

### **The Duchess and the Jeweller**

*The Duchess and the Jeweller*” was first published in 1938. As with most of Woolf’s other writings, the story addresses the British class system and the ambitions of all those dependent upon this system. Woolf spares no expense in her critique of both the aristocracy and those seeking to climb up the social ladder. As such, her insightful critique not only points to the conceits of the upper class, it highlights the probable conceits of lower class individuals who seek to raise themselves up but have neither the education nor ethics to make a change in the system.

The two main characters of the story are the jeweller, Oliver Bacon, and the Duchess. Woolf portrays the Duchess as careless individual who is used to the extravagancies which her money and title afford her. She is both pampered and self-absorbed, though when the reader meets her in the story, the Duchess has fallen on somewhat hard times. The fact that she requires even more money for her decadence places her in the path of the jeweler, Oliver.

Oliver Bacon is manipulative, like the Duchess. His striving, however, stems from his rise from nothing to a place of status, albeit a place nowhere nears the Duchess’, at least not yet. Though he has amassed treasures as a jeweller, and has risen based on his shrewdness, Oliver is depicted as an unsatisfied individual. He wants more and more, regardless of the price. As such, though he is a seeming opposite of the Duchess, the two share similar traits as far as materialism and dubious ethics are concerned.

The two share an acquaintance, though it is not really a friendship. Both need something from the other, and they both have no qualms about attempting to dupe the other individual. As such, the Duchess wants to sell some pearls to Oliver. It is suggested that the pearls are fake, but the Duchess manages to manipulate Oliver into purchasing the jewels for a lofty sum. Though Oliver can say no, especially as he has his doubts about the authenticity of the pearls, the rewards offered by the Duchess are perhaps pricier in Oliver’s eyes than the pearls.

The Duchess invites Oliver to a high-society dinner where both royalty and her daughter, Diana, will be in attendance. For Oliver, this is a godsend of an invitation. He will be able to hobnob with the upper crust of society. Moreover, the Duchess has suggested that Diana can be his—for the right price. With the possibilities inherent in the invitation, Oliver accepts the offer and purchases the pearls.

Though it seems that Oliver might have a heart, especially when thinking about riding in a carriage with Diana, it is actually his pocketbook that drives his ambitions. Diana represents nothing more than commodity. She is a means to an end for him, a stepping stone into high society. Again, the Duchess and her lack of ethics mirror Oliver's here. She is essentially offering her daughter up as a commodity, knowing that the jeweller wants nothing more than to gain access to high society. Moreover, it is revealed that the pearls are indeed fake, meaning the Duchess is just as manipulative, if not more so, than Oliver.

Though Oliver questions his actions as he speaks to a picture of his dead mother, he will go through with the invitation. He wants nothing more than to be in the presence of the upper class, and will denigrate his soul if need be. His entire life of scrapping and getting by has led to this encounter with the Duchess, and Oliver will go along with the fakery if something is in it for him.

With the two characters of the jeweller and the Duchess, Woolf reveals how neither the aristocratic Duchess nor the social-climbing jeweller are in the right. Materialism has turned both of their characters into caricatures of greed. Even more troubling for Woolf is the fact that people like Oliver Bacon would soon be running the country, replacing the aristocratic class and making the rules. If these individuals with their new money were just as corrupt as aristocrats, and if they lacked the education and knowhow of the aristocrats, what did that mean for England? Woolf's critique is thematic in that one class's overthrow does not guarantee change, especially if the power-to-be is no better, or no better equipped, than its predecessor. At the end of the day, character speaks volumes for the individual. A civilized individual fits into a civilized society. A civilized society of individuals with morals is what is needed to effect change, not jewels or class status.