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Unraveling Edith in Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*

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Anita Brookner (1928 -) is a contemporary British novelist and French Romantic art historian known to write novels which explore moral, social, and gender issues and cultural diversity similarly to her great influences Henry James and Edith Wharton. With the award of the Booker Prize for *Hotel du Lac* (1984), it draws heavily on class distinctions and their weight in European society. European class structures predate the rise of capitalism and industry. The upper class, or aristocracy, is established through heredity; thus, wealth alone is not enough to qualify one for membership. The novel is set in the early 1980s, to the Critic, Gard:

a period when European economies were booming and the middle classes were seeing massive increases in their wealth, with many attaining refinements such as education and social polish that were previously limited to the aristocracy. Despite the fact that class distinctions were becoming less rigid than they once were, they remained (and continue to remain) important to some, particularly those born into the aristocracy. (www.gogalegroup.com)

Peta Mayer says that Brookner received accolades that assured her of a place among the ranks of the best contemporary writers of British fiction. Many critics and readers regard it as Brookner's best novel to date. However, along with a greater readership, the novel also crystallized criticism of Brookner's writing, as she is now seen as an important enough writer to attack.

From this time onward, the annual publication of one of Brookner's novels automatically attracted reviews, commentary, and interviews. According to Peta Mayer, her interest in the topic of humiliation and failure, she said that in England her books are criticized for being depressing. She has attributed this to her semi-outsider position in England and her affinity with French life. While some critics fault the lack of thematic variety in her works, many regard Brookner's elegant prose and detailed descriptions of place, her use of literary devices common to Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century French literature, and her confessional tone as features that elevate her fiction above the romance genre.

Hotel du Lac begins in late September at a quiet, respectable hotel in Switzerland where Edith Hope, a thirty-nine year old English writer of romantic novels has just arrived:

Edith hope, a writer of romantic fiction under a more thrusting name, remained standing at the window, as if an access of goodwill could

pierce the mysterious opacity with which she had been presented, although she had promised a tonic cheerfulness, a climate devoid of illusions, an utterly commonsensical, not to say pragmatic, set of circumstances-quiet hotel...to forget the unfortunate lapse which had led to this brief exile. (8)

Edith's friends have persuaded her to take a month's break away from her home in London since they consider her for some reason as yet undisclosed to the reader to be in disgrace. Edith is driven to the airport by a friend and neighbour who will forgive her for her indiscretion only if she takes time to think about what she has done and returns after learning the lesson and ready to apologize. Edith views herself as a serious, responsible person who is seen by her friends as being beyond the age of indiscretion.

As for her physical appearance, Edith notes that several people have commented on her resemblance to Virginia Woolf. She also mentions that she does not profess anything about the success of her writing but understands that it is doing very well. The Hotel du Lac is by no means lavish with any hairdresser or gift shop. Instead it provides its guests with agreeable scenery, a place of sanctuary and the assurance of privacy. Edith hopes to be able to finish her latest novel while staying at the hotel, although her first act upon arrival is to write to David, the married man with whom she is having an affair. However, at the Swiss resort, Edith is observed as being both physically and psychologically lonely. She is physically lonely, for she spends long periods of poignant isolation in her hotel room. Her psychological loneliness, on the other hand, is mostly evident in the hotel dining room. There, Edith is sometimes seen dining with others, but her thoughts are constantly soaring in distant spheres.

At dinner that night she observes the hotel guests. Edith thinks of the meals she cooks for David and how he always appreciates her cooking. She watches him intently when he eats, serving more to satisfy his appetite until he drinks his tea and finally leaves her for his other life. He always comes back, she points out; sooner or later, he does come back. As Edith looks around the dining room that evening, she remarks to herself that she has been reduced to complete the tortoisedom. She watches the thin woman arrive and is slightly disappointed that her entrance is not quite as grand as she expects. Edith continues walking aimlessly through the town and her walk yields no further evidence to the ongoing life there. A corner shop displays three perfectly unadorned baskets of string beans and buys three days old copy of *The Times* finally reaches the Hotel.

Edith rubs her eyes picks up the pen again, "My dear Darling, you cannot know how much I think of you and long for you and wait until I can see you again" (50). She keeps the letter aside and continues to work on the novel she has been writing now. She sees the hotel as a well populated one. M. Huber at the desk suggests alterations to the menu for dinner. Edith also recalls David:

She suddenly longed to do was to speak to David; the intrusion of a man into her consciousness, however parodic, had the painful effect of awakening her longing. She glanced at her watch, calculating the time anxiously; if she rushed upstairs now, she might just catch him before he left. At the Rooms, she thought, with a pang of love and terror. (56)

She thinks of him and how they have met at a party given by her friend, Penelope Milne. Edith and David exchange very few words at the party, but David then comes to her house several hours later as she guessed he would, and they almost immediately go to bed together, “they fell instantly into a warm mutual sleep, arms around each other, and when they woke, almost simultaneously, they laughed with pleasure. After that, it seemed as if she knew everything about him; the only revelation was his delightful and constant appetite. She took to keeping the house full of food” (61). Edith does not sleep well. Later she meets another guest, Mr. Neville, a tall man in a gray suite and Panama hat. He asks, “May I call you Vanessa Wilde? He went on. For the first time in weeks Edith laughed. The sound, so long unheard, surprised her. Once started, she could not stop” (74).

He invites her for a walk, during which he reveals that he knows she is a writer whose pen name is Vanessa Wilde. In the evening, Edith hears a scream coming from the corridor. She rushes to the Pusey’s suite, fearing Mrs. Pusey has a heart attack only to find that the scream is uttered by Jennifer at the sight of a spider. Mr. Neville is in the process of scooping the spider up and throwing it out of the window. Edith writes to David, telling him she has discovered that Monica, here new friend, suffers from an eating disorder and appears to subsist entirely on cake. Monica is also infertile, and her wealthy titled husband whom she hates and fears, has sent her to the hotel to get well so she can produce a child for him. Edith in her room feels the shame during her affair with David at the parties where she has done small injustices of her unworthy thoughts towards the excellent women:

I have been too harsh on women, she thought, because I understand them better than I understand men. I know their watchfulness, their patience, their need to advertise themselves s successful. Their need never to admit to a failure. I know all that because I am one of them. I am harsh because I remember Mother and her unkindnesses, and because I am continually on the alert for more. But women are not all like Mother. (88)

Mr. Neville takes Edith to lunch in a small restaurant high above the lake. He tells her that he owns an electronics firm and that his wife has left him several years ago. But he is content being single since this leaves him free to please himself rather than be apprehensive about the happiness of another. He believes that self-centeredness leads to a simple and enjoyable life and he urges Edith to be more self-centered. Edith knows that there is something wrong with this argument but she does not dispute it with him. She finds him intelligent and even goo-looking. They converse about love and Edith says she cannot live fully without it.

Mr. Neville disputes this position, saying that what she needs is not love but social position and marriage, which he according to the grapevine believes is possible without love. According to him the secret of contentment is without a huge emotional investment, one can do whatever one pleases. One can take decisions, change one’s mind, alter one’s plans. “There is none of the anxiety of waiting to see if that one other person has everything she desires, if she is discontented, upset restless, bored. One can be pleasant or as ruthless as one wants. If one is prepared to do the one thing one is drilled out of doing from earliest childhood—simply please oneself”(94-95). To the question of love Edith replies, “I am not a romantic. I am a domestic animal. I do not sigh and yearn for extravagant displays of passion, for the grand affair, the world

well lost for love. I know all that, and know that it leaves you lonely. No, what I crave is the simplicity of routine” (98). He tells that she is a good woman as, “good women always think it is their fault when someone else is being offensive. Bad women never take the blame for anything” (99).

Edith remembers her own birthday parties when she has been a girl. She makes her own cake and for once enjoys a semblance of family life as she thinks it ought to be lived. Still feeling uneasy, she recalls the events that bring her to the hotel. Edith has agreed to marry Geoffrey Long, a worthy but dull man whom she has met at one of Penelope’s parties. She agrees to marry him since she thinks that at the age of thirty-nine, it would be her last chance. She has given up trust of ever getting what she really want but on the day of the wedding, as her Chauffeur-driven car approaches the Registry Office where groom and guests are assembled. She changes her mind and asks the Chauffeur to drive on to the nearby park. When she later returns to her house everyone is indignant, and Geoffrey accuses her of making him a laughing stock. She hands him back his ring and says good-bye.

Edith’s life is the same at the end of the story, as it is at the beginning. She is disappointed and even more frustrated. Fortunately she has her writing which becomes the sense of her life. She can fulfill all her dreams, that can’t be realized in a real life, through her novels. And Edith also figures out that love is not the only thing to live for. The setting of the novel *Hotel du Lac* is mostly the Hotel. The atmosphere of the Hotel, of the environment and of the whole book is quiet and monotonous and all Edith’s surrounding looks deserted and isolated. The reader can also feel a lack of excitement. The novel creates that atmosphere at the very beginning where the author writes about the weather using the words as grey, stiff, narrow or quiet.

It seems that the main heroines of Brookner’s novels are living more by watching other human beings and writing about them rather than living their own lives. It was a kind of escape for them. Edith knew it and she confessed it while speaking with one of the guests in the Hotel, Mr. Neville. They are talking about being happy and she has told him: “Suppose that you were a person who was simply bored with living their own life and wanted to live somebody else’s” (96). It is possible to see a parallel with Brookner in the statement above. Her writing was also an escape from everyday life; she tried to heal herself through writing. The main heroines of her novels are in the same situation.

As early as 1984, just after her fourth novel, *Hotel du Lac*, earned Booker prize, Brookner protested to interviewer John Haffenden, “Success is what other people say you are, and I don’t feel it...I’m absolutely passive, like blotting paper. I really feel invisible” (Haffenden 60-61). The author’s passivity apparently stems chiefly from her perception of her parents and herself as “being outside the natural order, being strangers in England, not quite understanding what was happening and being done to them” (Haffenden 60-61). Brookner reveals to John Haffenden, “If you have a ‘cause’ you have to propound it with energy. My cause is to tell a story or perhaps to cast a moral puzzle” (68). Speaking to John Haffenden, Brookner grew even more expansive on the subject of gender. There is a certain inborn competitiveness among women which is a little bit murky, and it has to do with success with men; it is an area in which friendships can become strained. A man can go from being a lover to being a stranger in three moves flat – there is no subtlety about it, “you know exactly where you are – but a woman under the guise of

friendship will engage in acts of duplicity which come to light very much later. There are different species of self justification". (68)

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