor and duty that May represents and feels her sacrifice worthwhile. Many years later, Newland reflects that his quiet life of public service and family stability was not without rewards, though his deepest nature remained unfulfilled.

Although its main theme is serious, the novel provides devastatingly witty portraits of the pillars of society and pokes fun at the more absurd social rituals of the day. The book's appeal rests both on its sympathetic characters and on its skillful portrayal of the flaws and virtues of a bygone world.

THE ALCHEMIST

Ben Jonson

1610

Drama

Comedy

When his master leaves London to avoid the plague, a butler invites an unscrupulous alchemist to use the house as headquarters to deceive gullible men who attempt to satisfy their avaricious pursuit of wealth.

A forerunner of the comedy of manners, the play comprises a succession of episodes in which Subtle (alchemist and confidence man) and Dol Common (his prostitute accomplice) cheat morally corrupt clients. The butler, Jeremy, is procurer and manager, finding customers, orchestrating visits, and extracting payments.

The first victim is Dapper, a lawyer's clerk who aspires to win at gambling. Then comes Druggier, a tobacconist who looks to necromancy for the secrets of success in business. The third client is Sir Epicure Mammon, who seeks through alchemy to become the richest man in the world. He is followed by Ananais the Anabaptist, who wants the property of his church transformed into gold.

The satiric intensity of the play increases with the procession, since each protagonist is more corrupt than his predecessor. Dapper's aspirations hurt nobody; but Ananais and his superior, Tribulation Wholesome, are religious hypocrites ready to cheat orphans in order to enrich themselves and their church.

The conspirators scheme seems endangered by a skeptical friend of Sir Epicure, Pertinax Surly, who had accompanied Mammon on his first visit and returns in disguise to expose the rascals, but the inevitable return of Lovewit, master of the house, proves to be their undoing. Subtle and Dol flee, leaving their booty to Jeremy, who confesses all to his understanding employer.

While the play treats alchemy and the occult as sophisticated confidence games, Jonson mainly uses them as means of satirizing people whose greed makes them gullible and easy prey for confidence men. Comedy, said Jonson, should show an image of the times and sport with human follies, not with crimes.

THE ALEXANDRIA QUARTET

Lawrence Durrell

1962

Novel

Tetralogy

This complex collection of novels examines the nature of love in the modern world through a concomitant exploration of the nature of time and of experience.

Darley, a writer, becomes involved with Justine, the wife of Nessim, a wealthy Egyptian Copt. Eventually, it is revealed that Nessim and Justine are engaged in smuggling armaments to Palestine and that Darley is a secret agent. Surrounding this basic plot and involved in it with greater or lesser degrees of awareness are Mountolive, the British Ambassador and former lover of Nessim's mother; Melissa and Clea, Darley's mistresses; Balthazar, a doctor who treats Justine; and various characters who flesh out the community of Alexandria.

The tetralogy's substance and appeal issue from its ever-changing points of view on the action. The first three novels cover the same events, but do so from different viewpoints. Darley is the narrator of *Justine* (1957) and of *Balthazar* (1958), which presents, however, the interlinear notes of its title character and corrects Darley's limited version of events. In *Mountolive* (1958), which is written in the objective third person, Darley becomes a character. *Clea* (1960) serves as a commentary on the whole and advances the narrative forward. Thus, each novel corrects the one before by providing more information from a different perspective.

The structure of the tetralogy, rather than its content, reflects Durrell's interest in the nature of reality and of knowing. This is reinforced further through the use of writers as characters and of journals, letters, diaries, and memoirs. The spirit of place, Alexandria, is also exploited by references to the poet Cavafy to suggest that perceptions of reality are affected not only by who we are but also by where we are.

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

Lewis Carroll

1865

Novel

Children's, Fantasy

This children's classic features an imaginative narration of Alice's adventures and conversations in an eccentric world of mad hatters, talking mice, weeping turtles, and a diabolical Queen of Hearts.

Few authors have succeeded as well as Lewis Carroll has in writing a children's fantasy which is as entertaining for adults as it is for the younger readers. Alice's adventures begin on a drowsy day as she reclines near the bank of a river. Bored by her sister's company and her unillustrated book, she follows a white rabbit down a hole into an enchanted land of talking animals, uproarious conversation, and outrageous situations.

The plot of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is difficult to paraphrase since it consists of loosely connected episodes which transport Alice from one hilarious encounter to another without much continuity. And while Alice does participate in a number of adventures, the central focus of the book really is upon the enchanting word play between Alice and such memorable characters as the Mad Hatter, the Dormouse, the Mock Turtle, and the Queen of Hearts. Along the way, Carroll, the pseudonym of Charles Dodgson, satirizes the conventions of children's books and succeeds in creating some of the most marvelous parodies of adult talk and typical adult behavior ever published. Alice often serves as a foil that exposes the absurdities of Victorian educational theory and the pretentiousness of literary analysis. All in all, these adventures are simply a delight to read aloud.

The real point of Alice's adventures is a celebration of childhood, a reminder of how innocent and literal the world of children is and, therefore, a rebuke to parents and others who want to take the world too seriously or to limit their children's imaginative life with an artificial realism.

ALL GOD'S CHILDREN NEED TRAVELING SHOES

Maya Angelou

1986

Nonfiction

Autobiography

Charting the experience of a well-known Afro-American performer in Ghana during the early years of independence, the fifth volume of Angelou's autobiographical chronicle centers on the sometimes tense, but ultimately rewarding, relationship between members of the black expatriate community and their African hosts.

The fifth volume of the autobiographical chronicle begun in *I Knew Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) begins with the arrival of Maya Angelou in the West African nation of Ghana during the euphoria of the early years of independence. Already an established dancer and actress, Angelou journeyed to the capital of Accra in part to enroll her seventeen-year-old son, Guy, in the University of Ghana and in part to recover a sense of self-worth following the break up of the marriage described in *The Heart of a Woman* (1981).

One important, and familiar, motif concerns the development of her relationship with Guy, who suffers a near-fatal automobile accident shortly after their arrival. The story of Guy's successful recovery and his gradual assertion of individual selfhood—which Angelou experiences in part as a rejection of her maternal role—anchors the book in the frequently sentimental family-saga genre.

The real strength of the new installment—one of the most satisfying in the sequence—lies in its treatment of specifically Afro-American concerns. The exuberant self-confidence of the Ghanaian people under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah contrasts, sometimes sharply, with the uncertainty of the Afro-American expatriates as they contemplate their own relationship with the struggle for civil rights in their native land. Of particular interest are Angelou's guarded comments concerning Martin Luther King and the March on Washington and her report on the visit of Malcolm X to Ghana.

Neither a celebration of African/ Afro-American kinship like Alex Haley's *Roots*, nor an ironic treatment like Richard Wright's *Black Power*, Angelous narrative of her search for a homeland is written in a familiar, colloquial style that should help maintain and broaden her readership.

ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

Erich Maria Remarque

1929

Novel

Historical, War

In a diary-like record, a young German soldier tells of the inhumanity of World War I. Translated into forty-five languages, this novel of blunt realism and quiet pathos has lost nothing of its compelling force for today's reader.

Barely out of school, the nineteen-year-old Paul Baumer finds himself in the trenches of the Western Front. After having his patriotic idealism crushed by the chicaneries of basic training, Paul increasingly hardens in his efforts to survive the endless shellings, the gas attacks, the nightly patrols, and the maddening fear of ever-present death. Only the bond of a cynical, though not insensitive, camaraderie among the common soldiers and a brief idyll with three French girls provide moments of human warmth in the general atmosphere of indiscriminate slaughter.

Baumer is forced to acknowledge how completely his life at the front has estranged him from the values of conventional society when he spends two weeks on home leave with his family. He must admit to himself that he will never be able to assume a normal existence in a postwar world and returns to the war, resigned to the fact that he has become a member of a lost generation for whom not even the prospect of peace holds any hope.

When guilt is assessed, Baumer and his comrades-in-arms place it with their parents and teachers, who had deceived them with sermons about love of fatherland and heroism. For the rest, this lost generation cannot even muster the strength to lash out against those who callously planned and executed its destruction.

Although written in the sparse style of an almost impassive objectivity, the novel was bound to arouse passionate reactions. In 1933, the Nazis publicly burned it and deprived Remarque of his German citizenship, actions, as it turned out, which only emphasized the novel's artistic and moral distinction.

ALL THE KING'S MEN

Robert Penn Warren

1946

Novel

Political, Historical

Suggested by the controversial political career of Huey Long, a governor of Louisiana who was shot while serving as the States United States senator, this consummate work of political fiction raises troubling questions about the role of principle and practice in public affairs and about the compromises and corruption inherent in the career of a power-seeking individual.

This novel has a double focus: first, on the narrator, Jack Burden, and his effort to understand his employer, Willie Stark, and second, on Stark himself, a protean figure who is sympathetically portrayed. Burden is a student of history, a Ph.D. candidate who abandons his notecards for the dissertation he never writes because he cannot make his sense of the past cohere. Stark is a man of the present, who believes that the means justify the end—that is, he operates in a world of graft, bribery, and coercion in order to build better highways, schools, hospitals, and the other things that contribute to the commonweal.

Each man, the intellectual and the activist, educates and supports the other, but neither is quite whole as a person or professional. By tracing the development of Stark's career—which constitutes the novel's plot—Burden is simultaneously attempting to come to terms with his own inaction. Similarly, Stark uses Burden and others to rationalize the deals he has made to put his political program into practice.

Written with great compassion for human error, and in a profoundly philosophical style that occasionally is freighted with too much rhetoric, the novel manages to penetrate deeply into the human heart. Stark is very hurt by early disappointments which expose his naivete, and Burden is damaged by his unwillingness to accept that human beings have their limits, that they cannot always be loyal or faithful to their ideals or loves. In a sense, he fails to learn the lesson that Stark learns too well: that human beings are fallible.

The intricate plot—including a brilliant flashback to the story of Cass Mastern (Burden's 19th century ancestor)—reveals the catastrophic consequences of fanatical idealism and of a complete abandonment of principle. Jack Burden, in the end, must search for a language that balances the contrary positions of those human beings who would understand and shape history.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

William Shakespeare

c. 1602-1603

Drama

Comedy

Helena, the daughter of a distinguished physician, cures the King of France of an illness thought to be incurable, and, as a reward, the king offers her any husband she wishes. She chooses Bertram, the son of her ward, the Countess of Rousillon, much to the young man's displeasure.

Helena has been the companion and ward of the Countess of Rousillon since her father's death. The play opens when Bertram, the young son of the countess, and his friend Parolles leave for Paris to enter the service of the King of France. The countess discovers that Helena has fallen in love with Bertram and encourages her to follow Bertram to the French court.

By means of a rare prescription that her father left to her, Helena cures the King of a fistula and is given her choice of a husband. When she chooses Bertram, he rejects her because of her low rank. After their marriage, he sends her home to Rousillon. She receives a letter from him saying that he will never live with her until she obtains the ring from his finger and shows him a child begotten of his body.

By coincidence, Bertram's troops are entering Florence just as Helena returns from a pilgrimage. Bertram is trying to seduce Diana, the daughter of a widow who offers Helena lodging. Helena tells the two women who she is and asks for their assistance.

Diana begs the ring from Bertram and agrees to an assignation with him, but Helena takes her place. Believing Helena to be dead, the countess writes to Bertram, urging him to return. Before he leaves, he discovers the cowardice of his foppish companion Parolles.

Just as Bertram is about to be married to another woman, Diana and her mother appear and insist that he is already married. When Helena is finally led forth, she explains that she has met both the conditions imposed upon her. Bertram promises that if she can make me know this clearly/III love her dearly, ever dearly.

Shakespeare complicates the folktale motif of a repudiated wife who fulfills impossible tasks to win her husband by using the circumstances to explore the values of the characters. Ironically, it is the older generation who perceives Helena's worth despite her low birth. In the play, the nobility of a past society is juxtaposed with a present-day world in which fine clothes and rank are valued more than virtue.

THE AMBASSADORS

Henry James

1903

Novel

Psychological

A New Englander goes to Paris to bring home the son of his patroness and is converted to a richer, subtler sense of life's possibilities.