

The Vertical Ladder

William Sansom (b. 1912)

William Sansom was born in 1912. He has written a number of short stories and sketches against the background of the Second World War. His writings are marked by a power of minute observation and a vivid perceptiveness about the visual surface of life. His stories generally lack moral theme. He builds up his stories on the basis of suspense and the solutions to be drawn by the readers themselves.

In the story 'The Vertical Ladder' Sansom shows the readers the importance of suspense in a short story. This story has very little plot or character, but the writer has been able to create a thrilling story on the basis of suspense alone. The whole story is based on a single dominant situation which is extremely dramatic in pattern.

In the beginning of the story we have an artistic introduction to the condition which gave rise to the dramatic situation. Flegg, the main character of the story, is a young boy who comes with his companions (consisting two boys and two girls of his own age) to a ground to play. An abandoned gasometer, which had a vertical iron ladder fixed to its side, is visible among the stands in the background. Flegg has a soft corner in his heart for one of the girls, who has dark eyes and talkative nature. The boys start throwing bricks on the upper portion of the gasometer. Flegg wanted to excel in the eyes of the girl to whom he is attracted, so he starts throwing bricks

(2)

higher than the rest of the boys. The other boys feel snubbed before the girls, so they taunt Flegg that he could not possibly climb as high as he could throw. His girl friend also instigates him to fix her handkerchief as a sort of flag at the top of the gasometer. In order to look brave before her, Flegg foolishly accepts the challenge. The ladder attached to the gasometer was broken up to a height of ten feet at the base and was supported by a printer's ladder. Flegg now begins to climb this ladder and the readers are filled with suspense.

Flegg climbs up the wooden ladder quickly and reaches the iron ladder. Initially enthusiastic he soon feels himself completely isolated. As he moves higher, he feels gradually exhausted and his grip on the ladder starts weakening. He finds a vast emptiness surrounding him both internally and externally. He could see nothing which could assure him. With the upward climb of Flegg, the readers are filled with a tense feeling of suspense regarding the result of the risky climb.

Flegg climbed steadily higher. To his great horror he sees that the base of the ladder has been removed by the boys, ~~but~~ and they are shouting with pleasure at the discomfiture of Flegg. Only the dark eyed girl appears to be protesting and sympathizing with Flegg. The height of the ladder now fills him with a sense of fear. The climb that

he has already made makes his head reel and he is ~~seduced~~^{left} without any strength. With the base of the ladder already removed, he is left without any chance to climb down now. So in desperation he decides to climb ahead and to reach the platform on the top of the gasometer. He feels panicky and the whole of his being is gripped by fear. He regains courage and with great labour reaches the topmost rung of the iron ladder. At this point with great amazement he discovers that top platform ~~was~~ is still five feet above and the connecting rungs of the ladder, the real top rungs were missing. He is now in an unbelievable position. He can neither go up nor climb down" . . . and there he hung shivering and past knowing what more he could ever do "† we are left in a suspense with no conclusion given by the writer regarding the fate of Flegg.

Thus we find that the most prominent element in the story is ~~the~~^{its} suspense. The suspense of the story is heightened gradually keeping pace with the gradual upward movement of Flegg on the ladder. The human psychology that motivates Flegg to accept the risky challenge, ~~is~~ is a very common experience in love. The activities of his friends indicate how jealousy and rivalry in love make people mean, selfish and ~~are~~ cruel. The story

† The story ends here.

④

in the final analysis may be acknowledged
to be intensely readable. It keeps the
interest of the readers thoroughly
alive from the beginning to the end.

_____.