
Booknotes for Flatland

Authorial Background:

Edwin Abbott Abbott was born in 1838, in a time when the nineteenth-century middle class had begun to rise up from social oppression in Britain. A highly distinguished head schoolmaster, English clergyman, and Shakespearean scholar, he was more interested in the fields of theology and classic literature than in mathematics. Because he sought to express concern over the social problems of the period, he recognized his motivation for writing Flatland; the book was published in 1884 under the pseudonym A. Square to protect himself from attack by those he satirizes in the book. However, although he held his interests in theology and classic literature, his presentation of geometrical concepts earned him acclaim for his intricate barbed satire of the hierarchical Victorian age. For eighty-eight years he lived; in 1926 he died, renowned and remembered for his treatise on mathematical fiction and the power of knowledge.

Literary Period/Country:

Victorian Period, Great Britain.

Setting:

The social context of the satire was during the 1800s, when socioeconomic and political changes began to create a flux of new ideas, rebellion, and tense order. The satire takes place in the two-dimensional space Flatland, where lines and shapes move “freely about, on or in the surface” (1). A hierarchical dominion exists in Flatland: Circles are priests, figures having the greater number of sides comprising the higher class, isosceles and irregular triangles are shunned from society, and women--only pinlike lines--are considered the lowliest class of all. This hierarchy emulates exactly the social order of Britain at the time. Other lands that were visited were Lineland, where the people could not move but existed along one line, Pointland, its sole inhabitant proving to be most egotistic, self-centered, and mindless, and the land that opens A. Square’s imagination--Spaceland, the Land of Three Dimensions.

Characters:

A. Square: He is the narrator of Flatland, the main protagonist and character. He is a Square, a flat figure with one eye and mouth; he is a professional man, with a wife and grandson. From his narrow-mindedness, he is saved by a stranger from Spaceland who reveals knowledge of the third dimension. After being imparted with an incredible knowledge, he makes it his point to raise awareness in everyone of the next dimension. However, he is accused of heresy against the high Circles, and becomes a prisoner for life.

Sphere: a Spaceland figure, appearing to A. Square in Flatland as a perfect circle constantly changing in size. He shows the square what Spaceland is through analogy and experience, and convinces him. However, when the Square begins preaching the Gospel of Three Dimensions, he becomes imprisoned and the Sphere’s teachings are proved to have been made in vain.

Chromatistes: leader of the Color Revolt, having introduced color into Flatland by creating paint and painting everyone with it. All people were subsequently painted except the Circles and the Women; later, when the Color Bill was to be passed, Chromatistes’ revolt was quelled, he was sentenced to death, and the art of painting was lost to all except the Chief Circle.

Pantocyclus: the Chief Circle, he quells the Color Revolt and executes Chromatistes for leading the rebellion. He is aristocratic and arrogant, and out of courtesy he is always said to have ten thousand sides to distinguish himself from the lower classes. He wanted to rule, to set the precedence of perfection. Flatland ends without much word about Pantocyclus.

Theme:

Many themes were present in Flatland. One of the most important is the fear of the unknown. Often society is content with the status of things and view any change as a threat. When the Square first heard of Spaceland from the Sphere, he refused to believe in it because it conflicted with the teachings of Flatland. Also, upon the Square's preachings to the Circles of Flatland, they charged him with heresy and threw him into perpetual imprisonment because he spoke of something greater than the Circles. The Circles saw this new teaching as a threat because they did not understand it.

Another important theme is man's inhumanity to man. The Irregulars, from birth, were "scouted by his own parents, derided by his brothers and sisters, neglected by the domestics, scorned and suspected by society, and excluded from all posts of responsibility, trust, and useful activity" (24). Because the Irregulars were different, all human rights were denied to them. "Are all the doors and houses and churches in Flatland to be altered to accommodate such monsters?" is one question that is commonly raised during conversations of the upper class (24). How ironic it is, that even the church--a place of supposed refuge--would deny service or entrance to people who did not measure up to the social standard!

A third conflict within the book is the conflict between emotion and logic. Whereas the Sphere tries to reason with the Square in explaining the third dimension, the Square lashes out at him with fierce emotion: "Monster. . . be thou juggler, enchanter, dream, or devil, no more will I endure thy mockeries. Either thou or I must perish" (62). In a different, humorous theme, the ultimate satire is made of the aristocracy when the Sphere introduces the Square to Pointland. The Point's egocentric qualities outstandingly portray the aristocracy of nineteenth-century Britain.

The most powerful theme, however, is the quest for and the power of knowledge. A. Square is driven to preach the Gospel of the Three Dimensions despite his anticipation of social backlash. However, although at the end he waits quietly in jail, he has triumphed over society. Even though no one believed in three dimensions, people were made aware of it. Lastly, it was he who had received the power of knowledge--he had been transformed from an ignorant man to one of greater thought and realization.

Plot Summary:

Flatland is a two-dimensional landscape, its characters but two-dimensional shapes structured hierarchically in a society ignorant of its misdeeds and of knowledge. The main character, A. Square, lives contentedly in Flatland, dominated by the demigodlike Circles, who seek to rule every aspect of Flatland life. The Circles preach perfection and Regularity, that "Configuration makes the man," that to look and behave more like them should be the primary goal of all Flatlanders. In response, parents of Polygonal children seek to risk their children's lives in order for them to reach this perfection-- "at the end of that time the child has, in all probability, added one more to the tombstones that crowd the Neo-Therapeutic Cemetery" (36). In a society where one's own wife is treated as the lowliest person and disfigured Irregulars are made into elementary school specimens to be viewed and studied, A. Square lives contentedly until the

Sphere enlightens him with the “Gospel of the Three Dimensions” (62). From there, he seeks to educate Flatland of this wondrous knowledge that is given only once every thousand years; however, from the beginning he is hampered in his attempts. The caste system of Flatland, the Circular patriarchs, refuse to accept that anything could be higher than themselves. In fear of punishment and loyalty to the Circles, the Square’s grandson readily renounces his beliefs in the third dimension and ridicules his grandfather. Then, as he voices his opinion, he is sentenced and imprisoned for life. The grand knowledge that could have been imparted to Flatland, his proclamation of Three Dimensions, was lost due to snobbery, arrogance, and hate. As the Square lies in jail, no one--not even his witness brother--will come to his help.

Author’s Unique Style:

Abbott uses barbed satire in his portrayal of social problems in the British nineteenth century. He uses analogies to explain the human weaknesses and shortcomings of the Flatland aristocracy and to present a logical argument in the explanation of one, two, and three dimensions. The logical arguments, provided in his “Geometrical Progressions” 1,2,4 and 0,2,4, serve to show the abrupt divide between the Sphere’s logic and the Square’s emotion. Diagrams are illustrated to further help the reader understand his mathematical logic. Within the abstract mathematics of Flatland, barbed satire manifests itself many times; to exemplify, the qualities of the sole Point of Pointland’s egocentrism, arrogance, self-worship, and ignorance are neatly mocked by comparing him to a single speck. Finally, he provides a link between the book Flatland and the nineteenth-century British Victorian era by incorporating himself as the main character; A. Square stands for Abbott Square, so it may be inferred that the author wished to note a direct link between the story and the events that were happening to him when he was writing Flatland.

Quotes:

1. “The irregular is from his birth scouted by his own parents, derided by his brothers and sister, neglected by the domestics, scorned and suspected by society, and excluded from all posts of responsibility, trust, and useful activity” (24). This quote serves to explain the theme of the Flatlanders’ inhumanity towards socially unacceptable people. Unconformity with the social standard (the Circle) or imperfect people were viewed as wisely destroyed.
2. “Are the houses and doors and churches in Flatland to be altered in order to accommodate such monsters?” (24)
People were expected to conform to society, and not society to them. If an Irregular could not fit through the door of their home, or even a church, it was just too bad.
3. “[The Equilateral Triangle] is then immediately taken from his proud yet sorrowing parents and adopted by some childless Equilateral, who is bound by oath never to permit the child henceforth to enter his former home or so much as to look upon his relations again, for fear lest the freshly developed organism may, by force of unconscious imitation, fall back again into his hereditary level” (8). This quote shows what less fortunate families were willing to do to ensure the future of their children, and what the aristocracy was willing to do to ensure that new members wouldn’t be “contaminated” by the lower class.
4. “Go to bed. . . if you would talk less nonsense, you would remember more sense. . . The boy is a fool” (53). Here, the Square shows his closed-minded reaction to the new and different concept of three dimensions. Because he does not understand or the subject does not interest him, his emotions overpower his logic and he wrongly calls his Hexagonal grandson a fool.

5. “Heavily weighs on me at times the burdensome reflection that I cannot honestly say I am confident as to the shape of the once-seen, often regretted Cube...nay, when even this hard wall that bars me from my freedom, these very tablets on which I am writing, and all the substantial realities of Flatland itself, appear no better than the offspring of a diseased imagination, or the baseless fabric of a dream” (82). The last paragraph of Flatland shows A. Square’s despair as he is struck down by society and family. Of all the knowledge that he received, all the changes he visualized would happen, he could do nothing about it.

Glossary:

1. Barbed satire: a form of satire in which human weaknesses and shortcomings are held up for ridicule. Barbed satire remains the focus throughout the entire book.
2. Archetype: a belief or story that is common to many cultures; a universal truth. All the themes of Flatland are archetypes, such as the rise of the aristocracy, the caste system, condescension onto lower classes, emotion vs. logic, the determination of class by birth, education, monarchy, the legal system, natural selection, the quest for knowledge, and the power of knowledge.
3. Symbol: something that stands for something other than itself. The Square, a relatively neutral person compared with the social extremes of the Women and the Circles, was given his shape to represent neutrality. The Circles, however, were circular because being free of jagged angles signifies purity and Perfection. Women were given the shape of lines instead of full-bodied figures to denote their insignificance in society. The most humorous example of symbolism is the King of Pointland; an egocentric, self-worshipping, ignorant person is symbolized as being nothing but a speck by himself.
4. Personification: the giving of human characteristics to things that are nonhuman. None of the characters were human but were given human attributes such as emotion, logic, speech, and highly humanlike intellect. This faulty intellect served as the stumbling block for Flatland.
5. Syntax: the arrangement of punctuation, words, and language in order to elicit a desired tone or meaning. Some words are capitalized to note emphasis on them or their meaning as “Paradise,” “Higher Classes,” “Your Lordship,” and “Configuration.”

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