

# **A Cup of Tea: A Novel of 1917 Study Guide**

**A Cup of Tea: A Novel of 1917 by Amy Ephron**

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## Plot Summary

*A Cup of Tea: A Novel of 1917*, written by Amy Ephron in 1997, is based on a short story of the same name written by Katherine Mansfield. Unlike the short story, the novel is set in the spring of 1917 in New York, set against the backdrop of World War I.

Socialite Rosemary Fell invites a homeless woman, Eleanor, to her home for a cup of tea, as it is pouring rain and the woman is clearly getting drenched with just a thin sweater. Rosemary is generous and offers Eleanor clothes and food. When Rosemary's fiancé Philip walks in, he is clearly struck by Eleanor's beauty - a beauty that was masked before she had a chance to clean herself up. When Rosemary clues in to this, she gives Eleanor money and an overcoat and sends her on her way.

Rosemary's friend Jane runs after Eleanor and urges her to go see Dora, a woman who runs a hat shop for a job. Eleanor gets the job and finds a place to stay. Soon Philip is in the shop to pick up some hats for his upcoming wedding to Rosemary. When he sees Eleanor, he starts a pursuit that develops into an affair of deep love between him and Eleanor. Despite his feelings, Philip follows duty and marries Rosemary. He ships out to war soon after.

Rosemary refuses to believe the news of Philip's death. When Eleanor learns the news, now with a daughter by Philip, she goes into mourning.

To everybody's surprise but Rosemary, Philip returns from the war physically intact, though psychological damage continues to eat at him. After acclimatizing to regular life again, Philip decides he wants to be with Eleanor. He breaks this news to his wife and this ignites devastating tragedy.



# Pages 1-29

## Pages 1-29 Summary

The novel opens with the image of a young woman standing in the rain. It is evening, and she is only wearing a thin sweater. She is solicited by a man but sends him away.

The next image presented is of Rosemary, only slightly older than the young woman, who is shopping in an antique shop. The owner fawns over her as she clearly has money to spend. She buys a small enamel box and a letter opener, leaves, and walks down the street, just a few feet away from the young woman in the rain.

Rosemary enters the flower shop and buys bunches of flowers. Walking out of the florist, Rosemary approaches the young woman in what is now pouring rain and asks if she is alright. The woman- Eleanor- asks for some money for tea. Instead, after short reflection, Rosemary invites the woman to have tea at her home. Eleanor is hesitant but Rosemary insists.

As they get into Rosemary's car, Eleanor feels the driver's judgment of her.

When they arrive at the house, Rosemary can see the housekeeper's disapproval on her face. Rosemary takes Eleanor to her room, where they have brandy and sandwiches. Rosemary gives Eleanor fresh clothes, and Eleanor is grateful for it.

Rosemary's friend Jane Howard enters the room while Eleanor is changing clothes in the washroom. Jane voices her doubts about taking in Eleanor to Rosemary, who defends her actions by saying she had to follow her impulse.

Eleanor emerges from the washroom, refreshed and cleaned up. Rosemary introduces her to Jane, and a moment later Rosemary's fiancé Philip Alsop enters the room and is immediately struck by Eleanor's beauty and fragility. Eleanor has an equal urge to look at him, though she tempers her gaze to the occasional glance.

Philip asks to speak with Rosemary in private. While they are out of the room, Jane catches a glimpse of a different side of Eleanor, as Eleanor accepts a cigarette.

Philip challenges Rosemary on her choice of bringing Eleanor home. He asks her what comes next, and to this Rosemary does not have an answer. Philip tells Rosemary that Eleanor is exceptionally pretty.

The exchange with Philip makes Rosemary see things differently. She returns to Eleanor, handing her an overcoat and some money. Eleanor understands it is time to leave. She also understands the subtleties of why she is being asked to leave. She thanks Rosemary and departs.



## Pages 1-29 Analysis

The novel commences by highlighting the differences between Eleanor and Rosemary. Eleanor stands in the rain with nothing but a thin sweater to protect her. Compare this to Rosemary, who is spending money on frivolities. It is clear that the women come from different worlds.

Rosemary believes that wealth is useless unless you spend money once in a while. She similarly believes that a position of privilege is not useful unless one can help someone else from that point of privilege. Rosemary shows a genuine desire to help. Mixed in with this is her desire to present a persona of helping that will help define her. She will be able to proudly tell her friends what she did for someone in need.

At first Eleanor is hesitant to take the help. When she first arrives at the house she is equally hesitant, but once she agrees to drink some brandy, she relaxes and accepts all that is being offered to her. Other than this, not much is revealed about Eleanor in these early pages.

The conflict in the story emerges once Philip sees Eleanor. It is clear that this will not be the only time they will meet. Rosemary senses this and tries to prevent it by sending Eleanor away. There is a suggestion that Rosemary tries to solve everything with money, including this.

Eleanor senses this too, as she knows why she is sent packing. Philip, however, seems the least aware of this. This is why he is entirely comfortable sharing his thoughts on Eleanor's beauty with his fiancée.



# Pages 30-61

## Pages 30-61 Summary

Jane runs after Eleanor in the rain and catches up with her. She gives Eleanor the name of a woman who runs a hat shop, and implies her friend Dora will give Eleanor a job there. Eleanor is not sure how she feels about this. She does not like the feeling of being helped, yet this is an opportunity to get a job and take care of herself.

Eleanor goes to the hat shop and Dora mistakes her for a customer and has her try on a series of hats. Eleanor tells Dora that Jane Howard thought she might find a job here, and Dora hires her on the spot. She also gives Eleanor a beige hat that Eleanor likes.

Next stop for Eleanor is a boarding house, where she procures a room from Miss Wetzel. She also encounters fellow boarder Josie Kennedy, who has aspirations to be an actress but currently works at a local diner.

Meanwhile, Rosemary and Philip are saying goodnight in front of her home, after a night of theatre and dinner. Philip is kissing Rosemary and she is torn between pulling in closer to him and pulling away. Philip reminds her that they don't have much time left, implying that the war would take him away overseas. Rosemary is uncomfortable facing that truth.

The next image presented is Rosemary returning home after a walk, where she encounters her father in the library. He is listening to the radio - with news about the war - and Rosemary is tired of it. She is not up for the reality of the war or how it will affect her life. Her father, Mr. Fell, wonders if he's properly prepared his daughter for the tough situations she will now be facing.

One afternoon when Jane comes by for a visit, she finds Rosemary picking out fabrics for the wedding. Soon Rosemary shares with Jane that Philip has enlisted in the army. This means the wedding - originally scheduled a half a year away - will need to be moved up, and Philip will take on his duties two days after the wedding.

Eleanor is at work, serving Mrs. Mayhew and her daughter, who are both in need of hats. At first Eleanor feels she is not cut out for the job, but when push comes to shove, she is able to sell hats to both mother and daughter.

Dora soon acknowledges that "Eleanor did have a knack for selling hats." Eleanor is skilled at sewing and understands design, good subtle designs. Dora also feels that Eleanor is honest. As her trust in Eleanor grows, she gives her more leeway, more time in the store unsupervised.

One day, Philip, in uniform, comes by the hat shop to pick up Rosemary's order for the wedding. He recognizes Eleanor and is thrilled to run into her. Eleanor is shy and tries to retain a formality between the two of them. As they carry the boxes to the car, there is



a moment where they find themselves pressed against each other. Philip admits he wanted to see Eleanor.

## Pages 30-61 Analysis

This point in the novel tracks the changes that happen in the lives of Eleanor and Rosemary simultaneously. For Eleanor, this is growth and movement in the right direction: equipped with Rosemary's dollars and Jane's assistance, she acquires a decent place to stay and a job in which she excels.

Rosemary's life changes are less rosy. Though her mother died when Rosemary was very young, Rosemary has had a trouble-free existence until now. She now has to make room for the war in her life. It is the main subject of discussion in society, it is constantly on the radio, the newspaper vendors shout its headlines, and now her very own fiancé has enlisted to fight in the war. Not only does this mean that Philip will be in danger and away from Rosemary, but it also has the more immediate consequence of speeding up the wedding. Rosemary is unprepared for this.

Eleanor handles the new developments in her life with caution. She does not reveal much about herself to anyone, and she remains careful not to assume too much or take too much. Rosemary, on the other hand, tries to flat-out ignore that her world is changing. She wants to stay in the innocent bubble in which she has been raised.

When Philip enters the shop, Eleanor is surprised to see him in uniform. She sees a depth in him that she hadn't noticed before. She is still shy in front of him, even when Philip is so comfortable being familiar in front of her. He feels no need to hide his attraction towards her.



# Pages 62-99

## Pages 62-99 Summary

At the end of the work day, Eleanor emerges from the shop and discovers Philip's carriage waiting for her. He holds the door open from the inside. Eleanor does not think she should accept the ride at first but Philip insists. The next steps aren't followed but it is known that they stop for a drink and they have a brief kiss goodbye.

Meanwhile, Rosemary is waiting for Philip at a restaurant, wondering what has detained him. When he finally does show up, he tells her he was at the War Office.

Days later, Rosemary opens her mail when she discovers a card from Eleanor with the money Rosemary had lent her. When she says "Philip, she's sent me back my money," Philip pretends he does not know who she's talking about. Rosemary is pleased with the card, as she takes the repayment as a sign that she has helped Eleanor.

Again Eleanor finds Philip waiting outside her shop. He asks her to accompany him to dinner but she declines. Philip then heads to Jane Howard's place. Philip confides his pull towards Eleanor is "like an addiction." Jane confides that Eleanor has the same effect on her.

When Eleanor comes home that night, she finds Philip waiting for her. Eleanor is annoyed that he seems to expect her to always be there for him. He says he would do it "the right way" if he had the time, but the war has made that impossible. Eleanor lets Philip kiss her and lead her to his carriage.

Meanwhile, Rosemary eats at home with her father, wondering if she'd arranged plans with Philip for that evening or not.

Philip brings Eleanor home and they spend the night together. The next morning Eleanor is getting ready for work but Philip asks her to take the day off, and Eleanor realizes that Philip's interest in her runs deeper than she thought. Later they emerge and explore the market on Canal Street. Philip buys Eleanor a shawl, and wrapping it around the both of them, he kisses her.

At a party at Rosemary's house, Jane grills Philip on his connection with Eleanor. He acknowledges he feels some guilt.

One evening, Eleanor is at home stitching a hat, reflecting on two of the customers that came in the shop earlier in the day. What made them noticeable was that they were not "old New York" but rather women who had reinvented themselves. Shopping was a spree to them.

Soon Eleanor hears a knock at the door. It is Philip. This is clearly not the first time he has come by. Eleanor objects at first, more as a game than in earnest, and then





accedes to his kiss. He departs at 3am, but leaves behind a present he had given Eleanor- a gold and diamond necklace that had been his mother's.

The next day Dora shows Eleanor a newspaper article announcing Rosemary and Philip's approaching wedding. The article notes that Philip will ship out to France the subsequent week.

Eleanor immediately goes to see Philip at his shipyard to confront him. She says her piece and leaves, furious.

That night, Josie stops by Eleanor's room and finds her distraught. Eleanor debates returning the necklace to Philip but she keeps it.

## Pages 62-99 Analysis

Philip's pursuit of Eleanor grows increasingly bold throughout this section. The arc of their entire relationship is present. Key pieces of information show Philip's feelings without taking up pages of text to do so. One such example is when Philip gives Eleanor his mother's necklace- the only necklace she hadn't pawned. This makes it perfectly clear that Philip's feelings for Eleanor are genuine and not fleeting.

The distance Philip puts between himself and Rosemary is also expressed without lengthy passages. Rosemary finds herself waiting for him for dinner; Philip lies about his whereabouts. She finds herself home alone one night and he is distracted. These brief moments are enough to convey the results of Philip's feelings for Eleanor on his relationship with Rosemary.

Even so, Rosemary seems blissfully unaware of Philip's affair. She has her head full of thoughts of the wedding and tuning out Philip's impending departure. Yet on some level she feels she does not feel loved by Philip, or thought of as beautiful by him.

Philip feels no qualms in telling Jane about his liaison with Eleanor. He does not for a second anticipate that she would judge him for it or tell Rosemary. He admits to her his feelings for Eleanor are like an addiction. This shows Philip's mindset: he feels caught in the vortex of his feelings and feels powerless to stop it.

At first Rosemary assumes that Philip is after her as a one-night affair, and she is surprised- and happy- to learn otherwise. At the same time, she continuously reminds Philip that she is not someone who he can treat any way he likes. He cannot assume she will be free at his every whim, and she demands a certain amount of respect.

Philip is bold when he is with Eleanor, and this may give her a false sense of what is to come. When she sees the wedding announcement in the newspaper, Eleanor is shocked and devastated. Even then, she does not give Philip the satisfaction of being so needy that she will fall apart; instead she says she'll be able to take care of herself.

It seems that Philip does not choose to marry Rosemary but rather he chooses not to stop the wheels that are already in motion. Perhaps he feels powerless to stop those wheels as well.



# Pages 100-133

## Pages 100-133 Summary

Philip writes to Rosemary from France. The troops are on their way to Normandy but so far they haven't left the comfort of inns, friendly faces, and good food. As she reads the letter, Rosemary reflects on recent events and the story rolls back in time a few weeks.

Preparing for the wedding- particularly on the day of the wedding is busy and full of mayhem. The wedding itself is beautiful and goes exactly as planned.

Though Rosemary does not see her, Eleanor is in the crowd outside as the wedding party emerges, and catches sight of Philip kissing Rosemary on the steps. As Eleanor walks away, a drunk on the street recognizes her as his daughter. Even though he is fact her father, Eleanor ignores him and pretends he is mistaken.

Eleanor goes to a musical in which Josie has a part. After the show, she is introduced to Robert Doyle, the producer, who is quite taken with her. Eleanor turns down the offer of drinks and goes home alone.

Rosemary packs some creature comforts for Philip to take with him. Saying goodbye is difficult for Rosemary in the huge crowd as Philip's ship sets sail. Back in the crowd, Eleanor is also present, wishing she could say goodbye. It occurs to her that Philip might die and she would need to mourn in secret, with no outlet for her grief.

Philip keeps thinking of Eleanor and sends her a letter, in which he asks for forgiveness and promises to make things right when he returns.

Eleanor reads the letter again and again. She and Dora have been making black hats lately for the fresh widows of war. When Eleanor delivers one such hat, she is sick and vomits in the washroom. The cook of the household immediately figures out that Eleanor is pregnant.

Eleanor shares the news with Josie, and it is clear she will keep the baby. She has not yet thought through the details of losing her job and being kicked out of the boarding house.

Dora finds Philip's letter to Eleanor and rushes to show it to Jane. It is clear the two women are lovers. Jane believes this news should not be shared with Rosemary and Dora feels otherwise. Dora is prepared to fire Eleanor but Eleanor beats her to the punch, removing herself from the sales floor and asking to design hats for Dora instead. Dora agrees, afraid she would lose business to Eleanor were she to branch out on her own.



Josie and Eleanor move into an apartment. Eleanor stays inside and Josie does all the shopping. She also shuttles Eleanor's hats to Dora's shop. They tell everyone Eleanor is married to Josie's brother, who is away at war.

## Pages 100-133 Analysis

This section starts with Philip at war and then quickly backtracks to fill in the gaps- the mayhem of the preparations, the successful wedding, the goodbye at the dock. All of these are anticipated. Unlike the next bits of news- Philip has written to Eleanor to say he will come home to her. Dora finds the letter. Eleanor is pregnant. None of this was expected.

It is clear that Eleanor is not ready to leave Philip behind, or the possibility of a fairy-tale ending, even before she receives his letter. She joins the outside crowd to watch the wedding, she shows up at the dock when Philip departs. Though she always keeps a respectful distance, she still feels very much tied to these events. She shrugs off Doyle's interest in her. When she gets Philip's letter, she is that much more prepared for a fairy-tale ending, though at the same time she fears the worst.

Eleanor is a practical woman, and as such, she gets right down to sorting out the details of the new life she will need to create for herself. She is smart and is not too modest to use some strength to get what she wants. An example of this is when Eleanor subtly threatens Dora with taking some clients with her if she leaves. She has no qualms lying about her current situation, though she stays inside for fear of being seen by any of the very few people she knows in the district.

Philip is at war. At first his time in France is almost make-believe. There are no enemies and life is remarkably like the life Philip left behind. There is no mention of when Philip sent the letter to Eleanor - if it is before or after he has seen the battlefield.

Rosemary's reality in Philip's absence is not explored. The letter Philip sends to her is a reassuring letter.

An interesting moment is when Eleanor's father calls to her and she ignores him. So little is known of Eleanor's past, and it is left to the reader to fill in the blanks. Nevertheless, this is quite a difference from Rosemary's act of kindness at the beginning of the tale.



# Pages 134-164

## Pages 134-164 Summary

Eleanor gives birth to a baby girl and names her Tess. She gives her Josie's last name- Kennedy- to keep up the fiction of being married to her brother. Also at that very moment, soldiers arrive at Rosemary's house with a telegram.

At first Rosemary is devastated with news of Philip's death, but when she hears that his dog tags were found and he is only 'reported dead,' that they are unable to identify the body, she believes that Philip is still alive. She refuses to have a funeral or death notice in the newspaper. She redirected condolence flowers to the VA hospital. Rosemary continues on with life, though granted with increased volunteer work.

Equipped with an address she obtained from Dora, Jane seeks out Eleanor to let her know about Philip. She finds Eleanor with Tess, who is clearly Philip's daughter, in the stroller. Eleanor says the child belongs to her roommate. Jane does not have the heart to tell Eleanor that Philip is dead.

Eleanor pieces things together and heads to the armory. She speaks to the General, who breaks the news. She sequesters herself in the apartment for a week and Josie helps her through it. Eventually Eleanor takes up with Robert Doyle but she does not marry him.

Jane is wracked with feelings of guilt and spills the story to her mother. Now that she knows about the baby, she feels that Rosemary has a right to know. Jane goes to Rosemary's house to tell her about Eleanor, but when she shows up, Rosemary and some others are in the middle of a séance. Jane joins in. Soon the doorbell rings. It is Philip, home from war.

Philip has been through the wringer. He does not speak about his captivity and what he does say sounds rehearsed. Rosemary's father speaks of a syndrome where captives begin to identify with their captors, and this can cause horrible feelings of guilt afterwards.

## Pages 134-164 Analysis

This section has many twists and turns.

Rosemary is clearly being unreasonable when she refuses to accept that Philip is dead, and yet it turns out that she was right to hold faith in his return.

Eleanor has no idea about Philip's death until she receives a strange visit from Jane. This feeds the worst of Eleanor's fears and she seeks confirmation at the armory. She



goes through a full mourning process and comes to accept that Philip will never see his baby girl.

At first Jane does not feel guilty nor does she feel the need to tell Rosemary about Eleanor. She still finds room for Eleanor in her thoughts, so much so that she understands she will need to break the news to Eleanor about Philip's death. Once Jane learns of Tess, though, she develops strong feelings of guilt and feels an urgent need to tell Rosemary about the affair and about the baby. It is only by chance that she is circumvented from telling Rosemary, first by the séance and then by Philip's return.



# Pages 165-200

## Pages 165-200 Summary

Days later, Rosemary and Philip head to bed after a quiet dinner at home. Rosemary is full of passion and bold. At first Philip responds but then he breaks down and cries. Rosemary is hurt and does not see this as an opportunity to ask him about what the war was like. The next morning Philip gets ready to head to work - which has been his main occupation since he got back - and offers to meet Rosemary for lunch, but Rosemary already has plans.

At lunch Philip goes to Eleanor's old boarding house and has horrible flashbacks of the fighting while he is on the street. He gets Eleanor's new address from Mrs. Wetzel and heads straight there. As he arrives, he sees Eleanor emerge on Robert Doyle's arm and turns away so as not to be seen.

Philip visits Jane, who has changed since they were last together. He tries to talk to her about Eleanor, but Jane is now clear that her loyalties lie with Rosemary.

At work Philip doesn't know what to do with himself. Civilian vessels had been hit, so all ships were to now have military escorts. This slowed things down considerably for Philip's shipping business.

Jane tells Rosemary about the affair. Rosemary tries to block the words from coming out- she would rather not know- but Jane does manage to tell Rosemary that Eleanor now has a child. For a moment Rosemary lashes out in anger towards Jane but soon she retreats into herself and handles it all with formality and good manners. That night, Rosemary impresses upon Philip that she would not be ok if she were to lose him.

Next morning, Rosemary goes to see Eleanor who is in the park with Tess. Rosemary wonders out loud to Eleanor "Did I do something to you?" She tries to make sense of the fact that she had been kind and generous to Eleanor and it led to this. Rosemary then quickly leaves.

When Eleanor returns to her apartment, Philip is there waiting for her. He sees the baby and understands right away that it is his baby. Philip kisses Eleanor and promises to come back to the apartment tonight, once he has told Rosemary he cannot and will not live with her anymore.

Philip struggles with how to tell Rosemary, and then he confronts her as she is getting ready for the party they are hosting that night. Rosemary reacts first in desperation and then anger. She stabs Philip in the throat with a letter-opener.

Rosemary descends to tell the guests Philip won't be able to make it, but they all see her covered in blood and soon Jane finds the body. Philip's body is taken away and the police take Rosemary away in handcuffs.



Eleanor prepares and waits a long time for Philip before she fully understands that he won't be coming. She only discovers what happened two days later when she sees it in the newspaper.

## Pages 165-200 Analysis

Philip returns from the war and everyone seems to be different- everyone except Rosemary, who carries on as always. Philip is deeply damaged from the war. He is thinner, less sure of himself, and he carries a lot of guilt about his actions when he was held captive. Philip has flashbacks of the fighting- of seeing fellow soldiers blown-up, of having the heavy weight of being the officer in charge, left to decide the fate of his battalion.

Jane has changed. She has seen Rosemary go through the news of Philip's death and while Rosemary did not show pain, Jane understood that all of Rosemary's actions were her way of handling the enormous pain she felt. Feelings of guilt pile up for Jane, for having arranged a job for Eleanor and for having supported Philip in his tryst. She feels even more guilt once Philip has returned and Rosemary finally has him back- what if Rosemary were to lose him again?

Everyone attributes such strength to Rosemary, even if it seems a superficial strength. People see Rosemary skip through life as if none of it can touch her. This appears shallow. Rosemary fosters the illusion of only living on the surface by separating herself from the news of the actual world, be it the horrible war raging on, the presumed death of her husband, or the news of his affair and the resulting child.

Philip is so sure that Rosemary can handle whatever comes her way, that she can fix her problems with shopping sprees and simple distractions. He does not realize that just as his own feelings about the war are bottled up yet raging inside, the same holds true for Rosemary, yet more so, because Rosemary goes to great lengths to preserve the perception of her persona. This all comes tumbling to a tragic end when one too many things piles up for Rosemary, and she cracks in the most unfortunate of ways.

There is a parallel for Rosemary and Eleanor in that they both think they have lost Philip, only to have him again, only to lose him again. First Eleanor loses Philip to a wife and then to the war. She begins the healing process. And then once again he is back in her life, so the pain is doubly unbearable when just a short while later he is wrenched from her for good.





# Characters

## Eleanor Smith

Not much is known about Eleanor's past. Eleanor is down on her luck when Rosemary befriends her and invites her for tea at her home. This is where Eleanor sees Philip for the first time. Eleanor is reluctant to take handouts. She is equally reluctant to accept Philip's advances, yet with time, he wins her over. Eleanor is strong and is well liked in her job at the hat shop. She has made good friends with Josie from the boardinghouse where she lives. Eleanor also has a father who is a drunk. She is embarrassed by him and feels no need to acknowledge him.

Eleanor is 20 years old and exceptionally beautiful. She has a hold on people when she meets them. Both Jane and Philip are smitten by her right away.

## Rosemary Fell

Rosemary is a few years older than Eleanor. She lives in high society, though that society is crumbling and hobbling along due to the war. Rosemary is vivacious and loves company. She throws parties and enjoys being in her circle. Her mother dies when Rosemary was a young child but otherwise, Rosemary has had a smooth life.

Rosemary is kind. Some of her kindness is genuine, and some of it is always with the thought of how her actions will appear to others. She invites a complete stranger, a homeless person, into her home. She feeds her and gives her clothing and money.

Rosemary is seemingly occupied with the surface details of life. She enjoys shopping. She also feels at home planning her wedding to her fiancé Philip Alsop. Rosemary seems even to anyone who looks. No matter what news befalls her, she just keeps on trucking, smiling, entertaining, and shopping. Underneath this surface, though, is a woman who has to grapple with an increasingly difficult reality. Rosemary finally engages in extreme action as she has no safety valve to release her inner stresses.

## Philip Alsop

Philip is first introduced in the novel as Rosemary's fiancé. He is tall, handsome, athletic, and tanned. Philip grew up in society but without much money. He started a small business in the shipping industry and grew it over time. As Jane says "He's had to work for everything he has."

Once Philip meets Eleanor, he is taken by her immediately and it is not long before he is in love with her. Philip is energetic and persistent. He is bold and brash and makes his feelings for Eleanor perfectly clear to her. He feels, however, that he is bound by duty, and does not try to change the course of his life away from his upcoming marriage to



Rosemary. Duty and honor are strong in Philip, and it is only when he is in battle that it no longer makes sense to him. He sees the sole reason for the war as honor, and this is when he begins to doubt it.

After the war, Philip is a different man. He has brutal and gruesome images burned into his brain, and he has to live with the things he was forced to do in captivity, though what these things are is unknown.

## **Jane Howard**

Jane is Rosemary's friend. She dresses plainly and has uncommonly short hair for the times. Dora has been her lover for the past three years. Jane is boisterous and speaks her mind. She feels at home anywhere, particularly with Rosemary.

Jane has known Philip since they were kids and they trust each other implicitly. Jane encourages Philip on his course with Eleanor. It is only when she learns of Eleanor's child that she faces her role in the affair.

## **Gertrude**

Gertrude is Rosemary's housekeeper. She stepped into a maternal role when Rosemary's mother died. Now it is unclear to her when she is in charge and when Rosemary is in charge. Gertrude disapproves of Rosemary bringing Eleanor into the house.

## **Miss Wetzel**

Eleanor takes a room at a boarding house run by Miss Wetzel. Miss Wetzel is a non-nonsense woman, She has firm rules of no male visitors after 8pm, and men are never allowed upstairs. Miss Wetzel has some standards but for the most part she does not intrude on the lives of her tenants.

## **Josie Kennedy**

Josie Kennedy is boisterous and confident. She is used to looking after herself. She wants to be an actress but she also understands the realities of the world and is currently working at a diner to earn her keep. She is friendly with Eleanor from their first encounter. They become good friends, and eventually share an apartment together.

Josie understands Eleanor's situation when she learns of her pregnancy and she never judges Eleanor. Instead, she moves in with her and they concoct a story that Eleanor is married to Josie's brother.

## **Dora**

Dora runs a hat shop. On Jane's urging, Eleanor approaches Dora for a job, which she gets. Dora is kind to Eleanor. She is clear, however, when she finds out about Eleanor's tryst with Philip- she feels that Rosemary has a right to know.



# Objects/Places

## New York City

The New York City of 1917 has the same energy it carries today. Multiple classes rub shoulders walking down the street and it is a world where anyone can rise up. Rosemary lives at her father's home in the city. Rosemary first lives at the boardinghouse and later an apartment.

## Hat Shop

Dora's hat shop usually attracts what is referred to in the book as "Old New York" clients- people who have had money for generations and don't feel the need to engorge themselves on spending.

Eleanor takes a job at the hat shop and encounters many people. She learns that she has a knack for the hat trade but more as a designer than as a salesgirl. This works to her advantage when she is pregnant and can design and build hats from the privacy of her own home.

## Boarding House

Equipped with some clothing and money from Rosemary, Eleanor finds a job and then finds a place to stay. This is a sign for Eleanor of her independence. Miss Wetzel runs the place. This is also where Eleanor meets Josie, who becomes her good friend.

## World War I

The Great War, as it was known at the time, had a major impact on the lives of Americans even though it was fought overseas. So many young men went off to fight that the city no longer ran the way it used to. There were fewer consumers buying fewer things, and not all services or products were readily available.

Philip enlists to be an officer. He ships out to France and is in the battle of Normandy. The war has a deep effect on Philip.

## Letter Opener

Rosemary buys the letter opener from the antique shop at the beginning of the tale, just before she meets Eleanor. Later, this becomes the weapon Rosemary uses to kill her husband by stabbing him with it in the throat.



## Flowers

Flowers are important to Rosemary and she ensures her house overflows with flowers. This is a physical manifestation of Rosemary's need to always keep things lively and happy.

## Rosemary's Apartment

In 1917, it was extremely unusual for two women to share an apartment, and at the time, opinions mattered in a different way than they do now. Eleanor and Josie concoct a story that Eleanor is married to Josie's brother who is away at war, to help explain the unusual living arrangements.

## Pregnancy

Eleanor's pregnancy is such a secret that she confines herself to her apartment for the duration of the pregnancy. The growing life inside her is a manifestation of her and Philip's love, and for Eleanor it is a sign that their love will always live on.

## Necklace

When Philip's father died, there was no money and his mother was forced to sell off her jewelry. There was one piece, however, that she kept- the gold and diamond necklace that Philip gives to Eleanor. Knowing that he has given her his mother's necklace shows the significance of his feelings for Eleanor. When Josie suggests that Eleanor can sell it if need be, it is clear that Eleanor will never part with the piece.



# Themes

## Honor and Duty

In 1917, the class system was far more rigid than in modern times and everyone was expected to behave according to the rules of their class. For the upper classes, duty and honor were held in the highest regard.

Even though Philip is in love with Eleanor, he marries Rosemary out of a sense of duty. He has arranged to marry her and he can't back out now. This is extremely painful for Eleanor but as Philip sees it, he is powerless to act in any other manner. Philip doesn't do this grudgingly- he treats Rosemary well and with respect. He could not imagine doing otherwise. Though his mind is on Eleanor while he is in France, Philip dutifully sends letters home to his wife Rosemary.

On the battlefield, Philip comes to the conclusion that the only reason for the war is honor and this stops making sense to him along the way. It is for this reason that Philip's eyes open up to possibilities beyond the constraints of honor and duty.

## Love

Philip and Eleanor fall in love despite a wealth of obstacles: class differences, Philip is engaged, and further, he is going off to war- a war from which he may never return.

Philip seems to have no hesitation in pursuing Eleanor even though he is engaged to be married at the time. Eleanor, however, is more cautious. She does not want to be used or thought of as a toy. She slowly comes to understand the depths of Philip's feelings.

Philip's love for Eleanor is freeing for him, a different kind of freedom than he has ever known. Once he releases himself from duty, he finds a thrill in being able to follow his heart.

Rosemary has been in love with Philip ever since she was a child. The nature of her love, however, must be examined in the light of her final actions of the story- killing her husband so that another woman cannot have him. Eleanor, in comparison, acted differently when Philip was no longer hers. She kept her distance, she let him have his life with his wife.

## The Gap between the Classes

Philip not only has to contend with Rosemary when it comes to his love for Eleanor; he must also face the class divide, and to his credit, he does not flinch from it one inch.



The United States and New York City in particular have always been known as a place where dreams are made, where anything is possible, no matter what your beginnings. But in 1917, just as in present times, a class structure still thrives.

The notion that Rosemary would invite a homeless woman into her house is extraordinary and extremely uncommon. Reality more commonly highlights the differences between the classes, a gap that was wide then and a gap that keeps growing wider today.

Philip built himself and his company up, an extreme accomplishment, and he is still accepted in the upper classes as he is originally from the upper class. Compare this with Rosemary, her father, and Jane, who don't seem to have jobs. The women of this class were expected to volunteer and do good deeds.

A clear portrait of the division between the classes is the image of the wedding party coming out of the church onto the steps and the lower class crowd that has gathered around to catch a glimpse.

# Style

## Point of View

A Cup of Tea is written in the third-person singular. At times, the narrator follows a character's train of thought, so that the reader is exposed to all sides of the dilemma.

## Setting

The novel takes place in New York City and briefly, in France. The streets of New York are present in the text. The difference between Eleanor's reality at the boardinghouse and Rosemary's house full of flowers is quite clear.

The story takes place in 1917 during the World War I. Philip is part of the first round of American soldiers to ship out overseas for the war.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the narrator is modern and unadorned. The language of the characters reflects their class, yet their words are modern. The author has avoided old-fashioned dialogue to reflect the era. With current dialogue, it is easy to forget we are in 1917 and transport the story to the present.

## Structure

The novel starts in January of 1917 and continues over the course of a year. The text is presented in short vignettes, with the feel of scenes for a screenplay.

There is little reference to the passage of time between vignettes so it is often up to the reader to decide if a particular event occurs the next day or several weeks later.





## Quotes

"And think of how she would feel if she could successfully show this poor creature that life could be wonderful, that all women were sisters, that the world was full of possibilities" (p. 8).

"What good was it to have power, if one couldn't be beneficent some of the time" (p. 8).

"I don't know how to do anything useful. I play the piano some, but I don't know who that's useful to" (p. 15).

"There was something frail about the girl and yet exciting as if she had another side. Not like Rosemary's usual friends who were done up to appear exactly what they were" (p. 21).

"It was one of the things he admired most about Rosemary, that she staunchly believed that things should be a certain way...and that she had the luxury to believe it" (p. 44).

""Will you think I'm terrible," asked Rosemary petulantly, "if I tell you that I'm sick of Archduke Ferdinand"" (p. 46).

"She looked for a moment like what she was, a society girl who had lost the society she was raised in" (p. 47).

"What is it that makes a man so distracted even when he's with you" (p. 54).

"And though she might not be able to control the rest of her life, it was clear she was going to have whatever she wanted for dinner" (p. 79).

"And the division between the wedding party and the people on the street was so defined, as if there was a barricade they would never be able to cross" (p. 108)

"I don't want to wave a flag. I'll wave a flag when he comes home" (p. 116).

"And life on 9th Street went on much the way it had, as though there had never been a telegram" (p. 145).

""Don't you always have a choice about war?" asked Rosemary sounding female and pacifist and slightly petulant" (p. 170).



## Topics for Discussion

This novel is based on a short story by a different author set in a different time. Why did Amy Ephron choose to set her version in World War I? In what ways does the war link in with the story?

Describe the differences and similarities in Rosemary and Eleanor's lives. How do their homes differ? How does their entertainment differ? In what ways are the two women alike? In what ways do their personalities differ?

What does the reader learn of Eleanor's past? Why does Amy Ephron keep Eleanor's past so vague? Does it enhance the story? How?

Why does Rosemary invite Eleanor for a cup of tea? Why does she ask Eleanor to leave? What price does Rosemary pay for her act of kindness?

What is Jane's responsibility in what ensues? How does Jane feel about her own actions?

Why does Philip marry Rosemary? How does he change during the war? Why is he ready to be with Eleanor when he returns? Do issues of duty vs. love still apply today, and in what way?

What is Jane's sexual orientation? Is this important in the story? Why? What would life have been like for a gay woman in 1917?

Why does Eleanor go to the wedding? Why does she go to the dock when Philip ships out?

What if Eleanor left the letter behind on purpose? What would be her reasons?

Why does Eleanor ignore her father? In what ways is this different from Rosemary's actions?

How has the war changed Philip and how does Rosemary handle it? How did that affect their relationship? What could she have done differently? What could he have done differently?

Who are you rooting for in the story? Why? Does anyone deserve what they get by the end? How could it have been avoided?