

Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions Summary

Edwin A. Abbott, 1884

Introduction

There are 4 dimensions in this novel, which are coherent with the mathematical dimensions portrayed on graphs.

1. Zero Dimension = Pointland (all characters are points in time)
2. First Dimension = Lineland (all characters are lines along a longer line)
3. Second Dimension = Flatland (all characters are 2-D shapes)
4. Third Dimension = Spaceland (all characters are 3-D, like us)

Allegory: A story with a double-meaning: a primary meaning (surface) and a secondary meaning (under the surface).

- Flatland is an allegory about the rigid class structure and strict gender rules of Victorian society.
- A **Romance** of many dimensions; here Romance is an ironic allegory, which has a surface meaning of "love", and an under the surface meaning of "Romantic (18th century concept)", but it is actually ironic because Abbott really refers to the concept of "Existentialism".

Existentialism: a philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will.

- All existentialists criticized romantic notions, believing their negative way of thinking was the correct and intelligent one.
- Jean-Paul Sartre was a very well known existentialist philosopher.

"[...] it has been found by the wisest of our Circles or State-men that the multiplication of restrictions on Females tends not only to the debilitation and diminution of the race, but also to the increase of domestic murders to such an extent that a State loses more than it gains by too prohibitive a Code. For whenever the temper of the Women is this exasperated by confinement at home or hampering regulations abroad, they are apt to vent their spleen upon their husbands and children; and in the less temperate climates the whole male population of a village has been sometimes destroyed in one or two hours of simultaneous female outbreak" (Abbott 11).

- Despite how misogynistic this quote sounds, Abbott was a strong supporter of women's rights, particularly when it had to do with education.
- Is a quote that outlines Evangelical Christianity. Blind faith was how the followers of this religion operated, and the ideology consisted in the disconnection of logic and mathematical reasoning.
- Flatland's portrayal of a society's attempt to suppress the "dangerous" knowledge of other dimensions can be seen as an indictment of hierarchical religious institutions (like the Anglican Church) that attempt to suppress curiosity and difference of opinion in favour of maintaining their own power.

- The Circles abuse their power ignorantly to keep everyone in line, and also keep the third dimension, Spaceland, as something divine and inaccessible to everyone but themselves, creating that hierarchical religious aspect.
- The Sphere periodically visits Flatland to initiate new apostles into the truth of a third dimension (A. Square is one of those apostles).
- A. Square also visits Lineland, where he tries to tell the Monarch of Lineland about two-dimensional existence. However, this can also be considered as a colonial attitude portrayed by A. Square.
 - The term is being considered a missionary, like the kind that came to America in the 1500s to change the aboriginals' way of thinking into their own.

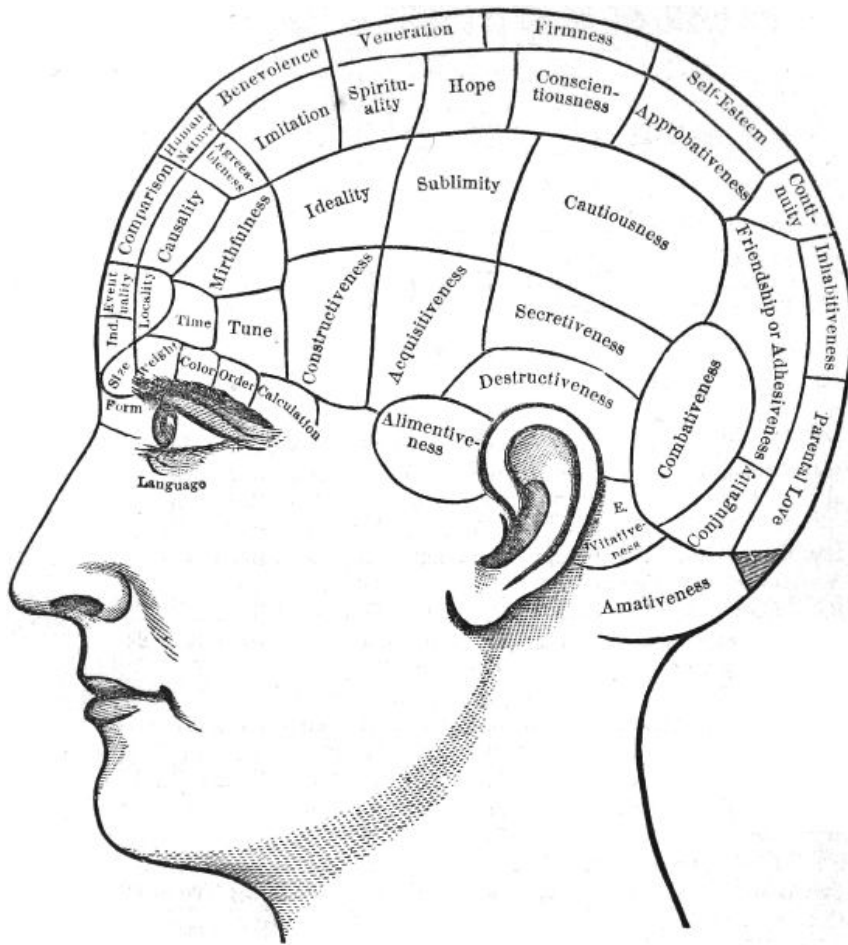
Eugenics: the science of improving the quality of the human population through selective reproduction, sterilization, and euthanization. The term was coined by Francis Galton in 1883, one year before Flatland was published.

"You are a Line, but I am a Line of Lines, called in my country a Square: and even I, infinitely superior though I am to you, am of little account among the great nobles of Flatland, whence I have come to visit you, in the hope of enlightening your ignorance" (Abbott 51).

- Satire on colonial attitudes.

Biological Determinism/Essentialism: the belief that all human characteristics and qualities (e.g., intelligence, femininity, masculinity, homosexuality) are innate, the product of "nature" rather "nurture".

Phrenology: a popular Victorian pseudoscience that used the shape of the skull to determine character and intelligence.



NUMBERING AND DEFINITION OF THE ORGANS.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. AMATIVENESS, Love between the sexes. | 20. CONSTRUCTIVENESS, Mechanical ingenuity. |
| A. CONJUGALITY, Matrimony—love of one. [etc.] | 21. IDEALITY, Refinement—taste—purity. |
| 2. PARENTAL LOVE, Regard for offspring, pets, | B. SUBLIMITY, Love of grandeur—infinity. |
| 3. FRIENDSHIP, Adhesiveness—sociability. | 22. IMITATION, Copying—patterning. |
| 4. INHABITIVENESS, Love of home. | 23. MIRTHFULNESS, Jocoseness—wit—fun. |
| 5. CONTINUITY, One thing at a time. | 24. INDIVIDUALITY, Observation. |
| E. VITATIVENESS, Love of life. | 25. FORM, Recollection of shape. |
| 6. COMBATIVENESS, Resistance—defense. | 26. SIZE, Measuring by the eye. |
| 7. DESTRUCTIVENESS, Executiveness—force. | 27. WEIGHT, Balancing—climbing. |
| 8. ALIMENTIVENESS, Appetite—hunger. | 28. COLOR, Judgment of colors. |
| 9. ACQUISITIVENESS, Accumulation. | 29. ORDER, Method—system—arrangement. |
| 10. SECRETIVENESS, Policy—management. | 30. CALCULATION, Mental arithmetic. |
| 11. CAUTIOUSNESS, Prudence—provision. | 31. LOCALITY, Recollection of places. |
| 12. APPROBATIVENESS, Ambition—display. | 32. EVENTUALITY, Memory of facts. |
| 13. SELF-ESTEEM, Self-respect—dignity. | 33. TIME, Cognizance of duration. |
| 14. FIRMNESS, Decision—perseverance. | 34. TUNE, Sense of harmony and melody. |
| 15. CONSCIENTIOUSNESS, Justice equity. | 35. LANGUAGE, Expression of ideas. |
| 16. HOPE, Expectation—enterprise. | 36. CAUSALITY, Applying causes to effect. [tion.] |
| 17. SPIRITUALITY, Intuition—faith—credulity. | 37. COMPARISON, Inductive reasoning—illustra- |
| 18. VENERATION, Devotion—respect. | C. HUMAN NATURE, Perception of motives. |
| 19. BENEVOLENCE, Kindness—goodness. | D. AGREABLENESS, Pleasantness—suavity. |

"It is the merit of the Circles that they have effectively suppressed those ancient heresies, which let men to waste energy and sympathy in the vain belief that conduct depends upon will, effort, training, encouragement, praise, or anything else but configuration. [...] Configuration makes the man. [...] [N]either good conduct nor bad conduct is a fit subject [...] for praise and blame. For why should you praise, for example, the integrity of a Square who faithfully defends the interests of his client, when you ought in reality rather to admire the exact precision of his angles? Or again, why blame a lying, thieving Isosceles when you ought rather to deplore the incurable inequality of his sides?" (Abbott 37).

- The Doctrine of the Priests: "Attend your configuration"

"It was decreed by the Chief Circle that, since women are deficient in Reason but abundant in Emotion, they ought no longer be treated as rational, nor

receive any mental education. The consequence was that they were no longer taught to read, nor even to master Arithmetic enough to enable them to count the angles of their husband or children; and hence they sensibly declined during each generation in intellectual power" (Abbott 39-40).

- Once the religious hierarchy was established, they used their power to control women particularly, as can be derived from this quote.
- The theme of women's rights and their special oppression is clearly displayed.
 - Because women are considered "emotional creatures" they shouldn't be given any mental education because it would make them more "emotional" and would ruin the rationality the Circles have created.

Implied Reader: a concept introduced by reader-response theorist Wolfgang Iser. The implied reader is the intended, hypothetical reader, the reader to whom the author is writing. (Iser makes a distinction between the "implied reader" and the "actual reader".)

Reader Surrogate: a character in a text who stands in for the reader of the text.

A. Square is a surrogate for, and a satirical depiction of, Abbott's implied reader (a middle-class Victorian man). Abbott uses his narrator to defamiliarize prevailing (19th century) attitudes concerning class and gender. As a satirist, Abbott's goal was to make his readers aware of their own prejudices (the first step toward changing them).

- This shows how the novel is narrated, which is an important aspect in all books, as we know from studying quite a few of them in this course.

Conversion Narrative: a story that gives an account of a character's awakening (epiphany) and personal transformation. Traditionally, the conversion was religious in nature (e.g., Augustine's Confessions), but the pattern has been adopted in secular narratives (e.g., De Quincey's Confessions and Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*).

- *A Christmas Carol* is very popular and has been adapted into many cartoons and movies. Scrooge, the main character is a mean, lonely banker who is obsessed with money and becoming rich, so much so that he neglects to help others who need it. On Christmas, which he spends alone, three spirits visit him in his sleep; the past, the present, and the future. They awaken him from his mindset (defamiliarization) because he will die alone, and money will no longer matter in the end.
 - This clearly outlines the conversion narrative because the protagonist is converted into believing something different than he originally believed, usually done by religious means. (the spirits are a religious symbol).
- Some real examples include; the Library of Alexandria, which was burned to the ground by a group of religious radicals in 48 BCE., which was right when the Christians and their religion started to take hold on western humanity.

- Galileo, who was on house arrest for his astronomical theories, Bruno who spread the heliocentric model, and many others until well into the 20th century.

Social Satire → Religious Allegory.

- A. Square comes to believe in the existence of a higher plane.

Spiritualism: the belief that spirits of the dead could return to earth and that it was possible to communicate with them (especially through a medium); Spiritualism originated in the Victorian Period.

Flatland Introduction Summary

- In his fable, Flatland, Abbott's goals were many: to teach mathematical principles, to satirize Victorian class and gender prejudices, to offer theological reflections, and to entertain.
- The work is a social and religious allegory that recounts the conversion experience of the narrator, A. Square.
- Principal literary devices: satire, allegory, persona, personification, defamiliarism, irony, allusion, direct address, reader surrageret, etc.
- Principal satirical targets: classist and sexist attitudes and practices, British imperialism (and the colonial encounter), the new and problematic science of persecution.