

American Painter in Paris: A Life of Mary Cassatt Short Guide

American Painter in Paris: A Life of Mary Cassatt by Ellen Louise Wilson

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

American Painter in Paris: A Life of Mary Cassatt Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Copyright Information.....	13

Overview

The United States has produced very few renowned woman artists, but Mary Cassatt ranks among America's most important painters. *American Painter in Paris: A Life of Mary Cassatt* deals primarily with Cassatt as a person: her ambitions, her emotions, and, of course, her art. Wilson limits herself to describing the works of Cassatt and others in a general, rather than technical, way. For instance, she writes of Edgar Degas, "the artist apparently thought it more important to have his models look real rather than pretty," and of a Claude Monet painting, "it shone with disturbing brilliance." Such generality makes the biography readily accessible to readers with a strong interest in art but little technical knowledge. Unfortunately, only one of the paintings is reproduced in color.

Mary Cassatt's life as a member of an affluent eastern family in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century adds an element of social history to the biography. Following Cassatt's life in the U.S. and France, Wilson vividly depicts the effects of the Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War, and World War I.

About the Author

Ellen Wilson was born sometime around 1902 near Pittsburgh, in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, the birthplace of Mary Cassatt. She received her bachelor's degree from Ohio Wesleyan University in 1924 and a master's degree from Radcliffe College in 1927. Thirty years later, she conducted graduate study at University Aix-Marseille, School for Foreign Students. She began writing children's books after her own three boys had gone to school. Inspired by her children, she wrote the "Three Boys" series. Then she published several biographies for children, including works on Ernie Pyle, Annie Oakley, and Robert Frost. In later years, Wilson concentrated on writing biographies for young adults. She especially enjoyed researching these works.

Wilson taught the history of children's literature at Indiana University in Bloomington for many years.

Considered an authority on children's literature, she wrote many articles on the subject and led workshops at writers' conferences. She died on December 17, 1976.

Setting

The biography opens in the Philadelphia of 1860, just before the Civil War.

Sixteen-year-old Mary Cassatt wants to study painting in Paris, but her wealthy father disapproves, insisting that she enroll instead at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, a "graceful white edifice on Chestnut Street." Most of the paintings in its gallery are "portraits of patriots or huge canvases of historical and allegorical subjects."

During the Civil War, the Cassatts live year-round in their summer home in rural Chester County. Mary loves the countryside, away from the factories and war hospitals of the city. She particularly likes to ride horseback and to romp with the dogs.

After the war, Mary finally gains her father's consent to study art in Paris, where most of the subsequent action takes place. Wilson provides many colorful glimpses of the great French city: the galleries, the opera, and the places Mary lives. The author also renders a striking description of the great Chicago fire of 1871. Visiting the city to sell some paintings, Mary leaves the canvases behind when she flees her hotel to reach the safety of the train station.



Social Sensitivity

Wilson skillfully portrays a woman who defies tradition in a mild way when she goes to Paris by herself. Cassatt never loses the social and moral standards with which she was raised and disapproves of the unconventional behavior exhibited by many Parisian artists. Wilson does not editorialize; she simply presents Cassatt's opinions. A perceptive student with a little knowledge of modern art will realize that some of the artists who met with Cassatt's disapproval, such as Pablo Picasso, are held in the highest esteem today. The critical approval extended to these artists lends weight to Cassatt's questions about dramatic changes in the world and in art.

Although it sometimes causes her art to suffer, Cassatt's devotion to her family is always portrayed as a virtue. In fact, at the end of the book, Cassatt wonders whether she has made a mistake by dedicating most of her energy to art rather than to marrying and raising children. Cassatt's doubts may not please feminists, but Wilson does not draw any distinct conclusions about appropriate roles for women.



Literary Qualities

Easy to read, *American Painter in Paris*'s clarity results not from simplistic sentence structure or limited vocabulary but from carefully constructed sentences and well chosen words. Wilson never defines the handful of French phrases scattered through the book, but the meanings are usually self-evident from the context in which they are used.

A biography that begins with the moment of its subject's birth and then proceeds to list virtually every known fact about the person can be exceedingly dreary. Wilson avoids this potential pitfall by beginning with a pivotal day in Cassatt's life. Of Cassatt's earlier life, Wilson relates only what is relevant to her vocation, such as the childhood trips to Paris. Wilson then focuses on the high points of the artist's life. Thus her successes in showing at the Salon with the impressionist group are recounted in detail; her travels and studies in Italy and Spain, although of some importance, receive less attention.

The work ends on a sharply ironic note. Most of Cassatt's family and friends have died, and she endures a lonely existence in her chateau. She can engage in intellectual conversation only with the village priest who visits once a week. Cassatt, whose life's work has depended on her vision, almost completely loses her eyesight. She cannot see her collection of paintings, but as Wilson comments, "they were, after all, engraved on her mind. She remembered every superb line in every one of them and was consoled by what she saw with her mind's eye."



Themes and Characters

Although theme and characterization develop more fully in fiction, they exist in biography as well. Frequently more subtle, biographical themes are inherent in a person's life story. Mary Cassatt's ambition to be a fine painter guides her early life, and her determination to achieve that ambition dominates her later years.

At the beginning of the biography, Mary celebrates her sixteenth birthday.

She has dabbled in painting for several years and realizes that, despite her talent, she has advanced about as far as possible without formal instruction. She wants to study in Paris, where on a family trip she has seen the Louvre and the many art students working there.

After waiting and planning for her birthday, she asks her father's permission for this undertaking. Bringing up the subject at the dinner table, Mary exhibits a great deal of courage, especially when her determination does not waver after her father comments that he would almost rather see her dead than living and working by herself in Paris.

She feels that, although Paris is a long way off, she has taken the first step.

Mary's unconventional aspirations contrast her generally conventional attitudes. Her goals are unusual for a woman of her time, but she is not a rebel. She waits for her family's permission before leaving for Paris; she even devotes less time to her art in order to be with her family when they come to live with her in Paris several years later. Not inclined toward self-indulgence, she disapproves of the bohemian habits of many Parisian artists. When she is older, she attends a gathering at the apartment of Gertrude Stein, an American writer who lives in Paris and collects the works of such avant-garde artists as Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. The crowd repels Mary, speaking "everything but French and English," devouring "spreads of ham, bread, and cheese," and elbowing each other in the congested room. At last Mary asks a friend to take her home, saying that she has never seen so many dreadful paintings and dreadful people. Later she wonders if the world has changed completely and if her kind of painting is out of date, but she decides that there will always be a place for her meticulous work.

The author depicts her nonfictional heroine exceptionally well. Restricted to real characters, some biographers invent details to make their work more interesting and readable. Wilson fictionalizes less than most biographers, minimizing direct conversation because dialogue must usually be invented by the author. On the other hand, the biography contains an inaccuracy in its first paragraph: according to Wilson, Cassatt celebrates her sixteenth birthday on May 22, 1860, but, in fact, this was the date of her fifteenth birthday. Also, Wilson attributes emotions to Cassatt but does not document her sources. For instance, without providing any evidence, she claims that Cassatt loves Edgar Degas and that, at the end of her life, she regrets that she did not marry and raise a family. Although the authenticity of Cassatt's regrets is questionable,



they do serve a thematic purpose, contrasting the sense of immortality gained through bearing children with the sense of purpose derived from producing art that will live on.

American Painter in Paris provides interesting but sketchy descriptions of artists other than Cassatt. Unfortunately, the secondary characters never come to life, a particularly disappointing shortcoming in the case of Degas, the great Parisian artist who befriends Cassatt. Although Wilson provides a great many details about his eccentricities and biting sarcasm, she never really presents the living man.

Other well-known contemporaries of Cassatt are mentioned: American artists John Singer Sargent and James McNeill Whistler, and French artists Georges Seurat, Eugene Delacroix, and Claude Monet. Although they do not appear as characters in the biography, the brief descriptions of their works help to convey a strong impression of the Parisian art world during this exciting time.



Topics for Discussion

1. Do you think that Mary is right to obey her parents and postpone going to Paris until they consent? If they had refused to consent, do you think that at some point she would have decided to go without their approval? How might her life have been different if she went without her parents' consent?

2. Why does Mary consider the Pennsylvania Academy of Arts old-fashioned?

3. Why does Mary dislike the classical subjects for paintings that are popular in the late 1800s?

4. In late nineteenth-century France, one way for an artist to gain recognition was to exhibit paintings at the Salon in Paris. Do you know of anything in the U.S. that is comparable to the Salon?

How does an artist gain recognition?

5. Late in life, Mary wonders whether she should have raised a family instead of immersing herself in art. Why does she have these doubts? Do you think that she has made the right choice?

Could she have both raised a family and been an important painter?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are the chief characteristics of the artistic movement called impressionism? If you live near a museum that displays original impressionistic paintings, you might want to go there to study similarities and differences between the works of various artists.
2. Georgia O'Keeffe is another well known American woman artist, somewhat more recent than Mary Cassatt.

Find reproductions of some of O'Keeffe's paintings and study them carefully.

What do you think Cassatt would have thought of them? Would she have considered them "dreadful paintings"?

3. Find some reproductions of works by Pablo Picasso and study them carefully. Why do you think Cassatt disapproved of his art?
4. Find some reproductions of works by Edgar Degas and compare them with Cassatt's work. How are they similar?

How are they different?

5. Read some of Cassatt's letters published in *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters*, edited by Nancy Mowell Matthews. How similar is the personality reflected in her letters to the Cassatt portrayed by Wilson?

For Further Reference

Bullard, Edgar J. *Mary Cassatt: Oils and Pastels*. New York: Watson-Guptill, 1972. Reproductions of Cassatt's major works.

Getlein, Frank. *Mary Cassatt: Paintings and Prints*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1980. Reproductions of Cassatt's works.

Hale, Nancy. *Mary Cassatt*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975. A standard biography and discussion of Cassatt's works. Very readable.

McKown, Robin. *The World of Mary Cassatt*. New York: Crowell, 1972. A biography and discussion of Cassatt's works, geared toward younger readers.

Mary Cassatt: Pastels and Color Prints.

Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1970. Published on the occasion of an exhibition of Cassatt's works at the National Collection of Fine Arts.

Matthews, Nancy Mowell, ed. *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1984. Letters from Cassatt to her family and friends.

Especially revealing about her life in Paris.

Pollock, Griselda. *Mary Cassatt*. London: Jupiter Books, 1980. A particularly interesting biography.

Roudebush, Jay. *Mary Cassatt*. Translated by Alice Sachs. New York: Crown, 1979. Originally published in French, this book presents challenging reading.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996