

Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald Summary and Analysis of "Bernice Bobs Her Hair"

Summary

A Saturday night dance in summer is the setting. The story opens in the social hubbub of a club ballroom. The two sides of the social set are defined by the middle-aged ladies "with sharp eyes and icy hearts" observing the "dangerous" youth. The narrator explains that the reader needs to be within the throng of the occasion to appreciate "the drama of the shifting, semi-cruel world of adolescence." The reader is then led through the crowd.

The omniscient narrator draws the attention of the audience to the individuals present. They are described collectively: "a medley of faces and voices," then the narrator focuses on individual young men, finally resting on Warren McIntyre. He is "one of the unfortunate stags." Seeing himself as superior to others as he had "gone East" to college, Warren was still captivated by the girls of his city, and was "crazy about" Marjorie Harvey.

Marjorie Harvey is a fairy-like individual with a "bewildering tongue." She is celebrated for turning five cartwheels in succession at a previous gathering. Marjorie has informed Warren that she does not love him, as "when she was away from him she forgot him and had affairs with other boys." She pushes him into dancing with Bernice, her cousin, whose gaucheness and nervousness make her irritating.

Bernice observes that Marjorie is very different from her, having "very few... blessedly feminine" qualities. At home, Mrs Harvey tries to convince Marjorie that popularity is not everything, but Marjorie is fiercely sure that it is. Marjorie blames Bernice's "Indian blood" for the reason she is so socially backward. Unfortunately, Bernice overhears the conversation.

Bernice tries to bluff that she will leave. Marjorie is unmoved by her sanctimonious approach. She says Bernice epitomizes "a weak, whining, cowardly mass of affectations!" Marjorie and Bernice calm down, and Marjorie agrees to coach Bernice in the social necessities. She tells Bernice to pay attention to the "sad birds" – the less popular men – to get her noticed by the more desirable people. Bernice does want to be popular like Marjorie, and accepts Marjorie's suggestions with innocent gratitude. When Bernice suggests "common kindness," Marjorie is

quick to condemn her for quoting [*Little Women*](#) – “What modern girl could live like those inane females?”

At a dinner-dance the following week, Bernice suggests that she may have her hair bobbed, and that she would “charge admission.” The crowd are excited at this dramatic idea: even the handsome and revered G. Reece Stoddard shows an interest. Lots of men dance with her, including Warren McIntyre, whose name is on Bernice’s lips as she falls asleep that night.

The social experiment works, and Bernice’s self-confidence increases along with her popularity. Warren McIntyre is spending time with Bernice, and Marjorie feigns disinterest. However, she calls Bernice out on her suggestion of having her hair cut. Bernice realizes that she has to go through with the deed, “to walk unchallenged in the starry heaven of popular girls.”

The haircut is not a success. The cut is unflattering – “ugly as sin.” Bernice’s “Madonna-like simplicity” has gone and she now looks “frightfully mediocre.” Bernice has no confidence in herself and her look, so the crowd is unimpressed and dismissive, including Warren.

Marjorie has set an “outrageous trap” as she was aware that the next function the girls were to attend is the Deyos’ party. Bobbed hair is Mrs Deyo’s “pet abomination” and Bernice will be further humiliated and uncomfortable at this occasion. Marjorie herself has “long blond braids” and as the girls prepare to retire, she brushes and plaits her hair “like a delicate painting of A Saxon princess.” As she lay in her bed, “something snapped” in Bernice. She gets up and packs her bag, then she cuts off Marjorie’s braids. She leaves the Harvey household and throws the braids onto Warren’s front porch. Bernice refers back to Marjorie’s comments about her Indian heritage “Huh!” she giggled wildly, “Scalp the selfish thing!”

Analysis

The inspiration for “Bernice Bobs Her Hair” came from a letter Fitzgerald wrote to his sister, Annabel, in 1915. He was advising her on the ways to succeed socially, which are explored in Bernice’s developments with Marjorie’s intervention in the story. There has been much comparison made with elements of Louisa May Alcott’s “*Little Women*”, implying that Fitzgerald was utilizing elements of the traditional code for young women and subverting them for the modern reader. Reference to the text is made in the story itself, but as this is the modern age,

young women are able to negotiate problems in new and challenging ways. Fitzgerald critic Susan Beegel observes that there are subtle differences in the way that the women from each text act and react. Both women cut their hair, but with different purposes and effects: "Jo cuts her hair out of altruism...Bernice bobs her hair out of narcissism."

There is a contrast between young and old in the story, and Fitzgerald alludes to the new social ease with which the young could attain privacy for their liaisons. Some couples will be kissing in "the parked limousines": the irony of the situation is made apparent in that the cars used by the romancing couples were for the most part owned by the generation that most disapproved of the liberty the vehicle afforded.

Bernice, in contrast to the cultured youth who are adept at the artifice of the social scene, is sensitive and vulnerable. The overheard conversation between Mrs. Harvey and Marjorie has an almost physical effect on her. Fitzgerald's use of metaphor emphasizes the directness of the event - "the thread of the conversation going on inside pierced her consciousness sharply as if it had been drawn through with a needle." Bernice is wounded by the betrayal, but her spirit is not broken. The fact that the girls are cousins is the only commonality between them. Neither girl understands the other, although Bernice is more willing to get to know her cousin. Marjorie is a schemer: much more than just the lively socialite, she is a cruel manipulator. When Bernice suggests "common kindness," Marjorie is quick to condemn her for the source of her advice. Bernice does want to be popular like Marjorie, and accepts Marjorie's suggestions with innocent gratitude. Bernice is willing to learn from Marjorie, but not vice versa. Both girls will end up wearing the evidence of their association, however.

When Marjorie attributes Bernice's lack of social graces as her "crazy Indian blood", the comment foreshadows Bernice's revenge at the end of the story where she says: "Scalp the selfish thing!" Part of Bernice's strength is in her individuality, and in the passion that she keeps suppressed until the end of the story. There is an element of Fitzgerald's unique style of nostalgic reflection on the excesses and energy of youth and its transience over time.

Warren is captivated by Marjorie, but unsure of how to talk to Bernice: she is good looking, but her gauche actions make him feel uneasy in her presence. His attempts to win over Marjorie are described as approaching a "labyrinth." The allusion gives Marjorie a mythical quality. As she continues to "disappear" with other men, Warren turns his attentions to Bernice. Warren uses

Bernice as a diversion from Marjorie's lack of commitment. Bernice is captivated by Warren and is enjoying the excitement of first love. She is beginning to conform to the social codes of Marjorie's group. She has lost her honesty, innocence and timidity.

When the crowd is unimpressed with the haircut, Bernice's confidence is dashed. Warren does not have the confidence or ability to see beyond the haircut – or more likely, the group's reaction to it. He appears to exist to be on the arm of the popular girl: first Marjorie when she was the belle of the ball, then Bernice as she emerged as the new fashion. He stays with Marjorie, though she is clearly unfaithful, in order to be important in the social circle. At the destruction of Bernice – when she leaves the barber's – he returns to Marjorie's side, looking as “coldly” as the other disappointed bystanders.

Fitzgerald describes the luxury of Marjorie's braids as “like restive snakes,” a simile that gives Marjorie Gorgon-like qualities. Bernice realizes that Marjorie's hair symbolizes power. There is a play on the story of *Little Women*: as Jo in the novel cut off her hair to raise money for the family, so Bernice sacrificed her hair to be accepted by Marjorie. There is also the allusion to the Biblical story of Samson. Bernice, in cutting Marjorie's plaits off, “scalps” her like an Indian. Throwing the plaits on Warren's porch symbolizes Bernice's rejection of him, and her glee is in “spoiling” Marjorie.