

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
*Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.*

# GENTLE JULIA

## Booth Tarkington

### OVERVIEW

*Gentle Julia* is a gentle novel. Vastly under-rated and under-appreciated, the novel seems to have been misunderstood from the first. It's considered a humorous novel, possibly in the style of the populist author Mark Twain, and thus there has been the mistaken notion that *Gentle Julia* merely explores the quirky thinking and adventures of adolescence and young childhood. However, the novel is much more than that. First, Tarkington constructs the novel with a clear nod to the classics of chivalric fiction of the Middle Ages and the later 19th-century romantic adventure novels of Alexandre Dumas, which he then juxtaposes with the ideas of many of the main philosophers and literary critics of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Gentle Julia* is a satire of a chivalric romance as well as multi-faceted coming of age novel, which has its knights as well as their dragons to fight (obstreperous father, intrusive young niece and nephew, illusion-bursting sages). Second, it comes from revealing the diverging ideas and mindsets of the people in the novel. In some ways, it is generational with comically divergent views of the ways people see themselves and other. *Penrod*, *Penrod and Sam*, *Seventeen*, and *Gentle Julia*, contain repeated types of events and generational clashes. At the same time, there is a "magic circle" in the presence of a beautiful young woman which provides a place of refuge and fantasy from a world that is changing rapidly due to industrialization, and which has experienced the trauma of the Great War (which is never mentioned in Tarkington's novels). In that sense, Tarkington's novels could also be viewed as almost "costumbrista" in the tradition of Latin American novels that capture the life, times, and customs of specific places at a specific moment in time. While grounded in realism, *Gentle Julia* contains the magic of a fairy tale or a chivalric romance, with comical satire allowing laughter and an extension of the safe space of the novel, and deep acceptance of human foibles and weaknesses. It takes a rather unjudgmental stance toward the rather openly manipulating behavior of a young beauty, essentially giving her a pass by demonstrating her warm-heartedness and also recognizing that her day in the sun will be fleeting, as youth and beauty are ephemeral. As opposed to his grim and slightly dystopian "serious" novels (*Alice Adams*, *The Turmoil*, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *The Midlander*, etc.), which always have happy, albeit bittersweet endings, *Gentle Julia* ends in a way that reanimates the magic circle, and allows the dreams, fantasies, and good feelings to continue.

### STORY

*Gentle Julia* is largely about the relationship of Florence Atwater, age 13, and her Aunt Julia, age 20, who is widely regarded as the most beautiful girl in the not inconsequential city of 65,000 inhabitants. The Atwater family is a pillar of the community and the extended family members live in stately homes in the prestigious part of town. They live in comfortable homes, the men and sons walk to work downtown, and the women marry, run households, and raise children. Industrialization has changed their lives, and there are cars, trains, streetcars, telephones, electric lines, factories, and more. But, it is before household automation and most homes employ cooks, gardeners, and maids.

It is in this context that we see what first appears to perhaps be a "costumbrista" novel, which is focused on the humorous excesses of infatuated suitors, a beauty who hates to hurt anyone's feelings, a cousin who is fascinated by her gorgeous cousin, and who also has a crush on the least eligible of all the suitors, who is not handsome, not well educated, and not wealthy. In fact, the best one can say of him is that he is very polite to those he meets on the street, and he is well-mannered. There are also others in the cast of characters: Julia's father, who is intensely frustrated by the hordes of suitors who visit every night, make noise, and smoke annoying cigarettes. The suitors are often distinguished by their gifts, and one gains an unromantic (and humorous) view of the family dynamics and those of the suitors from Mrs. Kitty Silver, who works as a cook for the Atwaters. In fact, Kitty Silver is perhaps the most engaging character in the

book, partly because of the refreshing honesty of her observations, and also for the fact that she speaks in vernacular African-American dialect, which provides the costumbrista atmosphere and integrity to representation. It is useful to see that the language of Kitty Silver is the language of truth-telling, of revelation, and of pulling back the veil, and as such it is quite comical.

So, while the story traces the activities of the suitors, with the interference of Frances and Herbert (and Mr. Atwater), it does so with humorous details. The suitors vie for attention, and in many ways, their devotion to Julia resembles the chivalric romances of medieval times such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. And, certainly Booth Tarkington provides such allusions, particularly at the beginning of the novel. The fact that most of the suitors give unusual and expensive animals, such as a canary, and Airedale dog, a set of Persian cats, and even a Florida alligator, to Julia, and the fact that her father loathes all of them (except for Gammire, the little French poodle, the "Parisian rascal," who wins his heart) effectively satirizes the traditional romance novel.

The book traces the adventures and experiences Frances and Herbert who are motivated by becoming a budding entrepreneur (Herbert), a great writer (Frances), or simply a friend of one of Julia's suitors (Frances). Their adventures are quite comical, particularly when Kitty Silver is involved. Her frank and open attitude, and the use of African American idiolect provides a comic foil. When she tells her friend about how Herbert and Frances attempt to pass off the neighbor's obese white one-eyed tomcat, "Violet," and a small, partially white cat purchased for 35 cents from an intimidated young girl, for the expensive white "Berjam" (Persian) cats gifted to Julia, both suffuse in laughter.

When Uncle Joe gives a printing press to his young nephew Herbert, he has no idea that it will turn into such a destructive force. 14-year-old Herbert immediately decides to use it to open up a bona fide newspaper and to sell subscriptions. They immediately develop a "beat" and become reporters looking for (and printing) news of all kinds. 13-year-old Florence is excited about a poem that she has written and she pays Herbert to print it. However, when they botch the typesetting, she manages to pressure her way into the role of managing editor, and she includes editorial content she considers interesting: a reprint of her poem, neighborhood and city news, and the report that Julia Atwater, who is visiting relatives, has become engaged to be married to a divorced man who has 7 or 8 children. Needless to say, this is news has a crushing effect on all those who had been vying for her attention.

The newspaper, *The North Side Daily Oriole*, sells out immediately and excerpts are even typewritten and mimeographed for distribution. All the suitors are stricken, but none is more affected than Noble Dill, who has a mental breakdown of sorts, and wanders aimlessly around town, and then ends up in the train station, intending to purchase a ticket for some vague notion of "all points south." As the ticket counter attendant dismisses Noble Dill as a semi-lunatic, Julia just happens to be returning home early from her trip. She greets Noble Dill and essentially pulls him back from the brink of what was likely to have been a tragically doomed sojourn. They eat a modest dinner together at Julia's house which she prepares him, but he is too distracted and depressed to eat, as he is convinced that she is engaged. Julia reads the Frances's handiwork, the newspaper, and is both shocked and dismayed. She explained that while she did meet a Mr. Crumb, and she did initially assent to his proposal of matrimony, when she met Mr. Crumb's mother, she just could not bear it and had to say "no." Noble Dill is elated, and in his relief and delight, he asks Julia for a special request. He asked Julia to promise to never become engaged with anyone. Julia agrees, and the novel ends; essentially allowing the magic to continue -- dreams of being in the presence of the magical and entrancing Julia.

## THEMES

**Chivalric romance:** The medieval narrative underpinnings of *Gentle Julia* are very clear, particularly in the way that there are echoes of morality tales and chivalric romance. When the suitors compete for Julia's favor by visiting her every night, serenading, and giving her gifts (animals, chocolates, and flowers), their efforts echo the efforts of Sir Gawain to gain the favor of his Lady, the Virgin Mary, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (14th century, anonymous).

**The often clashing mindsets (youth vs old):** Part of the humor of the story comes from the difference of mindset between generations. For example, Mr. Atwater, as an example of the older generation, loses patience with Julia's suitors. He is particularly angry about the noise and the cigarette smoke, having clearly forgotten the vicissitudes of his own youth. Herbert and Florence, as the younger niece and nephew of Julia, find themselves to be drawn to the spectacle, and they serve to reinforce Julia's complaint that she was "getting pretty tired of being mistaken for a three-ring circus!" to which Florence responded with the intent of being more precise, "Three!" she said. "Why, Aunt Julia, you must be crazy! There's Newland Sanders and Noble Dill and that old widower, Ridgley, that grandpa hates so, and Mister Clairdyce and George Plum and the two new ones from out of town that Aunt Fanny Patterson said you had at church Sunday morning—Herbert said he didn't like one of 'em's looks much, Aunt Julia. And there's Parker Kent Usher and that funny-lookin' one with the little piece of whiskers under his underlip that Noble Dill got so mad at when they were calling, and Uncle Joe laughed about, and I don't know who all! Anyhow, there's an awful lot more than three, Aunt Julia" (Chapter Three).

**Chivalric Satire:** As the suitors step up their efforts to win Julia's favor, and perhaps even her hand in marriage, they give gifts that almost inevitably backfire in their ultimate impact. For example, when Julia had the mumps, her cousin Florence spent time with her (as she had already had the mumps and was immune). Every day, the florist's cart would deliver flowers and candy. One of them, Murdock Hawes, sent three five-pound boxes of candy at the same time, which did not gain favor, but did make Florence ill, after eating too much at a single sitting. The puppies, the Airedale dog, the hand-written poems, the alligator, the cats, and the canaries were just a few examples of gifts that angered Mr. Atwater, frightened Mrs. Silver, and left Julia nominally pleased, but ultimately indifferent.

**Dreams:** The action in *Gentle Julia* takes place within the boundaries of a city, a time, and the enchanting glow of the idealized feminine, resulting in a space that encourages dreams and dreamers. Noble Dill (in a similar manner as another Tarkington hero, Bibbs Sheridan) is an underdog, with nothing in particular to recommend him except for his big heart and his ability to dream of a magical world in the presence of his lady, in an echo of the medieval world of knights, castles, lords, and ladies. When Noble Dill spent time with Julia after she encountered him in the train station, he was embittered by the idea of her engagement to another, which spoiled his time with her. He reflected that without the engagement "the present moment would have been to him a bit of what he often thought of as "dream life" (Chapter 22). Florence, too, spends a great deal of time in her dreams; she observes the world around her carefully, and her dreams often manifest in action as she contemplates herself in a different world or setting, such as with the King of Spain.

**Comic Foil:** Shakespeare had his Falstaff, and Booth Tarkington has Kitty Silver, the African American cook for the Atwater family. Florence is fascinated by her weight, which appears to be at least 250 pounds, and also her thoughts. Mrs. Kitty Silver has been married three times: two times to the same person, and she has worked for the Atwaters for a number of years. Her interactions and observations about the gifts that Miss Julia receives are hilarious, especially as they are written in vernacular. The fate of the "Berjum cats" (Persian cats) and her interaction with "Gammire" (Gamine), the little black French poodle make her a comic foil between the resolute determination of Julia and the intentions of Julia and Herbert to wash the cats or play with the dog.

**Self-Invention and the American Dream:** The story becomes more profound and complex when the reader sees the gap between the individuals' conceptions of themselves and the way they are perceived. Other issues of identity and the limits of self-invention are explored as we see the characters in the novel trying to shape outside perceptions of them. Although they are involved in what would seem like seduction, it's really more about creating a higher, more desirable self - one that has access to more opportunities in life. In many ways, this is a variation of the American dream, since it echoes the notion of self-directed positive effort resulted in upward mobility.

**Entrepreneurship:** Starting a business is essentially an extension of play, and it is also an opportunity to enter into a world of fantasy, transformation, and limitless potential. It is a place to construct a world and to modify identities. When Herbert decides to study bugs, he and Frances catch a wide array of spiders, bugs, beetles, and put them in a jar. They then take a streetcar downtown to sell them as bait. They are

unsuccessful, and return with the jar of spiders still in Kitty Silver's shopping basket. She finds it that evening, and without looking, opens the jar. Needless to say, what ensues is chaos, and it is quite comical. When Uncle Joe gives Herbert a printing press, it is the ideal springboard for 14-year-old Herbert and the 13-year-old Frances to create a business, and one that involves shaping worlds and dreams. The biggest "scoop" was gleaned from the letters that Julia wrote home to her family, but highly embellished to align with the dream she has of being a flower girl at Aunt Julia's wedding.

## CHARACTERS

**Florence Atwater** is Julia's niece. She is 13 years of age, "Florence—even in the realistic presence of a mirror—preferred to think of herself as an ashen blonde, and also as about a foot taller than she was. Persistence kept this picture habitually in her mind, which, of course, helps to explain her feeling that she was justified in wearing that manner of superciliousness deplored by her mother." (chapter 2)

**Julia Atwater**, "upon a cushioned *chaise longue*; for there fluffily reclined, in garments of tender fabric and gentle colours, the prettiest twenty-year-old girl in that creditably supplied town." (Chapter 2)

**Mr. Atwater:** Julia's father and the grandfather of Florence and her cousin, Herbert, Mr. Atwater is a successful businessman who goes to the office every day, except when he travels out of town for business, as in when he traveled to a town to investigate purchasing a sorgham mill.

**Herbert Atwater:** The lively cousin of Florence, Herbert is 14 years old, with an entrepreneurial bent. He and Florence spend time together and alternate being partners in crime and rivals. They tried to take Kitty Silver's place as "cat-wash woman" when Newland Sanders gave Julia two "Berjam" (Persian) cats, they collected bugs together, and then worked together on the newspaper printed on Uncle Joseph's cast-off printing press..

**Mrs. Kitty Silver:** A large African-American woman, Mrs. Silver is the cook and general helper in the Atwater household. She cooks, takes care of the kitchen, and also helps Miss Julia with the various challenges presented by her many suitors. Mrs. Silver has been married three times, much to the fascination of Florence, who is intrigued by her.

**Mrs. Balche:** A lonely widow, Mrs. Balche lives next door to the Atwaters with her enormous cat, a little kitten she called "Violet" despite the fact the little white cat was male. He is adored by Mrs. Balche, although "in his advanced middle-age, he had been fed to such a state that he seldom cared to move, other than by a slow, sneering wavement of the tail when friendly words were addressed to him" (Chapter 3). Violet is one of the cats that Herbert and Florence try to pass off as one of the escaped "Berjam" cats.

**Noble Dill (Mista Dills):** One of the devoted suitors of Miss Julia Atwater, Noble Dill is remarkable only in that he has no special qualities to recommend him. He is small, rather thin, wears decent but unremarkable clothing, and works for his father's real estate company collecting rent. He is utterly smitten by Julia Atwater, but probably has the worst chance of all to win her hand. He is, however, Florence's favorite, and she is fascinated by him. She thinks he is the most interesting of all Julia's suitors.

**Newland Sanders (Mista Sammerses):** One of Julia's suitors, Newland Sanders "was just out of college, a reviewer, a poet, and once, momentarily, an atheist," (Chapter 3), and he showed his devotion by writing Julia poems and giving her two white Persian cats. "One of Newland Sanders's longest Poems-to-Julia was entitled "Black Sapphires." (Chapter 3)"

**Gamin (Gammire):** A French Poodle, given as a gift to Julia by Noble Dills, Gamin (known as Gammire to Kitty Silver), is a quick, intelligent, and high-performing dog, who is all heart with his desire to please. "This dog was of a kind at the top of dog kingdoms. His size was neither insignificant nor great; probably his weight would have been between a fourth and a third of a St. Bernard's. He had the finest head for adroit thinking that is known among dogs; and he had an athletic body, the forepart muffled and lost in a mass of corded black fleece, but the rest of him sharply clipped from the chest aft; and his trim, slim legs were clipped, though tufts were left at his ankles, and at the tip of his short tail, with two upon his hips, like

fanciful buttons of an imaginary jacket; for thus have such dogs been clipped to a fashion proper and comfortable for them ever since (and no doubt long before) an Imperial Roman sculptor so chiselled one in bas-relief." (Chapter 13). Gammire parallels Florence as a change agent. He also parallels Mrs. Kitty Silver as a being that is intensely unique and powerful in and of herself / himself. And, there is the innate pathos of comparing him with the little jongleur who worked his little heart out.

## Discussion Questions

Taking streetcars downtown, and yet living in homes with stables, *Gentle Julia* bridges two worlds. What are those worlds? How did technology make the change possible? How is the persona of Julia, with her "in charge" "chateleine" presence in her father's household, and her expected destiny to marry a wealthy and powerful man, clash with reality? What did the house that still has an old stable, come to represent upward mobility?

Miss Julia's suitors regale her with a virtual menagerie of pets (or potential pets), all of which Mr. Atwater initially hates. The various pets often reflect attributes of the person who gave them to Julia. Please select two or three and describe them, their attributes, and how they shed insight into the attributes of the suitor.

Nineteenth-century American fiction broke new ground by incorporating the vernacular of its characters. For example, in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Queequeg speaks in an South Pacific patois of English and Polynesian words, as does Kory Kory, in *Typee*. In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, all the characters speak in their own characteristic language. In doing so, the authors create a kind of authenticity that also suggests that they are speaking their own truths, and thus the reader feels closer to them. Please examine the dialogue of Mrs. Kitty Silver and discuss the nature of her speech and how it contributes to the authenticity of her as a unique person. Describe how it also represents social class hierarchies, and how her speech subverts imposed power, and effectively makes the dominant culture the "Other" (as when Mrs. Silver recounts her conversation with Miss Julia about the fate of the "Berjam" cats or her assessment of Noble Dill's chances with Miss Julia).

## NOBLE DILL (Underdog; Dreamer)

**Character:** Noble Dill is invisible to those who live and work with him, and yet, he makes an indelible impression as one of the most smitten of the dreamers, and the least likely to actually win Miss Julia's hand in marriage.

## Parallels

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, anonymous): The idea of sacrificing oneself to serve one's lady is perfectly represented here

*The Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun), finalized in 1275 is another good example of the chivalric romance, which gives a roadmap of what it means to be a knight in shining armor, and the romantic ideal.

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra: *Don Quixote* (1615) is well known as the ironic satire which pillories the self-deluding and potentially dangerous ideas of chivalry and honor.

Alexandre Dumas *The Three Musketeers* (1844) and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) are great examples of the archetypes of the action hero, the romantic, self-sacrificing, ever-devoted hero.

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1884). The influences are obvious, at least when it comes to the use of vernacular and humor. However, Booth Tarkington is in no way populist. Instead, his impulses are medieval, with ideas of chivalry, honor, and devotion to a philosophical higher ground. Although the humor makes Tarkington seem somewhat "Twain-esque" he is more or less the "anti-Twain" because instead of exerting a demolishing energy toward the status quo, Tarkington seeks a restoration

of nobility, albeit within an aristocracy that has to prove itself through a set of trials and tribulations, in essence a meritocracy.

### Illustrative Passages

**Devoted and Self-sacrificing** The animals gifted to Julia by her suitors often reflect the personalities and core attributes of the givers. For example, the little woolly black poodle “Gammire” (actually, “Gamine” but pronounced Gammire by Kitty Silver), puts his little heart on his sleeve when he performs tricks and seeks to please in any way he can. In the chapter, Tarkington refers to *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*, a 1902 story by Anatole France which retells the medieval miracle story of the little juggler turned monk who has no gift to give the Virgin Mary but his ability to juggle. He was accused of blasphemy for juggling for the Virgin, and was to be punished when he juggled one last time for the Virgin Mary, with all his heart and soul. Her statue came alive, came to the little juggler (le jongleur) and blessed him. This is precisely what happened in the novel, and the subsequent linking between the small, smitten, little-to-offer Noble Dill and the importunate little black poodle, Gammire is truly sweet. Further deepening the insight into the essential goodness is the fact that Gammire is a black poodle, and with his woolly hair, wit, and intelligence, he and Kitty Silver immediately establish a bond. Sadly, for a reader in the 21st century, Tarkington’s quest to provide anthropological parallels comes across as embarrassingly and offensively racist. But, as a snapshot in time of contemporary values (and as a representative of costumbrism), it is remarkable.

**Aspiring Yet Poor** Kitty Silver, whose refreshing voice speaks the truth and tears any remaining scales from an observer’s eyes, is very direct about Noble Dill: “That there li’l young Mista Dills?” Kitty Silver cried. “Listen me! This here dog ‘spensive dog.”

“I don’t care; I bet Noble Dill gave him to her.”

Mrs. Silver hooted. “Go way! That there young li’l Mista Dills, he ain’ nev’ did show no class, no way nor no time. He be hunderd year ole b’fo’ you see him in autamobile whut b’long to him. Look at a way some nem fine big rich men like Mista Clairidge an’ Mista Ridgways take an’ th’ow they money aroun’! New necktie ev’y time you see ‘em; new straw hat right spang the firs’ warm day. Ring do’ bell. I say, I say: ‘Walk right in, Mista Ridgways.’ Slip me dollah bill dess like that! Mista Sammerses an’ Mista Plummers, an’ some nem others, they all show class. Look Mista Sammerses’ spectickles[Pg 200] made turtle back; fancy turtle, too. I ast Miss Julia; she tell me they fancy turtle. Go! rim spectickles ain’t in it; no ma’am! Mista Sammerses’ spectickles—jes’ them rims on his spectickles alone—I bet they cos’ mo’n all whut thishere young li’l Mista Dills got on him from his toes up an’ his skin out. I bet Mista Plummers th’ow mo’ money aroun’ dess fer gittin’ his pants press’ than whut Mista Dills afford to spen’ to buy his’n in the firs’ place! He lose his struggle, ‘cause you’ Aunt Julia, she out fer the big class. Thishere Gammire, he dog cos’ money; he show class same you’ Aunt Julia. Ain’t neither one of ‘em got to waste they time on nobody whut can’t show no mo’ class than thishere li’l young dish-cumbobbery Mista Dills!” (Chapter 13)

**Jealous** Poor Noble Dill seethes with jealousy at the evening party and dance that Julia holds in the mild months of summer. She had promised him the first and last dances, and also to let him sit next to her at the dinner. He then convinces himself that such a position is tantamount of being a co-host, and thus she should dedicate most dances to him. He seethes with resentment upon seeing others dance with her, especially “old baldy!” (his term for him, Mr. Clairdyce, who has thinning hair and a gorgeous baritone voice as well as a worldly air. (He is, after all, 32 years old). Noble Dill is also suffused with jealousy and impotent longing at the thought of the distant Mr. Crum, to which Miss Julia Atwater is engaged, at least upon the authority of *The North Side Daily Oriole* and the crack reporter (albeit uncredited), Florence Atwater.

**Self-sacrificing Knight in Shining Armor** When annoying cousin Herbert Atwater and his sidekick decide to steal away with one of two metal canisters containing the hand-cranked ice cream to be served at Julia’s evening fete, they are thwarted by the vigilant and brave Florence, who pursues them, even though she is wearing her white toile party dress, which has a wide pink moire satin sash. She plunges pins into them and stops them, but is not able to stop them. Noble Dill hears the boys’ shrieks of pain and Florence’s shouts, and he plunges through the dark into the small orchard at the side of Mr. Atwater’s house. He rescues Florence and the ice cream, frightens off Herbert and his sidekicks, and transforms

himself to a knight in shining armor in Florence's eyes. She immediately credits him for saving her life, as well as the ice cream.

**Polite** When Noble Dill disappears without a trace after the terrible *North Side Daily Oriole* article reporting on Julia Atwater's engagement, all the Atwaters comment on how, even though Noble Dill seemed to have no distinguishing attributes, he was always very polite when meeting people on the street. When considering Noble Dill's behavior, it becomes clear that he is polite due to an intense desire to please, and in doing so, he often overshoots the mark. For example, when it rains, he desires to protect Mr. Atwater from the rain, to the point that he wrests an umbrella from an ordinary passerby and gives it to Mr. Atwater. In another instance, Noble Dill gives Julia one of his prized Turkish "Arduna" cigarettes, when Julia suggests it is the least offensive of the tobacco products that her suitors use when paying her a visit.

### Discussion Questions

Noble Dill is depicted as a fragile dreamer at the beginning of the novel. What were the circumstances were somewhat altered, and he had some sort of self-determination? How would that change the essential nature of the story? Of the dynamics?

Noble Dill's relationship with Mr. Atwater is multi-faceted. Most of the time, Mr. Atwater views Noble Dill as the worst of the pestering admirers, notable for his peculiarly revolting cigarettes which are smoked with abandon under Mr. Atwater's library windows. However, Mr. Atwater and Noble Dill arrive at a kind of rapprochement. Why? What happened? What was the role of a woolly black poodle?

Underdog and Everyman: Noble Dill is the absolute bottom of the totem pole when it comes to acceptable suitors for the ethereally beautiful Julia. He is the underdog of the underdogs. And yet, in being so, he somehow represents the Everyman -- please explain how this might be so, and provide examples.

**FLORENCE ATWATER** (Joyous, Spontaneous, Embodiment of Truth)

**Character:** Although she is only 14 years old, Florence Atwater resonates with individuals of all ages. She is inquisitive, relentlessly so, and she positions herself as the person who ferrets out the truth in her family. And yet, for all her desire for the truth, she loses herself in a complete and total puppy love crush on Noble Dill, for whom she has only the most positive and complimentary commentary, even though he is, in fact, the most ordinary of mortals.

### Parallels

Shakespeare -- Titania (Queen of the Fairies) in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Florence, like Titania, is a change agent. As opposed to Titania, who sparkles with authority and the power to change, Florence is grounded in the world as we know it -- where transformation requires the injection of a romantic narrative and a request to trade places.

Shakespeare -- *The Tempest* -- Ariel (ubiquitous and capable of transformation or instigating transformation. Ariel saves Prospero from his unhealthy obsession with books, witchcraft and sorcery. In a similar way, Florence Atwater saves Noble Dill. Does he acknowledge it? He does insofar as he is grateful for the dawn of a new day -- Julia has promised to never marry anyone, and so his dream can maintain

Mark Twain -- Florence Atwater is quirky, invasive, and self-determining, as is Tom Sawyer in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. However, Tarkington is no populust, and he shows the innate nobility of each of his literary heroes.

E.D.E.N. Southworth -- ... (this is ABSOLUTELY a model for Florence!!!)

Note: I find it interesting that E.D.E.N. Southworth was so intensely influential during her time, and her heroines are so unforgettable... and are incorporated in all kinds of American literature... and although

she was a huge, huge, bestseller, she's never acknowledged as the absolute origin or mother of feisty, quirky, and free-thinking American females... why???? Why such an erasure of E.D.E.N. Southworth and not Mark Twain???

### **Illustrative Passages**

**Imp of Play** "Imp of Play" may seem a bit fey, but reflects her archaically magical mindset, which allows herself to be transported into a different time, place, and dimension. For example, when her cousin Julia receives the pair of white Persian cats ("Berjum cats) and asks Kitty Silver to wash them (to which Kitty Silver responds, "I ain't no cat-wash woman!!"), Florence desires nothing more than to trade places with Mrs. Silver and wash the cats. Play means to introduce the random, and to so advance fate - and so that "imp of play" (like Puck of a *Midsummer Night's Dream*) triggers fateful events.

**Warrior** It is the night of Julia's beautiful dance, and the refreshments are of tantamount importance to the younger scions of the family. They are also a great temptation. Cousin Herbert and his miscreant friends make off with one of two large tubs of ice cream. Florence defends the realm with her swords, her hat pins, but plunging them into Herbert and his buddies' legs. They collapse in pain, and Florence holds fast. At precisely the moment of her most urgent need, appears Noble Dill. He is ever-after considered to be her champion, and the rescuer who snatched her from certain death.

**Dog Lover** Florence adores dogs. She hates it that her grandfather sends all of the dogs gifted to Julia to their certain death. So, when Julia receives a bright, eager-to-please black poodle, Florence is eager to convince her grandfather, Mr. Atwater, to have mercy and keep Gammire.

**Kind-hearted** Florence is generous and kind-hearted. Nowhere is this more evident than in the parts of the book that show how she takes up the sword (her ardent vocal defense and her pen) to defend Noble Dill when his friends and family laugh dismissively. Although it did not work out as hoped, Florence's announcement of Julia's engagement to a divorced old man, father of a countless brood, was intended to liberate poor Noble Dill, so "uncouth" and allow him his freedom.

**Protean Selves / Multiplicities of Identities** Florence is the embodiment of magical enchantment and transformation. She does not do it as did Shakespeare's Ariel or Puck. Instead, she effects transformation by means of direct contact. She kidnaps the Berjum Cats; she inspires Herbert to try to sell his grotesque collection of spiders, bugs, and moths to purveyors of fish in the downtown fish market (with disappointing results), and she skillfully takes advantage of managerial incompetence to wrest editorial control from her cousin Herbert of the *North Side Daily Oriole* newspaper. In doing so, she incorporates her own "news" and whether intentional or not, the results of her gossipy yet Macchiavellian "dish" was a crisis of souls (the sadly obsessed Noble Dill and the Gentle Julia, fleeing from an uncomfortable scrape with a potential mother-in-law. Breaking the sense of self allowed all in that magic circle to transform, either to what they were destined to be, or to another stop along the way of life.

### **Discussion Questions**

As the granddaughter of one of the wealthiest men in the town, and a member of the most prestigious families, there is no doubt that Florence Atwater lives a privileged existence. And yet, she is deeply democratic at heart. Please find three examples of how Florence's views of life and of individual merit have been shaped by notions of democracy rather than aristocracy.

Florence Atwater is an inquisitive, open-hearted, high-spirited 13 year old. She is at that awkward age between childhood and adolescence. She wants to impress Noble Dill, but thinks that "skinning the cat" in a nearby tree will do it (until she thinks better of it, and that a "lady" might not "skin the cat".) Based on Florence's activities and the impact that they have, what do you think will be her future? How is the reader led to that conclusion?

One of the most memorable scenes takes place when Florence encounters Kitty Silver and the swift, smart black poodle she has been entrusted with named Gamin, but dubbed Gammire. Florence



immediately sees the positive attributes of the poodle, and she embraces him. Gammire is an eager-to-please “trick” poodle, and as such, is greeted with delight when he shares his repertoire of tricks -- both learned and spontaneously invented. How does Tarkington create a parallel between Gammire, the little “jongleur” of Notre Dame, and Noble Dill?

### **Reference**

Tarkington, Booth. (1922) *Gentle Julia*. Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18259/18259-h/18259-h.htm>