Best Seller

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF P.G. WODEHOUSE

Though born in England, Wodehouse spent the first two years of his life in Hong Kong, where his father was a British magistrate. When he was two, his parents shipped him back to England, where he was cared for by a nanny until he was old enough for boarding school—a common practice for well-off British families who lived in the colonies. The family's deteriorating financial situation prevented Wodehouse from attending university. He got a job as a banker but did not like the work and eventually resigned to pursue a career as a writer. In addition to his stories and novels, Wodehouse wrote for Broadway, making frequent trips to New York. Early in World War II, Wodehouse was captured by the Germans during a visit to France. While imprisoned, he agreed to make radio programs to be broadcast to the United States and the United Kingdom. The content of the broadcasts was not political, but there was a significant backlash in the UK, where many considered his actions treasonous. He never faced any official charges, but after his release, he settled permanently in the States and never returned to the UK. During his life, some serious literary figures considered Wodehouse's work frivolous, but others, including W.H. Auden and Evelyn Waugh, praised it highly. Today, he is widely considered one of the best comic writers of the twentieth century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Best Seller" was published just after the stock market crash of 1929, at the beginning of the Great Depression. Many writers at the time still were trying to come to terms with the unprecedented death and destruction of World War I, which had ended just eleven years earlier. At the same time, British colonies were advocating for independence, and the political ideologies of communism and fascism were gaining traction in Europe. None of this turmoil appears to affect Wodehouse's characters, however, who seem to exist in an idealized, escapist version of Edwardian England.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Best Seller" is just one of many short stories featuring Mr. Mulliner. Each story begins in a pub called the Angler's Rest, where Mulliner entertains the other patrons with humorous anecdotes about his various family members. Many of these stories are collected in three volumes: *Meet Mr. Mulliner*, *Mr. Mulliner Speaking*, and *Mulliner Nights*. Like the Mulliner stories, most of Wodehouse's other well-known works are comic pieces set in England during the first part of the twentieth century. The most famous of these are the many short stories and novels featuring Bertie Wooster and his valet, Jeeves. Wodehouse also frequently references musical and literary works; in "Best Seller," he mentions Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser*. Wodehouse's language play and absurdist humor were influenced by the Victorian theatrical partnership Gilbert and Sullivan, whose comic operas include *Pirates of Penzance* and *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Best Seller
- **When Written:** 1930
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1930
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Humorous Short Fiction
- **Setting:** The Angler's Rest, a pub in an unspecified English village; London
- **Climax:** Evangeline suffers an emotional breakdown, believing she will never be able to write enough to fulfill her obligations.
- **Antagonist:** Jno. Henderson Banks
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Orwell's Intervention. In response to accusations that Wodehouse had collaborated with the Nazis, George Orwell (the author of *Animal Farm* and *1984*) wrote an essay titled "In Defense of P.G. Wodehouse." The essay analyzes some of the key features of Wodehouse's work and concludes that Wodehouse's actions—though perhaps politically naïve—should not be construed as treasonous.

Not Welcome Here. When Wodehouse wrote "Best Seller," English social etiquette still prevented women from entering pubs. Apart from the barmaid, Miss Postlethwaite, Mr. Mulliner's audience at the Angler's Rest would have consisted entirely of men.

PLOT SUMMARY

Miss Postlethwaite, the barmaid of the Angler's Rest, is so moved by the novel she is reading that she attracts the attention of the pub's patrons. Mr. Mulliner, a regular, recognizes the novel as the work of his niece by marriage, Evangeline, and tells the story of how she came to be married

to his nephew Egbert.

Mr. Mulliner's narration begins with Egbert at a seaside village, where he has come to recover from an illness caused by the strains of his profession: he is an assistant editor who must interview female novelists. Egbert meets Evangeline at a picnic and falls in love at first sight. Before proposing, however, Egbert makes sure that she has never written a novel (or a short story, or poetry, for that matter). She insists she has not and accepts his proposal.

Unbeknownst to Egbert, Evangeline is so inspired by her feelings for her fiancé that she proceeds to write a romantic novel. When she tells Egbert what she has done and reads the book to him, he struggles to hide his distress. Her writing is both terrible and autobiographical: Egbert's proposal has been included word for word, and he can't believe that he ever uttered "polluted the air with such frightful horse-radish."

Evangeline's publisher is focusing on promoting a different, more salacious book, but their marketing efforts are undercut by an abrupt shift in fickle popular taste. Readers have grown tired of sex and want wholesome love stories. As a result, Evangeline's novel becomes a best seller.

Evangeline is unsure of herself at first, but she quickly grows more comfortable with her success. She writes letters to her fans and gives lectures instead of spending time with Egbert. She employs a handsome literary agent named Jno. Henderson Banks, and she begins to turn down Egbert's invitations so that she can go out for meals and to the theater with her agent. Egbert, jealous, demands that she stop seeing Banks. She refuses and breaks off their engagement.

Egbert is heartbroken. In order to cope with his grief, he focuses on his work. His experiences have made him tougher, and he is no longer too fragile to interview female novelists. He wins his boss's approval by taking on especially difficult tasks, such as interviewing an author who has driven one of his fellow editors mad.

Eventually, Egbert is assigned to interview his ex-fiancée, Evangeline Pembury. He hides his emotion as he arrives at Evangeline's home, and the two exchange formal greetings as if they are strangers. Egbert begins his interview, and Evangeline's answers are unenthusiastic until Egbert asks how her novel's sequel is coming along. Then she breaks into tears. Egbert moves to comfort her and asks the cause of her distress.

Evangeline explains that her agent has committed her to publish numerous short stories and serials. She has already been given an advance, but she has realized she hates writing and can't figure out what to write about, so she doesn't see how she can fulfill her contractual obligations. Egbert has a solution: he himself is a failed author, and he has three novels and twenty stories that he never was able to publish. Once they are married, Evangeline can simply publish them under her name. The story ends happily, with Egbert and Evangeline reconciled.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Egbert Mulliner –Egbert, the nephew of narrator Mr. Mulliner, is the story's protagonist. He is an assistant editor with an aversion to female novelists, whose work he views as clichéd and badly written. At the beginning of the story, Egbert appears to be somewhat fragile; his contact with female novelists is enough to make him ill, yet this fragility is understood by and arouses the sympathy of his fellow male editors. While recovering at the seaside, he falls in love with Evangeline and proposes to her. Ironically, Egbert's words and actions as the relationship develops are just as clichéd and overwrought as the novels he despises, and it quickly becomes apparent that he is less sophisticated than he would like believe. When Evangeline writes a successful novel inspired by their relationship, Egbert is mortified. When she proceeds to spend a great deal of time with her agent, Jno. Henderson Banks, he becomes jealous and demands that she stop seeing him. Initially, his tone is imperious; as Evangeline's fiancé, he expects her to obey him. But when she refuses, he becomes much less domineering and begs her to do as he asks. It's too late, however, and Evangeline breaks off the engagement. This rejection changes Egbert: he can now interview even the most sentimental of novelists without becoming ill. Nonetheless, he is still in love with Evangeline, and when she asks for his help meeting her contractual obligations at the end of the story, he enthusiastically suggests passing off his own work under her name. This revelation that Egbert himself once had aspirations as a novelist suggests once again that, beneath his façade, he is just as sentimental as the female novelists he claims to hate.

Evangeline Pembury – Egbert's fiancée, Evangeline, inspired by her love for him, writes a novel. It's horrible—at once unoriginal and poorly written—but becomes a best seller nonetheless. At first, Evangeline isn't sure how to handle her success—she stammers when a reporter comes to interview her, for instance—yet she quickly learns to enjoy her fame. She gives lectures, sends letters to her fans, and learns to use highbrow jargon to describe her work. She also begins to spend a great deal of time with her agent, Jno. Henderson Banks. When Egbert objects to this, she breaks off the engagement, making it clear that she is not willing to conform to the role he has in mind for her. However, it turns out that although Evangeline enjoys being a literary celebrity, she doesn't actually like writing. She panics when she realizes she doesn't have it in her to produce the additional stories for which she has been paid in advance. When Egbert comes to interview her for the magazine at which he is an editor, she initially greets him with cool formality. Still, it's clear that she has feelings for him, and her distress eventually gets the better of her. She throws herself melodramatically onto the sofa and breaks into tears, showing that despite her pose of literary sophistication, she

remains absurdly sentimental. She explains her predicament, and Egbert offers to solve the problem by allowing her to publish his work under her name. She accepts at once, and the story ends with the two lovers reconciled.

Jno. Henderson Banks – Evangeline's literary agent, Banks is handsome, fashionable, and overly reverential toward his female clients. Egbert becomes jealous when Evangeline begins to spend much of her time with Banks. It is Banks who arranges for Evangeline's work to appear in forthcoming magazines, prompting her horrified realization that she lacks the drive and talent to produce the stories she is contractually obligated to write.

Mr. Mulliner – Egbert Mulliner's uncle. Upon learning that Miss Postlethwaite is reading *Rue for Remembrance*, he tells the story of Egbert and Evangeline to the other patrons at the Angler's Rest. It's clear from his narration of Egbert and Evangeline's story that he finds their sentimentality silly. However, he also seems fond of them—he mentions that he has a particular interest in Evangeline's work, and he brings the story to a happy conclusion.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Miss Postlethwaite – The barmaid at the Angler's Rest. Overcome by emotion while reading *Rue for Remembrance*, she sniffles, drawing the attention of Mr. Mulliner and the other patrons. Miss Postlethwaite represents the reading public, whose fickle and sentimental tastes determine which books are commercially successful.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN

Egbert Mulliner, the protagonist of "Best Seller," has one "pet aversion": female novelists. As an assistant editor at *The Weekly Booklover*, Mulliner has to interview the female authors of best-selling novels, a task that drains and humiliates him because he sees literary women as vain, haughty, and delusional, and he considers their work unworthy. Mulliner would like to believe that his condescending attitude is the result of his superior taste, but as the story progresses, readers begin to see that Mulliner himself is imposing his own stereotypes on the female writers he interviews. Furthermore, Mulliner is a failed novelist who possesses all of the negative qualities that he ascribes to female authors (namely, vanity and delusional ambitions to seek literary fame with no real talent), so his ideas about female novelists seem actually to have little to do with women—instead, they hold a mirror to his own flaws and his threatened ego, showing his insecurity.

At the story's beginning, Mulliner's health is suffering, apparently due to the toll that interviewing silly female novelists has taken. He claims that their relentless sentimentality and clichés (listening to them discuss their "Art and their Ideals" and seeing them in "the cozy corners of boudoirs, being kind to **dogs** and happiest among flowers") have nearly driven him to an early death. In describing this, the narrator's tone is tongue-in-cheek ("The strain of interviewing female novelists takes a toll on the physique of all but the very hardiest"), but the other characters do not mock Mulliner's fragility—his coworkers and even his doctor take his "illness" seriously, prescribing rest in a seaside town to "augment the red corpuscles" in Mulliner's bloodstream. Therefore, even as the narrator's tone presents Mulliner's suffering as silly and overwrought, the story depicts a world in which men take themselves and their feelings quite seriously while dismissing successful women for allegedly being overly attuned to emotion.

Wodehouse deepens the hypocrisy of his male characters by suggesting that the alleged sentimentality of female novelists (the same sentimentality that wounds the men so deeply) is actually a stereotype projected onto women by male writers like Mulliner. This is clearest at the end of the story when Mulliner interviews his ex-fiancée, Evangeline Pembury, the writer of a best-selling romance novel. Instead of asking about her writing (questions to which she might have interesting or unexpected responses), he asks pointed and trite personal questions—"Are you fond of dogs?" or "You are happiest among your flowers, no doubt?"—to which Evangeline responds with nonchalance. While Mulliner accuses female novelists of thinking only in clichés, this moment makes clear that it's *Mulliner himself* who lacks the imagination to ask Evangeline a question that might invite an original response.

Further suggesting that female novelists are unfairly maligned for their alleged sentimentality, Wodehouse alludes periodically to the fact that the public *wants* sentimentality: after all, it's the public that makes sentimental novels best sellers. The effect of public demand is clear when Mulliner claims that his publication's readers want a picture of Evangeline with a dog (a sentimental and clichéd way to photograph a female novelist). It's not Evangeline herself, then, who loves dogs enough to want to be pictured with them; instead, she must fulfill the expectations of the public in order to please them and continue to profit from her book.

While Evangeline is clearly not the sentimental, silly person that literary men believe her to be, Wodehouse suggests that this characterization might fit the same literary men who dismiss her. For example, Mulliner's marriage proposal to

Evangeline appears verbatim in her novel and, upon reading it, Mulliner is mortified that he ever "polluted the air with such frightful horse-radish." Clearly Mulliner's own words are right at home in the types of novels he despises. Furthermore, the end of the story reveals that Mulliner himself wrote a few sentimental novels that he tried and failed to publish. This suggests that his highbrow literary taste disguises his lackluster capabilities as a writer, and also that the best-selling, lowbrow novels that the public sees as being the province of silly women are also written by men. Ironically, it's not until Mulliner tries to publish the novels under his famous fiancée's name that he finds success. The story therefore inverts the centuries-old phenomenon of a woman seeking literary recognition by publishing under a man's name; here, a failed male author uses his fiancée's name to achieve his once inaccessible dream of becoming a published author.

While Wodehouse generally punctures the male literary delusion that female authors are silly and a drain on literature, he himself sometimes seems to believe his male characters' own misogynistic ideas. After all, the story ends with Mulliner saving Evangeline from writer's block by giving her his unpublished manuscripts—the implication being that Evangeline would have been ruined had she not been able to pass off Mulliner's talents as her own. Furthermore, the barmaid at the beginning of the story, Miss Postlethwaite, is reading the sequel to Evangeline's novel (which Mulliner wrote and published under Evangeline's name), and she claims that this novel (Mulliner's) is even better than the first (Evangeline's). "It lays the soul of Woman bare as with a scalpel," she says, which seems to be a female fan affirming that Mulliner's condescending and silly ideas about women actually reflect the truth.

THE ABSURDITY OF ROMANTIC CONVENTIONS

Wodehouse's humor highlights the ridiculousness of the social and literary conventions of romantic love. In moments of heightened emotion, Egbert and Evangeline play out the traditional roles of characters in a grand romance. However, each time their emotions swell, the narrator undercuts them with a moment of absurdity for comic effect. While this humor pokes fun at the characters' sentimentality and mindless adherence to social conventions, the narrator seems fond of Egbert and Evangeline despite his condescending tone. Even as Wodehouse pokes fun at his characters, he makes them likeable.

In the first scene with Egbert and Evangeline, the setting is romantic, and Egbert seems nearly paralyzed by emotion. When the narrator interjects humor, however, the sentimentality seems suddenly ridiculous. The two characters are standing on a pier together on a quiet moonlit night, a scene that evokes those of the popular romance novels Egbert so distinctly loathes. They hear the sound of the town band playing part of *Tannhäuser*, an opera about romantic love, only for the music to become "somewhat impeded by the second trombone, who had got his music-sheets mixed and was playing 'The Wedding of the Painted Doll.'" The incongruent trombone punctuates the lovers' sincere conversation, highlighting the silliness of the way love is portrayed in popular literature.

Wodehouse punctures romantic expectations yet again as Egbert prepares to ask Evangeline a question "very near to his heart," his voice husky and his body "strangely breathless." The strong suggestion is that he is about to ask her to marry him. It turns out, however, that he is about to ask whether she has ever written a novel—an objectively absurd thing to get so worked up about, and a bait and switch that makes the subsequent fervent expression of love feel all the more overwrought. Here, it is a social convention—the ritual of the marriage proposal—that is made to look ridiculous.

Similarly, the description of Evangeline's suffering near the end of the story is played for laughs. Evangeline cries "a Niagara of tears" and flings herself onto the sofa, experiencing "an ecstasy of grief." The narrator's description of her emotional distress is hilariously over the top. She literally chews the scenery (in the form of a sofa cushion), and she gulps "like a bull-pup swallowing a chunk of steak." Just as Wodehouse undercuts the seriousness of Egbert and Evangeline's conversation on the pier, he uses an absurd simile to highlight the silliness of Evangeline's clichéd and melodramatic performance of grief.

Although the narrator clearly thinks the main characters' conventional sentimentality is silly, his sense of humor is good-natured rather than viciously satirical. Egbert's uncle Mr. Mulliner, who is telling the story, says that he has "a particular interest" in Evangeline's work, suggesting that he cares enough about his niece and nephew to follow their achievements. Writers often use descriptions of characters in pain as a way to elicit sympathy, and giving readers direct access to the characters' emotions further heightens this effect. By the beginning of the final scene, when Egbert arrives at Evangeline's home to find her looking "drawn" and "care-worn," it's obvious that the narrator is rooting for these characters even as he pokes fun at the way their relationship follows the conventions of sentimental romantic novels. Wodehouse also gives his characters a happy ending—Egbert and Evangeline find a way to solve their problems, and in the final lines, they express their love for one another. Their silliness, then, does not seem to have any lasting negative consequences.

Wodehouse uses humor to demonstrate the ridiculousness of romantic conventions both on the page and in society more generally. The narrator repeatedly develops an atmosphere of romance and heightened emotion only to deflate it—with hilarious results. His characters are made to look silly on nearly every page. At the same time, Wodehouse depicts his characters sympathetically (if also condescendingly); their

silliness is presented as an amusing foible rather than a major character flaw.

HIGHBROW VERSUS LOWBROW ART

Throughout the story, the narrator presents popular novels—and particularly novels written and enjoyed by women—as frivolous and unsophisticated. The reading public is portrayed as fickle, and popular taste as sentimental and clichéd. However, Wodehouse also gently mocks authors who have grand artistic aspirations. Finally, he bemoans the fact that poor popular taste and a profit-driven publishing industry make it difficult for high art to succeed.

The narrator clearly believes that popular novels are formulaic and that the public's taste is unreliable at best. At the beginning of the story, the "sensitive barmaid" Miss Postlethwaite is deeply moved as she reads *Rue for Remembrance*, the novel that Egbert wrote and has encouraged Evangeline to pass off as her own. The scene that has brought her to tears is full of the clichés of popular romance novels, as the protagonist's love interest has just left her "standing tight-lipped and dry-eyed in the moonlight outside the old Manor." Miss Postlethwaite acts as a stand-in for the audience here; her sentimental tastes reflect those of the general public.

Wodehouse also emphasizes the fickleness of popular taste ("these swift, unheralded changes of the public mind"). Readers seemingly are guided by their whims and emotions rather than any sophisticated sense of aesthetic value. Indeed, the narrative makes it clear that the success of popular novels has nothing to do with artistic merit—despite its best-seller status, Evangeline's novel is poorly written and autobiographical, suggesting a lack both literary talent and creativity. (In Egbert's opinion, it's a "horrid, indecent production.")

At the same time, Wodehouse makes fun of writers who make grand claims about the value of their work. The female novelists Egbert interviews all want to talk about "Art and their Ideals." These novelists want to seem highbrow and sophisticated, but, at least to Egbert, their ideals are actually just as clichéd and predictable as their novels. Wodehouse also mocks "sensitive artists," stating that while they might like to be seen as inspired souls and certainly like making money, they don't actually like writing very much. The narrator observes, "It is not the being paid money in advance that jars the sensitive artist: it is the having to work."

Highbrow or lowbrow, the story suggests, all writers are part of a publishing industry driven by economic gain, which makes it nearly impossible for high-quality art to succeed. For example, what appears at first glance to be serious social commentary about popular novels turns out to be a marketing ploy. Leading up to the publication of a romance novel titled *Offal*, publishers have arranged to have a newspaper discussion titled "The Growing Menace of the Sex Motive in Fiction: Is There to be no Limit." Ostensibly, this is a criticism of *Offal* and novels like it, but in fact it is intended to boost sales.

Wodehouse also lumps popular novels together with more experimental or "literary" works. Egbert's editor, for instance, sends him to "the No Man's Land of Bloomsbury" to gather information for a column. Bloomsbury was known at the time as the home of a group of artists that included Virginia Woolf, whose novels were considered avant-garde. It also was the location of the publishing company Faber & Faber, which was well known for printing Modernist poetry and criticism. Wodehouse, then, is placing novelists from Bloomsbury on the same footing as Evangeline, as columns about both are published in the same magazine. This is a reminder that even though "serious" writers may look down on popular novelists, highbrow and lowbrow literature are part of the same industry—one driven by commercial concerns.

By catering to popular tastes in order to increase profits, the publishing industry dissuades young writers from creating high art and forces them to seek more mundane employment. Continually shifting popular tastes cause "powerful young novelists to seek employment as junior clerks in wholesale grocery firms." Although Egbert derides poorly written popular novels, he is part of an industry that appears actively to inhibit the creation and dissemination of higher quality art.

While Wodehouse mocks the lowbrow preferences of the general reading public, he also satirizes the literary pretensions of so-called serious authors. Wodehouse himself, as a comedic writer, wasn't always taken seriously by the literary elite, so it's not surprising that he takes a jab at them here. Wodehouse further suggests that both lowbrow and highbrow works are part of a publishing industry that privileges commercial success over literary quality. As a result, the literary environment as a whole discourages the creation of high art.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DOGS AND FLOWERS

Wodehouse uses dogs and flowers to symbolize the clichéd sentimentality that is expected of female novelists in the story. When first describing Egbert's job as an assistant editor frequently tasked with interviewing female novelists, the narrator specifically notes that Egbert "had watched them being kind to dogs and happiest among their flowers"—in his mind, moments that serve to epitomize their silly emotionality in comparison with more serious (and, it's clearly implied, male) authors. Egbert despises these novelists because of this tendency toward romance and lack of

originality. Dogs and flowers appear again at the end of the story when Egbert interviews his ex-fiancée, Evangeline, whom he views as lacking any literary talent whatsoever. In this scene, however, *Egbert* is the one who brings up both objects in his questions, and Evangeline provides the expected responses without seeming very interested. This suggests that it is Egbert himself who projects certain stereotypes onto the female novelists he despises; he doesn't consider the possibility that they might have something more interesting to say about their writing, and instead falls back upon a distinctly sentimental line of questioning. By employing this symbol in two different contexts, Wodehouse shows that sentimentality is not an intrinsic trait of women writers but rather an expectation created by social convention and popular literary tastes.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Overlook Press edition of *Mulliner Nights* published in 2003.

Best Seller Quotes

"'Slovely," said Miss Postlethwaite. "It lays the soul of Woman bare as with a scalpel."

Related Characters: Miss Postlethwaite (speaker), Evangeline Pembury, Egbert Mulliner, Mr. Mulliner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening scene, Miss Postlethwaite, the barmaid at the Angler's Rest, is overcome with emotion while reading a novel. She sniffles, attracting the attention of Mr. Mulliner, who recognizes the book as *Rue for Remembrance* and asks what she thinks of it. This is Miss Postlethwaite's response.

Miss Postlethwaite's taste in novels mirrors that of the general public. *Rue for Remembrance*, despite being sentimental and unoriginal, is a best seller, so it's clear that popular demand is not an indication of artistic quality. It also is significant that Miss Postlethwaite frames her appreciation for the book in terms of gender. Egbert Mulliner, who wrote the novel and published it under his wife's name, makes it clear throughout the story that he thinks women are silly and sentimental. The fact that Miss Postlethwaite thinks this clichéd novel accurately portrays "the soul of Woman" suggests that Wodehouse may at least partially share this misogynistic view.

From far away in the distance came the faint strains of the town band, as it picked its way through the Star of Eve song from *Tannhäuser*—somewhat impeded by the second trombone, who had got his music-sheets mixed and was playing "The Wedding of the Painted Doll."

Related Characters: Evangeline Pembury, Egbert Mulliner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

Egbert and Evangeline are standing together on a moonlit pier, and it seems that Egbert is about to propose. Music swells in the distance, further contributing to the romantic atmosphere. A song from Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* is an appropriate choice, as one of its main themes is the redemptive power of love. This clichéd scene would not be out of place in a popular romantic novel—until a confused trombonist playing a jaunty Broadway tune completely kills the mood. This abrupt shift from the sentimental to the absurd is typical of Wodehouse's comic style. Here, the humor serves to highlight the ridiculousness of the way romantic love is portrayed in popular culture.

For six months, week in and week out, Egbert Mulliner had been listening to female novelists talking about Art and their Ideals. He had seen them in cosy corners in their boudoirs, had watched them being kind to dogs and happiest when among their flowers. And one morning the proprietor of *The Booklover*, finding the young man sitting at his desk with little flecks of foam about his mouth and muttering over and over again in a dull, toneless voice the words, "Aurelia McGoggin, she draws her inspiration from the scent of white lilies!" had taken him straight off to a specialist.

Related Characters: Egbert Mulliner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

Egbert has to interview female novelists as part of his job, which he considers an onerous task. These authors aren't very original, as far as Egbert is concerned; all of the interviews revolve around the same few sentimental

clichés. Their fascination with dogs and flowers, in particular, is emblematic of the way they conform to a gendered stereotype.

The effect of the interviews on Egbert's health obviously is exaggerated, and the narrator's tone is tongue-in-cheek. However, his boss takes his overwrought reaction seriously and takes him to a specialist. In this world, then, men's feelings are treated seriously even as female novelists are derided for their supposedly excessive sentiment.

> Everyone has his pet aversion. Some dislike slugs, others cockroaches. Egbert Mulliner disliked female novelists.

Related Characters: Egbert Mulliner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Before he proposes to Evangeline, Egbert feels the need to make sure that she has never written a novel. This, the narrator explains, is because Egbert has a "pet aversion" to female novelists. It is only after Evangeline has assured him that she has never written so much as a poem that Egbert confesses his love.

A fear of slugs or cockroaches is not necessarily uncommon, which makes Egbert's aversion to female writers seem all the more strange and irrational (and adds to the moment's humor). At the same time, comparing female novelists to slugs and cockroaches, even as a joke, implies that women's attempts to create art are revolting on a visceral level. Thus, even as Wodehouse shows that Egbert's attitude toward women writers is silly, he appears to share some of his character's misogyny.

> As for his proposal, that was inserted *verbatim;* and, as he listened, Egbert shuddered to think that he could have polluted the air with such frightful horse-radish.

Related Characters: Evangeline Pembury, Egbert Mulliner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

Unaware of Egbert's dislike of female novelists, Evangeline is so inspired by their romance that she writes a novel shortly after his proposal, and the next time they're together, she reads it to him. He hides his horrified reaction but is mortified to find that the novel is not only terrible but also distinctly autobiographical. When he hears the words of his own proposal read back to him, Egbert is appalled; his proposal is right at home on the page, revealing his own words to have been just as sentimental and clichéd as the popular novels he despises. Egbert's horror thus indicates that his aversion to female novelists may be based on his own insecurity: he is afraid that he himself might possess all of the negative qualities he attributes to female writers.

> It is these swift, unheralded changes of the public mind which make publishers stick straws in their hair and powerful young novelists rush round to the wholesale grocery firms to ask if the berth of junior clerk is still open.

Related Characters: Evangeline Pembury, Egbert Mulliner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

Just before the publication of Evangeline's novel, there is a dramatic shift in public tastes. Readers previously wanted stories focused on sex, but now they crave wholesome stories of romantic love. As a result, Evangeline's novel is a smashing commercial success.

Readers, the story suggests, are fickle, and their tastes are based on momentary whims rather than artistic value. Of course, the publishing industry wants to give the public whatever it wants, as that's the only way to make a profit. Unfortunately, this means that writers with real talent can't get their work published, and they have to find more mundane ways to support themselves. The implication is that the publishing industry, by focusing on profit above all else, actively prevents the production and dissemination of highbrow literature.

"Am I a serf?" demanded Evangeline.

"A what?" said Egbert.

"A serf. A slave. A peon. A creature subservient to your lightest whim."

Ebert considered the point.

"No," he said. "I shouldn't think so."

"No," said Evangeline. "I am not. And I refuse to allow you to dictate to me in the choice of my friends."

Related Characters: Evangeline Pembury, Egbert Mulliner (speaker), Jno. Henderson Banks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Following her novel's success, Evangeline acquires a literary agent named Jno. Henderson Banks, who happens to be suave and handsome. Egbert becomes jealous and demands that Evangeline stop seeing Banks. By asking Egbert whether he considers her a serf, Evangeline makes clear the extent to which Egbert expects her to conform to a stereotypically subservient feminine role. The fact that Egbert has to take a moment to consider her point is humorous, but it also shows that he hasn't actually thought through his silly ideas about women. He might not be willing to call her a slave explicitly when it comes down to it, but he certainly expected her to comply with his demand. Her refusal demonstrates that she is not the subservient creature he has imagined her to be.

When a column on "Myrtle Bootle Among Her Books" was required, it was Egbert whom he sent to the No Man's Land of Bloomsbury. When young Eustace Johnson, a novice who ought never to have been entrusted with such a dangerous commission, was found walking round in circles and bumping his head against the railings of Regent's Park after twenty minutes with Laura La Motte Grindlay, the great sex novelist, it was Egbert who was flung into the breach.

Related Characters: Evangeline Pembury, Egbert Mulliner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

After Evangeline rejects him, Egbert becomes tougher and able to handle the strain of interviewing female novelists. Egbert's boss takes advantage of Egbert's newfound strength by giving him especially difficult assignments, including an interview with an author who has driven one of Egbert's colleagues mad—another example of how this world supports Egbert's ridiculous notions about women and also reveals how fragile men seem to be when faced with female novelists' alleged sentimentality.

It's important to note the literary significance of Bloomsbury. It was the home of avant-garde feminist novelist Virginia Woolf, and it also was the location of Faber & Faber, a well-known publisher of highbrow poetry. Egbert's magazine doesn't appear to make a distinction between highbrow literature from Bloomsbury and lowbrow popular novels. This again shows that the publishing industry is more concerned with sales numbers than literary quality—and that all authors, regardless of merit, are ultimately subject to the whims of that industry.

"Oh, quite," said Evangeline. "I will send out for a dog. I love dogs—and flowers."

"You are happiest among your flowers, no doubt?"

"On the whole, yes."

"You sometimes think they are the souls of little children who have died in their innocence?"

"Frequently."

Related Characters: Egbert Mulliner, Evangeline Pembury

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

When Egbert is assigned to interview his ex-fiancée, he doesn't ask about her writing. Instead, he asks a series of trite personal questions. He specifically prompts her to say something about how much she loves dogs and flowers—the same sentimental clichés that he claims to abhor. Egbert's leading questions show that he has already decided how Evangeline will answer based on his preconceptions about female novelists; he doesn't give her an opportunity to talk about anything that would challenge his negative view of women writers.

Evangeline obligingly provides the expected answers to his questions, but she doesn't seem very interested, and it's clear that she is simply performing a role. She doesn't have a dog, but she's willing to send out for one so that he can take a picture, and in response to his prompt about flowers being the souls of little children, she offers only the dry one-liner, "Frequently." Her lack of interest indicates that she doesn't actually conform to Egbert's idea of a sentimental female novelist.

> Evangeline's "Oh, Egbert!" had been accompanied by a Niagara of tears. She had flung herself on the sofa and was now chewing the cushion in an ecstasy of grief. She gulped like a bull-pup swallowing a chunk of steak.

Related Characters: Evangeline Pembury (speaker), Egbert Mulliner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

Evangeline has been paid in advance to write a number of stories and novels, but she has discovered that she doesn't actually like writing, and she can't think of anything to write. She feels trapped, and when Egbert asks how her second novel is coming, she breaks into tears.

It's easy to imagine the protagonist of a sentimental novel crying a Niagara of tears and throwing herself onto a sofa—the image is a cliché. However, Evangeline's display of emotion is completely out of proportion to the situation, and Wodehouse highlights the absurdity of this literary convention by taking it to such a ridiculous extreme. Evangeline literally chews the scenery, and after the narrator has compared her to a dog gobbling a steak, it's impossible to continue imagining her as a figure in some grand romance.

> It is not the being paid money in advance that jars the sensitive artist: it is the having to work.

Related Characters: Evangeline Pembury

Related Themes:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

Evangeline's agent has arranged for her to publish numerous stories and serials, but although she has been happy to play the public role of a famous author, she has realized she hates writing and doesn't think she'll ever be able to fulfill her contractual obligations. She has been paid in advance, and she doesn't know what to do. The narrator's wry observation emphasizes the primarily financial motivations of the publishing industry: producing something worthwhile isn't important to many writers as long as they're getting paid. This comment also mocks authors who like to think of themselves as "sensitive artists"; Wodehouse clearly doesn't think highbrow literary pretensions are any guarantee of artistic quality.

> "Before I saw the light, I, too, used to write stearine bilge just like 'Parted Ways.'"

Related Characters: Egbert Mulliner (speaker), Evangeline Pembury

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

Egbert, despite his professed hatred of female novelists, turns out to be a failed author of exactly the kind of sentimental novels he claims to despise. He has written three novels and dozens of short stories but has never been able to find a publisher, and he solves Evangeline's dilemma by allowing her to pass his work off as her own.

Egbert's failed writing career makes it clear that clichéd popular novels are not solely the province of women; men write them too. Furthermore, he refers to his own writing as "bilge," suggesting that his aversion to female novelists doesn't actually have much to do with women. Rather, he sees his own flaws as a writer reflected in female novelists' alleged unoriginality and sentimentality, which threatens his fragile ego.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BEST SELLER

The sudden sob of Miss Postlethwaite, the barmaid at the Angler's Rest, interrupts the silence of the pub. She has been moved to tears by the novel she is reading, explaining that a man has just gone to India and left his beloved alone outside a moonlit manor. Her anguish attracts the attention of Mr. Mulliner, a regular at the Angler's Rest, who recognizes the novel and asks what Miss Postlethwaite thinks of it. She says it "lays the soul of Woman bare as with a scalpel." In fact, she says, the book—which is a sequel of sorts—is even better than its predecessor.

The scene Miss Postlethwaite describes is a cliché of romantic novels, and her reaction is comically emotional. Miss Postlethwaite is a stand-in for the reading public, and the implication is that popular lowbrow tastes are trite and sentimental. Miss Postlethwaite also explicitly links her sentimentality to her gender, bolstering a stereotype that will be reasserted throughout the story—that is, that women as sensitive and dramatic. Finally, that she's reading the novel's sequel suggests she's actually reading words penned by Egbert, not Evangeline,

Mr. Mulliner notes that he has a particular interest in the novel's author, Evangeline Pembury, who is his niece by marriage. He offers to tell the story of how Evangeline came to be married to his nephew Egbert.

Mr. Mulliner's interest in the novel shows that he cares about his nephew and niece enough to follow their achievements, indicating that his mockery of their silliness is good-natured rather than viciously satirical.

Mr. Mulliner's narration begins with Egbert and Evangeline standing on a pier in the moonlight. A breathless Egbert is preparing to ask an important question that he has tried and failed to broach many times before. The night is still, and across the water the couple can hear a band nearby playing the Star of Eve song from the opera *Tannhauser*. One of the trombone players has gotten his sheet music confused, however, and is playing the "The Wedding of the Painted Doll."

The moonlit setting is a romantic cliché that echoes the novel Miss Postlethwaite had earlier been reading. Wagner's Tannhäuser is an opera about romantic love, which further enhances the mood. Egbert's trepidation makes it seem that he is about to propose. The incongruent trombone humorously undercuts the lovers' conversation, highlighting the silliness of the way love is portrayed in popular culture.

Egbert had recently come to this seaside village in order to recover from poor health brought on by the strains of his profession as an assistant editor—a well-recognized "Dangerous Trade." Egbert frequently interviews female novelists, all of whom want to talk about "Art and their Ideals" and how much they love **dogs and flowers**. This task would take "its toll on the physique of all but the very hardiest" and caused Egbert to have a nervous breakdown. A specialist prescribed rest in order to "augment the red corpuscles." During his recovery, Egbert met Evangeline at a picnic. He fell in love with her the moment he saw her.

The sentimentality and clichés of women novelists—as symbolized by the image of dogs and flowers—has taken a toll on Egbert's health. Even though the tone suggests that Egbert's suffering is overwrought, his doctor takes his illness seriously. The story thus depicts a world in which men take their own feelings seriously while dismissing women for supposedly being excessively emotional—a hypocrisy that adds to the tale's comedic tone.

On the pier, Egbert does not immediately propose but instead asks with some trepidation whether Evangeline has ever written a novel; his "pet aversion" is a distinct dislike for female novelists. A surprised Evangeline assures him that she has not—nor, she says in response to his subsequent questions, has she written a short story or poems. A newly joyous Egbert professes his love and proposes, and she accepts.

The bait-and-switch from the serious question of marriage to the trivial question of whether Evangeline has written a novel makes the conventions of romantic love seem all the more ridiculous. Egbert's absurd "aversion" further demonstrates his sexist views about female novelists.

Evangeline, inspired by her feelings for Egbert, writes a novel titled *Parted Ways*. The next time she and Egbert are together, she reveals what she has done, not realizing how he will react. He manages to hide his horror as she reads her work to him. The book is awful—he considers it "a horrid, indecent production." Even worse, it's autobiographical, and Egbert finds that his proposal has been included verbatim. As he hears her read it, he can't believe that he ever uttered "such frightful horse-radish." For a moment, Egbert consoles himself with the thought that Evangeline may not be able to find a publisher, but then she announces that she plans to pay the cost of publication herself.

Evangeline's novel is clichéd and sentimental in exactly the ways Egbert despises. However, the fact that Egbert's own words are "frightful horse-radish" makes it clear that this kind of silliness is not a specifically female trait—Egbert is just as sentimental as the female novelists he derides. In fact, his hatred of female novelists may be based on his fear that he himself is sentimental and unoriginal. The mention of the cost of publishing, meanwhile, introduces the idea that commercial concerns dictate which novels reach the public.

Evangeline's publisher is focusing its marketing efforts on a different book titled *Offal*. As part of this promotion, the publisher has arranged for a series of newspaper articles titled "The Growing Menace of the Sex Motive in Fiction." However, these marketing efforts fall flat due to a sudden change in popular taste. Up until now, readers have wanted "scarlet tales of Men Who Did and Women Who Shouldn't Have Done but Who Took a Pop at It." But now it seems they want wholesome love rather than sexual passion. The fickleness of readers makes "powerful young novelists rush round to the wholesale grocery firms to ask if the berth of junior clerk is still open." As a result of the public's newfound interest in wholesome romances, Evangeline's novel is a massive commercial success. There is speculation in the press about it being adapted into "a play, a musical comedy, and a talking picture."

Ostensibly, the series of newspaper articles is a serious criticism of lowbrow novels like Offal, but in fact it is intended to boost sales: even apparently intellectual writing is part of a profit-driven industry. Using capital letters to describe the plots of popular novels emphasizes that they are formulaic, and the sudden change in popular taste shows that readers are guided by their whims rather than any sophisticated sense of artistic merit. Publishers cater to the public's poor and unpredictable taste in order to sell books. Consequently, it is impossible for highbrow art—the work of "powerful young novelists"—to succeed.

Egbert is distressed that Evangeline's success seems to be changing her. She is unsure of herself at first, but she quickly grows to like talking to the press, and she says her writing is "rhythmical rather than architectural" and claims that she inclines "to the school of the surrealists." She no longer wants to spend time with Egbert; instead, she writes letters to her fans and gives lectures.

Evangeline's use of highbrow jargon to describe her poorly-written, unoriginal novel satirizes the pretentiousness of some so-called serious authors. As a comedic writer, Wodehouse himself was used to the literary elite not taking him seriously, so it's not surprising that he retaliates here by mocking them.

To make matters worse, Evangeline now has a literary agent, Jno. Henderson Banks, who is handsome, snappily dressed, and excessively referential toward his female clients. Egbert is jealous of Banks and demands that Evangeline stop seeing him. She becomes angry and asks if Egbert thinks she is "a subservient creature." He drops his imperious tone and pleads with her, but she feels insulted and breaks off their engagement with a bitter laugh.

Egbert's demand suggests that he has indeed imagined Evangeline as a "subservient creature," and reflects his broader sexism. Her angry response demonstrates that she is not entirely willing to play the stereotypical female role he has assigned to her.

Egbert is heartbroken. To cope with his grief, he throws himself into his work. His experiences have hardened him, and his health now can withstand interviews with female novelists. He impresses his boss by taking on particularly difficult tasks, such as visiting "the No Man's Land of Bloomsbury" and interviewing a novelist who reduced one of Egbert's colleagues to "walking round in circles and bumping his head against the railings of Regent's Park."

Bloomsbury was the home of a group of artists including the avant-garde novelist Virginia Woolf. It also was the location of Faber & Faber, a publisher known for printing highbrow poetry and criticism. Wodehouse places these highbrow writers on the same level as popular novelists, as columns about both are published in the same magazine, to show that highbrow and lowbrow literature are part of the same industry. The comically exaggerated dangers of Egbert's profession again show that men take their own feelings seriously while dismissing the allegedly excessive emotions of women.


Egbert is assigned to interview none other than his ex-fiancée, Evangeline Pembury. Arriving in her sitting-room, he feels a pang of emotion, but he hides it. Egbert and Evangeline greet each another formally, as if they are strangers. Egbert notices that she seems "drawn" and "care-worn" but doesn't mention it. He begins his interview with a series of standard questions: "Are you fond of **dogs**, Miss Pembury?" "You are happiest among your flowers, no doubt?" She provides the expected answers without seeming very interested, and she offers to "send out for a dog" so that Egbert can take her picture with it.

Egbert and Evangeline's misery elicits sympathy: the reader is supposed to root for these characters despite their silliness, which is typical of Wodehouse's good-natured humor. This time, it is Egbert who brings up dogs and flowers. Evangeline's rote responses suggest that she doesn't actually care about these sentimental questions, which makes it clear that Egbert himself is the one projecting the stereotype of sentimentality onto female novelists.

Evangeline's answers continue to be perfunctory until Egbert asks how her novel's sequel is progressing. In response, she breaks into tears and flings herself onto the sofa, where she chews a cushion "in an ecstasy of grief" and gulps "like a bull-pup swallowing a chunk of steak." Egbert is deeply moved by this display and goes to comfort her.

Evangeline's display of grief is comically disproportionate to the situation. The humor again highlights the silliness of the way romance is portrayed in popular novels.

Evangeline explains that Jno. Henderson Banks has arranged for her to publish serials and short stories in numerous magazines. She has been paid in advance, but she doesn't think she will be able to meet her contractual obligations, because she has decided that she hates writing and doesn't know what to write about. Egbert advises her to cash the checks and spend the money anyway. (In an aside, the narrator, Mr. Mulliner, wryly observes, "It is not the being paid money in advance that jars the sensitive artist: it is the having to work.")

Although Evangeline was happy to play the public role of a successful novelist, she doesn't like writing and isn't very good at it. The narrator's remark about "sensitive artists" skewers authors who like to be seen as inspired artists (and certainly like to be paid) but are not actually capable of creating high art.

Egbert has a solution to Evangeline's predicament: he tells her that she doesn't have to write anymore, because he himself is a failed author who used to write the same kind of "stearine bilge." He has three novels and twenty stories for which he never found a publisher, and after Egbert and Evangeline are married, she will be free to pass them off as her own. Egbert and Evangeline once again declare their love, sighing rapturously and saying one another's names.

Egbert's own writing is just as sentimental and unoriginal as that of the female novelists he claims to despise. Ironically, his novels are only successful once he publishes them under Evangeline's name, inverting the common historical practice of women writing under men's names so that their work will be taken seriously. At the same time, the fact that Egbert has to rescue Evangeline from her writer's block suggests that Wodehouse may share some of his characters' misogynistic ideas. The story's happy ending again shows that Wodehouse's mockery is relatively gentle, as the characters' silliness is ultimately a minor flaw without any long-term consequences.


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