

André Gide considered *The Counterfeiters* to be his only true novel. Its main theme is the distinction between the genuine and the artificial. The fake gold coins become the symbols of the false relationships between several of the principal characters.

On the one hand we have genuine friendship bordering on love between the great but unappreciated author Edouard and Bernard, both of whom value integrity in their work as well as in their personal lives. On the other hand we have the false relationship between Comte Robert de Passavant and Olivier in which the young man's position as a literary review editor lasts only as long as he can be Robert's secret lover.

The novel opens with 17-year-old Bernard discovering his false position in the family, namely that he is the son of his known married mother and a never-identified lover. This discovery shocks and angers him. He is not only angry with his mother but also with Monsieur Profitendieu, her husband whom Bernard had always believed to be his father. He suddenly feels that his so-called father has never treated him with the same love and respect shown to the other children in the family and he can now attribute this behavior to his illegitimacy. Bernard is a strong character. Instead of weakening with this knowledge he abandons his parents and their home without having a place to live or means of financial support. He passes the bac, his college entrance exam, with high marks but decides not to enter the Sorbonne and instead works as Edouard's secretary. When this doesn't work out well he admits it and briefly considers joining a nationalist society which he later scorns as too jingoistic. In his search for something to believe in he wrestles with an angel, just as Jacob wrestled with God in the Old Testament. He loves and supports Laura. We learn later in the novel of his stepfather M. Profitendieu's honest efforts to treat Bernard with the same affection he has had for his own children and at the end of the book we learn that Bernard is returning to seek a reconciliation with him.

Edouard is Olivier's uncle but really functions in the novel as a stand-in for Gide himself. He is a kind, gentle, sincere man. Like Gide he has made up many rules about novel-writing, some of which he follows but some of which he doesn't. He has so many rules that they actually prevent him from writing even the first sentence of his own novel which by strange coincidence is also called *The Counterfeiters*. More about this later.

Both Bernard and Edouard are in love with Laura Douviers, a married woman who reciprocates both of their loves. She does not seem to care as much for her own husband, a kind man who forgives her for her affair and who promises to raise her child as his own. He is described as "something abstract and

simple-minded and credulous.” Her affair with Vincent Molinier at the tuberculosis sanatorium in Pau, Switzerland proves how disastrous a false relationship can be when she learns of her pregnancy and suffers from Vincent’s half-hearted attempts to pay for the birth and early care of their child. Vincent blames his vacillations on the devil but we all recognize this as the weakness of human nature. He gambles away all of the money he needs for Laura, gains it back again, and then rationalizes the use of this money for other purposes including his new love Lady Griffith whom he ends up murdering in a jungle in Africa. Again Vincent takes the easy way out, apparently without a conscience despite his training as a physician.

Olivier, Bernard’s best friend, is a weak character. He allows Bernard to live with him secretly in his parents’ house but is easily susceptible to the flattery of Robert de Passavant who employs him as the editor of his new literary review, a job for which he is not truly qualified. He attempts suicide when he is publicly mocked by Dhurmer.

Robert de Passavant is the exact opposite of Edouard. He is a smooth, self-confident, condescending author who knows how to write for the masses in a superficial way that attracts great attention in the literary world and in his personal life. Widely admired and insincere he uses people such as Olivier until they no longer suit him. He encourages Vincent to gamble with his life savings that he has promised to Laura. He also encourages Vincent’s affair with Lady Griffith to the detriment of his obligation to Laura.

Olivier’s younger brother George is in a group of immoral adolescent boys who are involved in prostitution and who dare each other to pass counterfeit gold coins. Their parents are aware of this but do not reproach the boys directly. Instead they seek ways to make such behavior more difficult to do and to try to avoid publicly naming their families. Their families’ reputation seems to be more important than the boys’ behavior. This lack of moral authority on the part of the boys’ parents leads to the boys’ false friendship with Boris and the shocking murder/suicide of this naïve young man.

Why does Gide introduce a novel within a novel, an odd literary form in its day? Doesn’t this add a rather complicated and unnecessary level to this book? He does it for two reasons. First of all it allows a closer evaluation of the story and characters from the viewpoint of another character, really the most perspicacious character in the book, but someone who, unlike Gide himself, has a stake in the story’s outcome. Secondly it allows Gide to digress upon the purpose and style of novel writing. “My notebook contains a running criticism of my novel, or rather the novel in general.” For Gide the novelist’s duty was to present reality and to contrast it with an individual’s perception of reality. Hundreds of pages into his notebook he writes “I am beginning to catch sight of the deeplying subject of my book, the rivalry between the real world and the representation of it we make to ourselves. We try to impose on the outside world our own interpretation. This is the drama of our lives. The persistence of facts invites us to transport our ideal construction into the realm of dreams, of hope, of belief in a future life which is fed by all the disappointments and disillusion of our present one. Realists start from facts. Bernard is a realist. I am afraid we shall never understand each other.” Near the end of his notebook he realizes

with Gide's famous irony "of the actual book not a line has been written. But I have worked at it a great deal."

In 1927 the great British novelist E.M. Forster delivered his famous series of lectures at Cambridge, later published under the title of *Aspects of the Novel*, just 2 years after the appearance of *The Counterfeiters*. Forster spoke at great length about *The Counterfeiters*. He said, "The novelist who betrays too much interest in his own method can never be more than interesting. *The Counterfeiters* is among the more interesting of recent works, not among the vital, and greatly as we shall have to admire it as a fabric we cannot praise it unrestrictedly now."

I mentioned earlier that Gide considered *The Counterfeiters* to be his only true novel despite having written several other works which are now also classified as novels. Why did he make this distinction? He labeled his other works as *soties* because they were shorter with fewer characters and less complex themes. I'll mention two of his other books. *La Symphonie Pastorale* deals with a pastor who falls in love with a blind girl his daughter's age. When she regains her sight through surgery she recognizes the sinfulness of their relationship. Another of Gide's works *The Immoralist* deals with the peripatetic lifestyle of Michel, a wealthy man diagnosed with tuberculosis who travels across North Africa with his wife while having affairs with Arab boys. By contrast *The Counterfeiters* is a much more complex and intricately constructed work. It has discontinuous scenes that come close to approximating the texture of daily life itself.

Homosexuality was not a welcome subject in French literature in 1925 yet Gide made it an important part of this book. He could only hint at it without alienating the French reading public. Indeed the cool reception that this book received upon its publication was blamed on this subject. Gide is not afraid of describing positive relationships, such as that of Edouard and Bernard, nor of negative relationships, such as that of Robert de Passavant and Olivier. Olivier's attempted suicide, which he later refuses to explain, is most likely the result of his being publicly called out as "funky like a girl". After the suicide attempt Robert de Passavant states that Olivier can no longer be an editor of his literary review because now "people are talking about their relationship" and he makes no effort to stop Bernard from removing Olivier's personal possessions from Robert's home. The message is clear: Gay relationships are acceptable as long as they are not publicly acknowledged.

The English translation of this work is controversial. Dorothy Bussy was a personal acquaintance of Gide and worked on this book with his full knowledge and consent. She had strong opinions and wanted the title in English to be *The Coiners*. Gide preferred *The Counterfeiters* and told Bussy "If the word does not exist, it soon will". She worked alongside him throughout the novel's creation from 1919 to 1925. Gide read parts of it aloud to her before it was serialized. She criticized him for planning a trip to Africa before it was finished. Gide did not especially like the literal character of the translation she gave it but nonetheless praised it for capturing every "nuance of his emotions and thinking." She avoided translating or even including potentially offensive words and sentences. For example she stated that

Laura discovered that she was “enceinte”, the French word for “pregnant” rather than the word “pregnant” itself. She omitted a sentence describing a blood-stained handkerchief following a young woman’s first sexual intercourse. But having read this book in French and English I found the strangest translation in a crucial sentence. After a gun is fired at the Argonauts’ dinner all of the guests dive under tables for safety. Olivier is the last person to come out from under a table. Dhurmer points at Olivier and says “ Il est poltron comme femme!” “Comme femme” means “like a woman”. The problem is with the translation of the French word “poltron” which means “coward”. There is even a word in English “poltroon” spelled with 2 “o” ‘s at the end which means “coward”. But the translator does not use the word “coward” or “poltroon” but rather translates the sentence as “He is funky as a girl!” “Funky” means “unconventional” or “smelly”. Neither meaning fits. It in no way conveys the kind of insult that would cause Olivier to punch Dhurmer, then challenge him to a duel with pistols, and then try to kill himself.

Some critics have called this translation “flat” or “wooden”, lacking Gide’s irony and therefore not revealing the falseness in the characters and their conversations.

While Gide’s literary influence has been declining since 1951, *The Counterfeiters* is still regarded as a groundbreaking work in French literature because of its erratic chronology, multiple viewpoints on characters and plots, novel within a novel, and the author’s own opinions on the actions of the central characters and on the construction of the novel itself.