

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Partie de campagne 1936

Jean Renoir 1894-1979

STORY

Partie de campagne (1936) is a thirty seven minute film release, by the director Jean Renoir, whose father was the famous Impressionist painter, Auguste Renoir. Much of his father's genius, for depicting nature as a fresh independent presence, out of history, indifferent to mankind yet marking our historical presence—much of this genius is taken by his son to touch central senses of our being here in the world. In the world, in this case, seems to connote the petit-bourgeois culture of nineteenth century France, with its frequent celebrations of getting back to nature, taking a holiday near the sea, or delighting in new travel picture postcards. In the film before us Renoir takes us back to a moment in which, on the one hand, nostalgia for nature, and even the travel industry of our day are implicit.

Setting. We have before us a small cast of characters, apparently involved in a harmless outing. M. Dufour, a Parisian shopkeeper, takes his wife, daughter, and soon to be son in law on an excursion to the countryside outside Paris, in order to enjoy (presumably an annual) day of relaxation. At the end of their journey, which has led them meanderingly to a small country inn, not far from a bubbling brook, rich in trout, they seem to have found the perfect spot. It seems that a perfect plan is working out; and after a short while of haggling with the innkeeper, over the fish courses available for the 'summer party,' the city folk divert out into the wide lawn of the inn, where they stretch out in the sun, swing robustly in the sun, and wait for their fish to be fried. Meanwhile another mini drama is taking place, inside the inn where the party dinner is being prepared.

Development. Two young men from the village are having a beer and peering through the plate glass window, of the restaurant, out onto the swingers and relaxers. Their eyes are naturally enough drawn to the two ladies, one of whom (Mme. Dufour) is sitting on a swing airing herself, while the younger daughter is swinging more boisterously, but in a standing position. The guys wish she would sit down so they could see a little more of her. And with this expressed desire, they move closer to the plan that will shape the day. The idea is to make out with the two women, during the afternoon, while the guys—who are already snoozing in the grass—agree to go off boating and fishing, the activities that brought them there.

Effectuation. Having artfully wheedled M. Dufour, the two swains get permission to take the ladies—who have agreed—on separate boating excursions, rowing up and down the river. At the last minute, before the skiffs' departure, the two swains see to it that their preferred partners are with them, Mme. Dufour with the lustier guy, Rodolphe, and Mme.'s daughter, Henriette, with the younger, shier, more complex Henri. As the tale plays out, it is of decisive importance that each pair formed as it did. And as the initial insight into that rhetoric of artistic fate, we have to thank the French short story genius, Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893), whose cunning short story, *Partie de Campagne*, was the inspiration for Renoir's film.

Amour. At their respective upriver love nests, the two couples take their pleasure in different ways. Mme. Dufour and Rodolphe flirt and paw like puppies, and just have a great time, which ends just as they want it to. Henri and Henriette proceed more tentatively, especially because the girl is a neophyte, and only hesitatingly gives herself. Give herself she does, though, and for both of them this first union is to remain a sacred memory. The aftermath feelings, of the two couples, are profoundly different.

Later. Time passes. One day Henri, who has never forgotten the love he had for Henriette, is in the old vicinity and walks down to the river bank, drifting toward the spot he remembers. It happens that Henriette, who has subsequently married Anatole, is picnicing in the same place where she and Henri had made love. She and Anatole have finished their lunch, he has dropped into a snooze, and she is

taking a short walk along the river when she meets Henri. Tears in her eyes, she reminisces with Henri about their brief time together. Then Anatole wakes, she hurries back to him, and Henri hides.

Even later. Maupassant, like Renoir, was a master of drawing the human content, in its quintessence, from human encounters. As the film ends Henri watches from the bank as Anatole and his wife float past him down the river, guiding their small craft. This time Henriette is doing the rowing. Anatole, still musty and indolent looking, after his nap, is slumped over in a corner, passive. He looks older. And in Henriette's face Henri can read the history of his own one true moment of love.

THEMES

Fun The 'summer party' has caught the imagination of the Dufour family, and they are all in a party mood. The men want only to go fishing, while the women are waiting for their minds to be made up for them. Good meal. Warm sun. Good moment

Sex. The women would hardly have thought of the sex issue, had it not been for the 'country swains' who were looking them, and paying them every courtesy. As it happened, though, sex was right there to solve the emptiness issue.

Purity. Henriette brings the word to mind. She is virginal and rapturous, as she swings in the sunlight, unaware (we think) of the guys who are eyeing her from the inn.

Melancholy. The mood of Henri, as he walks back along the river from his brief encounter with Henriette, is melancholy, plus. It is a realization of personal world loss, and of the transitory sadness of the human condition.

CHARACTERS

M. Dufour is the middle aged, out of it, shopkeeper who wants to repay himself for a hard year's work, by having a family day off in the countryside. When there he wants nothing but a boat ride and some fishing.

Henriette Is M. Dufour's daughter. She is young and pretty, and up for romance with just such a sensitive soul as Henri. She shares the highest moment of her life with him.

Henri is the young man who takes Henriette to his 'private office,' as he calls the bower he has set aside for making love to Henriette. Henri becomes the voice of the narrator, as the intimate closure of the short tale nears. His is the awareness voice or I, that catches the implications of human loss and natural indifference.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

M. DUFOUR

Character The main character is Henri, though he is very much just part of the summer's day outing the Dufour family made. Henri and his buddy are hanging out in their village and the *partie de campagne* arrives. They soon spy the two ladies, and make their plans of conquest. Henri first chose Mme. Dufour as his mate, but at the end chose Henriette, the subtler and more sensitive of the two. He thus knew his destiny, to pick carefully, to take chances, and to taste the brew of a lifetime of regret. He was and remains a keen reminder of the passage of beauty and tenderness in human existence.

Parallels **Dante's** Beatrice is a perfect model for the both real and literary character, who is virginally smitten by love at an early age—and who will be left throughout her life to meditate on beauty and loss. Such a loss moment is also captured by Dante in his profile of the book-inspired profile of Paolo and Francesca in Book V. of the *Commedia*. There Dante catches the passion of man and woman as flame, as their lips meet. The pain of reigniting an old flame, as Henri managed to do, is wonderfully, and humanly, captured in the TV show *Andy Griffith*. Returning to his high school reunion, this sentimental

deputy sheriff meets his high school sweetheart, and with much pain has to realize that the past is the past.

Illustrative moments

Lusting. From his observation post, in the bar of the Inn where the Dufours have arrived, Henri spots his chosen chick of the afternoon, and sets his eyes to wondering what she looks like from this or that angle.

Deciding. Henri argues women with Rodolphe, and expresses the opinion that complex and subtle women like Henriette, are likely to mean trouble. But then at the very boat dock, he arranges to get Henriette into *hisskiff*.

Drawn. Henri has never forgotten the bliss of his love making with Henriette, and he is the one drawn back to the originating spot in their relationship.

Completed. After seeing Henriette and Anatole In the same 'private office' where he himself had made love to Henriette, Henri is sad. Then, as he walks by the river, and sees the couple passing by, he understands better that the world simply puts a high price on pleasure.

Discussion questions

What is Renoir's own attitude toward the scene he unfolds here? Is he celebrating the human condition, or crying over the loss that always seems to shadow our joys?

You can learn, from reading about this film, that financial and weather conditions—and doubtless others-- kept this film from being completed. It is called uncompleted. Does the film seem uncompleted, to you? What does it mean for a film or story to be completed?