The Collected Stories of Colette Study Guide

The Collected Stories of Colette by Colette

BOOKRAGS

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Early Stories

Early Stories Summary

Early Stories: Clouk/Chéri

In "The Other Table," Colette tells the story of Clouk, a wealthy man who has been seeing Lulu, a star of the music hall, for four years. In the first part of the story, they dine together; in the second part, "The Screen," she has left him and he has become very depressed, going to an opium den and trying to forget her. In the third part, "Chouk Alone," he has worsened and all of his old friends want nothing to do with him; he sees two of them on the stairs and is depressed when they leave, thinking about life alone. In the last part, "Chouk's Fling," he is beginning to accept that she is gone forever as he sits with a depressing companion at a restaurant.

The second set of stories about this character have renamed him "Chéri." The first Chéri story involves an affair with Léa, an older married woman, and a string of pearls that the younger man is trying on. He reveals that he's getting married, and she becomes indignant. In "The Return," he comes back to her, having been married a while and tiring of his wife. She lets him stay, but in "The Pearls," they have run off together to Tunis and he is starting to see her age and become depressed, thinking about the youth of his wife.

Early Stories: Dialogues for One Voice

In "Literature," Colette's goddaughter questions her about what she's writing and gives her opinions on literature: about how children's literature is condescending, how she likes stories without pictures, and how stories that end happily are the best. The same character speaks in "My Goddaughter," in which the goddaughter is angry with her mother, who bought her a new unfashionable hat to go to school with; the young girl cut bangs on herself and angered her mother, who says that she has ruined her property.

In "A Hairdresser," the title character talks about the latest styles and about everything she knows about Colette's closest friends, showing a kind of professional intimacy. Likewise, in "A Masseuse," the masseuse complains about her other clients, clients who make her arrive quite early in the morning, and strange clients who are Christian Scientists. In "My Corset Maker," the maker comments on different women's body types and the kinds of corsets they bought or should by for themselves to conform to a particular ideal. "The Saleswoman" details the encounter between Colette and a store clerk at a hat shop as she cajoles and encourages certain purchases. In "An Interview," the reader hears a man's voice for the first time, detailing his own phobias and inner workings, as well as talking about his own work.

Early Stories: My Friend Valentine

In "A Letter," Colette writes to her friend Valentine, flattering her in certain regards but also criticizing how immoral she is, her hypocrisy, and how her adherence to the prejudices and principles of the day have ruined her. Colette bids her goodbye in the letter and says that they will never really understand each other. Similarly, in "The Sémiramis Bar," Valentine scolds Colette for frequenting the bar, which is disreputable. However, Colette defends the bar, saying that the owner has a particular kindness for her patrons, that the girls dance there, that it is a pretty and strange world. In "If I Had a Daughter," Valentine imagines what she would do if she had a daughter, how she would raise and dress her, how she would keep her from attending lectures and instead have her sit and do needlework. Colette pictures this, finding it unpleasant. In "Rites," Colette describes Valentine's manner of getting ready to go out - her makeup, her paints, her necklaces and jewelry. In "Newly Shorn," Valentine has cut her hair fashionably short and Colette evaluates it, thinking of it as a kind of freedom. In "Grape Harvest," the two women go out to the countryside to see the grapes harvested together, and Valentine longs for the days of feudalism, when she might have owned part of the property. "In the Boudoir" tells the story of a painting in Valentine's boudoir; she was distraught when she found out her uncle died, only to find out that she'd been confused and a different uncle had died. Still, his widow was so moved that she gave Valentine his favorite painting. In "The 'Master,'" Colette and Valentine go to see a dressmaker who sells ridiculous and vulgar things to willing rich ladies. In "Morning Glories," Valentine tells the story of her lover, a young man who is disappointed when she fixes herself up every morning and breaks it off because he prefers her natural, which she can't stand. In "What Must We Look Like," Colette and Valentine go visiting and Colette compares her life with the more traditional choices of her friend. Finally, in "The Cure," Valentine talks to Colette about the process of getting over a lover and in finding a cure in another love.

Early Stories: Uncategorized

In "Sleepless Nights," Colette recounts the torment of insomnia next to a lover who is sleeping without any problems; she remembers how they met and pictures what will happen when her lover wakes up. "Gray Days" is a short description of an anxious kind of depression, in which the narrator wants to be left alone; "The Last Fire" describes the coming of spring and the last fire that is needed for the year. In "A Fable: The Tendrils of the Vine," Colette tells the story of how the nightingale only began to sing at night when the tendrils of a vine rose up to choke him as he slept, and how the same thing has begun to happen to her.

Early Stories Analysis

In Colette's early stories, the reader gets a sense of her developing style and especially the social spheres she writes about. The stories foreshadow her later work in their themes, settings, and character types, as well as in certain narrative devices. In the Clouk/Chéri stories, Colette presents upper-class characters, buffoonish in some ways but deep and never stereotyped. Clouk/Chéri is at heart rather bourgeois, concerned with his own life and with material possessions. However, he can also have his heart

broken and spends a long time suffering, recovering in the first story, though in the second he is quite fickle.

Colette's "Dialogues for One Voice" are particularly indicative of the kind of strong characters she creates not only though action, but also through their speech. In these stories, which serve almost more as character sketches, she creates fully alive characters, ridiculous as they may be. Moreover, she draws them from her everyday life: these women are her masseuse, her hairdresser, and so on, but each one of them has a distinctive voice and her own story, showing the kind of democracy of characterization that Colette would later develop fully in her longer stories.

The Valentine stories, similarly, not only paint a vivid, full picture of a woman in a particular time and place, but also show Colette's growing disdain for the bourgeoisie. In fact, the first story we see, a letter to Valentine, expresses the writer's frustration with her friend's traditional morals and lack of creativity in her own life. Colette would later take these characteristics and apply them to other characters throughout her writing career.

The last, uncategorized stories in this section are notable for their extended use of imagery and metaphor and for the kind of extensive description that Colette would later temper when including in her longer stories. They are notable, however, for representing another element (such as the distinctive settings and strong narrative voice) that appears in her later works.

Backstage at the Music Hall

Backstage at the Music Hall Summary

Backstage at the Music Hall: On Tour

"The Halt" describes a troupe of performer's arrival in a village for a tour, how picturesque and foreign the surroundings are after Paris. "Arrival and Rehearsal" continues this narrative, with the performers getting ready to open a new theatre. In "A Bad Morning," the performers are depressed and having a difficult time getting started. "The Circus Horse," a dialogue for one voice, tells of one performer's travels and how eagerly she recounts her and her husband's act. In "The Workroom," Colette describes the conditions of the dressing room and how the performing women gather there to complain about their acts, the management, and especially the sub-par allowances they are given for costumes. In "Matinee," she describes performing in the terrible afternoon heat, and how different the performer's facades and public personas on stage are from what they are like backstage, with all of their makeup running off, completely miserable. "The Starveling" is about a performer who gets by on extremely little; Colette worries about how he makes ends meet and rationalizes that he must do all right, until he reveals that he is trying to save up money for when he returns to Paris, as he nearly starved to death the year before. In "Love," Colette describes a young English girl, not particularly remarkable in her looks, who nonetheless has a short affair with a Frenchman named Marcel, who breaks her heart. "The Hard Worker" is about Hélène, who works hard to make money as a dancer, though she is much more worried about finances than about her work. Colette worries about her private life, that she will never find love. In "After Midnight," she describes the late show of a dancer, who likes to pick out one particular couple and dance for them. However, on this night, her "sympathetic couple" seems to be having problems and may not be in love. "Lola" describes how Colette came to acquire her dog, Lola, who one day came into her dressing room. Colette gave her water, even though she was not supposed to have any before performances. A month later, she buys the dog. In "Moments of Stress," Colette draws the picture of a daredevil performer, who rides a bicycle dangerously, contorts himself, and so on, and the desire he creates in her to get far away from the performance. "Journey's End," another dialogue for one voice, is a woman speaking of how she is having a hard time in her career, too old at forty-six to play the really great parts, and how she has to support her family. "The Strike, Oh, Lord, the Strike!" is a picture of the entire cast getting worked up about unfair conditions and possibly going on strike, with one small woman who dissents, saying that it won't serve anybody well to go on strike, as it will only reduce their audience. "Bastienne's Child" describes a pregnant performer, who has her child though she is quite young herself, and then must raise her through the chaos of the music hall.

Backstage at the Music Hall: Cheap-Jacks

"The Accompanist" is a dialogue for one voice from the accompanist, talking about everything that she sees and does; how she's never really desired to be on stage, and how the heat of the room makes even the most prudish of dancers strip down until they're practically naked. "The Cashier," similarly, describes the job of the almost invisible woman who keeps an eye over everything and has an opinion on all of the performers. In "Nostalgia," Colette writes a dialogue for one voice for the dresser, who costumes the performers; she complains about the performers and their attitudes towards her, as well as her previous experiences touring. "Clever Dogs" is the story of a dog trainer and the different animals he works with. He is particularly proud of one of his dogs, Charlot, who he thinks really has a taste for performing. "The Child Prodigy" describes Colette's experience with a stage mother, who is supervising her thirteen-year-old daughter and complaining about how, despite all of her success, she'll never be a real child again. A slightly longer sketch, "The Misfit" describes La Roussalka, who everyone thinks is rather pretentious and who sings Russian songs and dances. She speaks a lot about her former life, how many countries she's performed in and so on. Other performers get jealous of her. Eventually, she gets put into the chorus. Finally, her salary gets raised. The final section shifts into her point of view, when she thinks about how scared she is of the summer audiences, thinking that they are savages. At the end, she goes home to her Paris apartment, happy with herself.

Backstage at the Music Hall: From the Front

In "La Fenice," Colette describes a tour to Italy, where the performers are in Naples. She describes her boredom with the many women with whom she must always travel. "Gitanette" tells of Colette running into a woman on the street, who used to work at the music hall They go to have a cup of coffee together and Gitanette tells the story of an old friend of hers, who got her into trouble when she took fifty franks and a slip from Gitanette and never gave them back, ruining their friendship and filling Gitanette with sorrow. "The Victim" is the story of Josette, who starts out at the music hall but eventually marries a rich man. When Colette sees her again, Josette tells her how sad she is in her marriage and how she is truly the victim, for she's not in love, while her husband has the pleasure of loving her. In "The Tenor," Colette describes the music-hall tenor, beautiful and patient, pleasant but a complete narcissist. "The Quick-Change Artist" describes the average evening of a girl who is in so many acts that she has to run around between them, changing and panting, from a Spanish number to an Egyptian one, to a Plains Indian number. "Florie" is the story of a level-headed girl in the music hall who is singled out by Lola, a juggler who finds her attractive; she has him fired and everything goes back to normal. In "Gibriche," a longer piece, Colette tells the story of the title character, who is a dancer at the music hall. One night, she is fined for a minor infraction and is extremely rude to Colette, though she had nothing to do with it. Later, the girl falls down stairs and has a miscarriage, and the other performers take up a collection for her. Colette and two other women go to Gribiche's house to give her the money, where they meet her rather foreboding mother, who Colette finds creepy. The other women eventually tell Colette that the mother is an abortionist who gave her daughter too much of a certain potion, causing her to fall down the stairs. Thus, it was the mother, and not the bad luck of the fall, that caused the "miscarriage."

Backstage at the Music Hall Analysis

Colette's Music Hall stories, almost all extremely brief and rarely longer than three or four pages, bring several important points to the reader's understanding of Colette's shorter corpus. In the first place, they bring to life the vivid first-person narration in Colette's "own" voice that appears in so many of her stories. In addition, they work narratively in complex ways, simultaneously poking fun at and sympathizing with the characters they represent. Finally, they are notable for their uncensored and honest portrayal of women at this time.

Colette serves as the narrator throughout the majority of these stories, and other characters often refer to her by name. Not only does she depict the scenes with seeming accuracy and detail, but she also references her own time spent working in a music hall. Thus, though the writings appear to be stories, they are in fact (probably heavily edited and modified) versions of her own memories from her past. Many of Colette's stories function this way. By presenting herself as the narrator and the stories that she tells as true events, the author gives a sense of veracity and honesty to the portraits she paints of the scenes and characters surrounding her, whether or not the anecdotes she recounts actually took place.

The author expresses boredom with the company of women with whom she spends an extreme amount of time. At the same time, however, she paints unflinchingly honest and often sympathetic portraits of them. Even with characters who get pregnant or have abortions (taboo topics of the day), Colette describes them fully, both their unflattering aspects (ugly clothes, lost beauty, cruelty to children) and their saving graces (supporting sisters or other family members, taking up collections for fellow dancers who have fall on hard times). She never falls into caricature, allowing her characters to be both good and evil at the same time.

In doing this, the stories are also notable for their complex visions of women at this time. Never completely good or completely bad, Colette's characters often express their thoughts and feelings from a third-person limited point of view, allowing the reader to enter into the woman's head and see what it would be like to live a poor existence with only the few pleasures and hardships of the music hall to sustain them. Just as she de-glamorizes the world of the music hall (her vision of this locale is full of sweat and tears), the author also de-glamorizes her characters. These are not saints and martyrs, but simply regular women forced into a certain kind of work by their talents and situations.

Varieties of Human Nature

Varieties of Human Nature Summary

"The Hidden Woman" is the story of a man who suspects his wife of cheating on him. When they are invited to a masked ball, he says he will be out of town but tells her to go. However, he follows her there, nervous the whole night. Nevertheless, when he finally sees her embrace somebody, he writes it off as her being caught up in the moment. In "Dawn," a man's wife leaves him and his friends begin to gossip. He goes to a country town to escape it all, but is haunted by insomnia and his own memories, thinking he will never recover from the loss. "One Evening" is the story of Colette and her friend Valentine, one night when they are out driving and their car breaks down. Colette knows some acquaintances nearby, so they go to see them. The man's secretary comes in and later Colette sees him embracing the woman of the house, who still professes to be so happy, alone with her husband in the country. In "The Hand," Colette describes two newlyweds, the woman admiring the man as they sleep. However, she sees his hand and becomes horrified, thinking it grotesque and wanting nothing more than to get away from it. The next morning at breakfast, the hand is still horrible and hasn't changed, but the wife decides to become resigned to it.

"A Dead End" is the story of two lovers, happy together until, one day, the woman sings a song that the man has never heard before, reminding him that she had a life before knowing him. He becomes extremely jealous, and the feeling grows until one day she dies and he finds that he is relieved. In "The Fox," a man who owns chickens becomes friends with a man who owns foxes; they walk in the park together every day, the animals in harmony, until the fox tries (unsuccessfully) to eat the chickens, ruining their friendships forever. In "The Judge," Colette tells the story of an aging woman who gets a terrible haircut that makes her feel her age. Under the eyes of her loyal young butler, she imagines what he thinks of her and immediately makes an appointment to change it back. "The Omelet" is the story of a man hiding out in the country after having killed his mistress. He is starving and convinces himself he can go out for food without any problems. However, as he finally orders an omelet, delighted to eat, he sees the police, who have found him. In "The Other Wife," a new couple runs into the man's ex-wife at a restaurant, and the woman starts wondering why his wife left him. He can't give a satisfactory explanation, and she starts to become dissatisfied with him herself, wondering what the first wife didn't see in him.

"Monsieur Maurice" is the story of a man hiring a new secretary, who has the choice between two women: a young, beautiful one, or an older one from his own neighborhood, who has fond memories of him in his glorious youth. He chooses the latter and has her start immediately. In "The Burglar," a man tries to rob an elderly woman he has carefully staked out. However, she comes home early and finds him behind the curtains. Rather than being shocked and angry, she thinks that he wants to court him and tells him gently that he can, but only in the proper time and place. "The Advice" is about an old man going for a walk in his neighborhood, upset about how

much it has changed. He sees a young man, who he assumes is leaving his parents' house in a rage, and councils him to go back. Later, the younger man stops and thanks him, and the older man realizes that he actually was trying to leave a woman, who may or may not be his wife. In "The Murderer," a man who kills his mistress goes into hiding, but can't stop himself from repeatedly returning to the scene of his crime, enamored with what he's done. Eventually, he is caught this way. "The Portrait" is the story of two middle-aged women who live together and who both had love affairs with the same man. They keep a portrait of him in their living room, but one day they find that the sea air has aged his image suddenly and in unflattering ways; they finally pity him, rather than pining after him.

In "The Landscape," Colette tells the story of a painter, who decides to paint a self-portrait rather than writing a suicide note. However, the act of painting keeps him alive long enough and impassions him so that he does not kill himself. "The Half-Crazy" is the story of a woman who is a little disturbed and keeps asking Colette to read her manuscript, until one day Colette offends her so much that she never asks again, by mocking her way of speaking. In "Secrets," women are at a dance, talking about the engagement of one of their daughters, which leads them to a discussion of the minor irritating things about their marriages, which are starting to really disturb them. "Châ" is about a couple who go to see Cambodian dancers; the man starts to see his wife as very masculine and won't tell her what the title word means, even though it is relatively insignificant. In "The Bracelet," a rich woman receives a fancy diamond bracelet as a present and is reminded of a blue glass bracelet she had as a girl. She goes on a long campaign to find this bracelet, but, when she finally does, she finds that it no longer holds the same enchantment for her. "The Find" is the story of a woman separated from her husband, alone in a cold, fancy apartment, who finally makes herself a small cozy space in the bathroom to stop feeling so alone. "Mirror Games" is about a dinner Colette has in a restaurant, sitting next to two women. A man arrives, and she thinks that he will prefer the brunette, but everyone is surprised to find that he prefers the blonde. In "Habit," two society women, best friends, have a falling out, which one of them desperately wishes she could repair when she sees the other's dogs walking through the park.

"Alix's Refusal" is a character study, showing women gossiping over another one who has a sense of false youth about her. "The Seamstress" is about Colette's daughter, who has to learn how to sew. Colette prefers that her daughter spends her time reading; when she sews, her mind wanders and she thinks about gossip. In "The Watchmen," Colette is in the country with several children, including her daughter. They hear something at night, and wonder if it is a ghost. Thus, they decide to stay up at night to keep watch and, after all of that suspense, discover that an enormous bird has been making the noise. In "The Hollow Nut," Colette describes a hollow nut in her daughter's pocket, which she seems to view as symbolic of youth. "The Patriarch" describes the life of her brother, who is a country doctor and has a hard life. The story shows the many difficult situations he has to witness and deal with constantly, including pregnant girls and abandoned babies, which create a very different life for him than the one that he had in Paris. "Sick Child" is the story of a young boy who falls ill. The story is set up as one that might lead him to death; throughout, he goes back and forth between dreams

and reality, confusing them more and more. He travels to fantastical places in his dreams, often the countryside, but slightly different from what he has known, and the injuries he sustains in these dreams correspond to the physical effects of his sickness on his body. However, in the end, he recovers, and has to give up his fantasy-land dreams.

In "The Rainy Moon," Colette tells the story of two sisters. While searching for a typist one day, she finds that one who has been recommended to her actually lives in her old apartment, where she went through many emotional times. She begins to take any excuse to go there, where she visits the typist and her sister, who is distraught having separated from her husband. Délia, the sister, has become a recluse, and Colette spends a lot of time with her, trying to help her through her loss. However, the relationship between Colette and the sisters becomes more and more intense, and the typist reveals that her sister has been casting spells, trying to kill the husband, and that she has tried a number of things to stop her but always fails. In the end, Colette stops going there; however, the next time she sees Délia, on the street, she is wearing widow's clothing and the reader assumes that the husband has died.

"Green Sealing Wax" begins with Colette describing how she loved office supplies as an adolescent, and how her mother once gave her some fancy green sealing wax belonging to her father. Meanwhile, the neighbor's husband dies without leaving any clear will. The neighbor comes over one day and borrows some books from Colette, leaving suddenly. Later, a will appears, and everyone wonders if it is false, for it has some very strange things in it. Moreover, the will was apparently sealed with the exact kind of sealing wax that Colette's mother had given her, which has been missing since the day the neighbor borrowed the books.

Varieties of Human Nature Analysis

The "Varieties of Human Nature" stories show a more mature side of Colette's work. While Colette herself does appear as the narrator and heroine occasionally, she also tells brief tales of characters from extremely different walks of life: murderers, lovers, children, artists, the bourgeoisie, and the rich.

Although her stories from this section vary greatly in setting and in characters, they share a few common themes. The first of these is the power of emotion, whether it is love, hate, or fear. "The Rainy Moon," is a stunning example of this. Throughout the story, the reader sees Délia transforming from a rather depressed woman into one completely possessed with the idea of revenge and with taking her husband's life. Although Délia stays in her room at all times and rarely leaves the apartment, her inner emotions are so strong that they eventually transform her. However, these emotions are affected by outside events to a certain extent as, when her husband dies, she is able to happily leave the house again. Similarly, "The Watchmen," describes a much more innocent situation, where Colette stays awake with a group of children to try to see a ghost. Throughout the story, the author builds the suspense to such an extent that even

the reader is surprised when the "ghost" turns out to be a bird. The transformative power of emotions permeates almost every story in this section.

Likewise, though these stories portray men and women almost equally, the limitations of a woman's life in the early twentieth century are highlighted in these stories. These limitations become particularly poignant in "The Seamstress," where Colette feels social pressure to make her daughter learn to sew. However, her daughter takes advantage of the time to analyze people they know, making the physical exercise somewhat mental, as well. Though a woman's options are limited, stories like this imply, women adapt to situations and have the strength to make the best of them. Colette's heroines are rarely wilting flowers but usually take some kind of agency in their lives, even when very little is left to them.

Finally, these stories are remarkable for changing between the extremely mundane and the extremely dramatic in one fell swoop. Certain stories focus just on trinkets or trivial, everyday matters, such as "The Bracelet," which centers around a woman's dissatisfaction with the title object she has searched for. However, these mundane events symbolize larger emotions: here, the woman is actually upset that she no longer has the vision to be excited about life's possibilities, as she did when she was a young girl. Similarly, stories such as "The Omelet" focus on extremely dramatic events (here, a murderer has evaded justice and is trying to stay hidden) but bring in everyday details - after all, even murderers have to eat. The blending of the small and the large unites these extremely different stories. Even though they appear to be disconnected, the kinds of symbolism that Colette uses and her narrative methods give them a coherence as she examines the differences and similarities of human nature.

Love

Love Summary

"In the Flower of Age" describes a liaison between an older woman and a younger man. Though they have a lively social life, the older woman is disappointed to find that the younger man starts to act old and never wants to go out. In "The Rivals," Clara and Antoinette are rivals for a singer named Bussy. Clara finally "wins" him, only to find out that Antoinette has already married her cousin and left the country on a long honeymoon, making Clara far less interested in Bussy. "The Respite" is the story of a man who, in physical pain, found a picture in the newspaper of his wife kissing another man. In his rage and jealousy, his arm pain goes away. However, he confronts her, and she acts so assuredly innocent that he is no longer certain that the picture is of her. Once his jealousy is mitigated, his physical pain returns. In "The Bitch," a soldier on leave goes to his mistress's house. She is not there, but her dog is and after he rests a moment, he takes the dog for a walk. The dog lead him to anther house, which the dog is obviously used to going to. Suspicious, the soldier leaves his mistress's house before she returns, taking the dog with him.

"The Tender Shoot" begins with Colette trying to convince her friend, an older man, that he will be better off spending the war (World War II) in the country in a houseful of young girls. He tells her that he had one romance when he was around fifty with a younger girl that has made him swear off them forever. The man goes on a hunting party with friends in the country and one day, when wandering, discovers a beautiful young girl of fifteen, with whom he becomes enamored. However, she is very tentative at first and will never accept gifts from him. Nevertheless, he is eventually able to seduce her. Later, he goes to see her and it begins pouring rain. The two take refuge in her mother's house and fall asleep. However, the mother discovers them and gets extremely upset, upsetting the girl, as well; the two of them decide to chase the man out and start throwing rocks at him so that he leaves. He does, never coming back, and has never seduced young girls since then.

In "Bygone Spring," Colette describes April arriving, which makes her think of other Aprils. In particular, she remembers one spring when she went for a walk and saw the maid and the day laborer kissing each other. Similarly, "October" is a descriptive sketch in which the author describes autumn coming and the changes to her neighborhood and the foliage. She writes about the garden and the children, and two cats who she imagines are in love with each other.

"Armande" is a love story between a man named Maxine and the title character. At the beginning of the story, Maxine is beside himself and talking to his sister, convinced that Armande is not in love with him. The story then goes back to the day they met, when he was also accompanied by his sister. In the present day, he goes to visit Armande, as he is about to leave on a long journey, and the two of them are alone. She seems indifferent to him, and he is tormented. However, she shuts the door suddenly and the

chandelier falls from the ceiling, onto Maxine's head. He falls to the ground, injured and in and out of consciousness. In his daze, he can hear how distraught Armande is and how she calls him endearing terms, showing her obvious love for him. He is not upset to be injured, as he now knows that she loves him, and as men come to take him to the doctor, she walks beside him in a display of devotion.

In "The Rendezvous," two couples have gone on vacation together to Tangiers: Cecil and Odette and Bernard and Rose. The former couple is married, and hope to see Bernard and Rose marry as well, which will allow Bernard to take part in Cecil's business. They are extremely bourgeois as a group, and Rose flirts a lot with Cecil as well as with Bernard, though she is having a physical affair with the latter. One night, as Bernard and Rose go out on a walk together before spending the night together, they come across Ahmed, a young native man who has served as their guide. He is severely hurt, and Bernard struggles to help him, trying to make bandages from Rose's coat and otherwise stop Ahmed from losing too much blood. However, Rose is disgusted and does nothing to help, standing back, and will not even walk Ahmed and Bernard back to the hotel, as she doesn't want to be seen. Bernard thus ends the affair with her, seeing her for the shallow, bourgeois woman that she is.

"The Kepi" is the story of "Marco," a friend of Colette's friend Paul, who makes her living writing stories. Colette convinces Paul to introduce them and, though she is in her early twenties and twenty years younger than Marco, works on giving the woman a makeover. Marco's ex-husband sends significant sums of money to her, and Colette helps Marco buy newer, fashionable clothes, do her hair in different ways, and so on. Meanwhile, Marco moves from her shabby apartment to newer lodgings. She later responds to a soldier's announcement in the newspaper that he wants a correspondent, and the two eventually meet in person and begin an affair, which invigorates Marco. However, one night, he leaves his kepi (military hat) on the bedside table and she puts it on as a joke, prancing around naked in his hat, and he finally sees how old and ridiculous she actually is this way. He leaves her, telling her he is being stationed abroad, but she finds out that he actually goes to his father's estate. Marco returns to her former life, older now, and doing the same kind of work that she did before.

In "The Photographer's Wife," Colette goes to see a woman to have her re-string a pearl necklace, and makes the acquaintance of the eponymous character, Madame Arnaud, who lives down the hall. However, one day, Madame Arnaud attempts to commit suicide. Colette later goes to visit her and Madame Arnaud is surprisingly forthcoming about her suicide attempt, saying that all of her days were like the others and that her life felt absolutely meaningless. She hoped to find a few moments of transcendence in the time before death, but now that she knows that the main thing she felt was pain in her feet and not anything spiritual, she will never try it again.

"Bella-Vista" is the story of Colette's trip to a countryside inn, which is owned by two sisters. Although she initially finds her trip there relaxing, she starts to be irked by the fakeness of the building and of the sister's discussions. In addition, a man arrives, who is universally hated by the animals, including by Colette's dog. A few birds in the menagerie begin to die; one day, later on, they are all found dead, and the man has

disappeared. Put off by this event, Colette leaves, angry at her friend who recommended the inn and angry at herself for having listened to his advice.

In "April," Philippe and Vinca, adolescents, are falling in love and decide to organize a picnic in the park. They go with their companions and have a nice time, but then Philippe accidentally leads Vinca to a place where a man and a woman are lying in each other's arms, having just made love. Embarrassed, he rushes her back to the group.

Love Analysis

Though these stories are all classified by the editor as "love stories," they are equally about people falling out of love and generally trying to sustain themselves at the end of love affairs.

Colette's female characters in this section are notable for representing a wide variety of "types" without ever being limited by their models. For example, Madame Arnaud in "The Photographer's Wife" is the perfect feminist example of a woman despairing over her lack of meaningful work and her limited existence. However, though Madame Arnaud does attempt to commit suicide, she does not succeed and, in fact, is extremely prosaic about never trying again. Dying didn't bring to her what she thought it would, so she won't touch it again. This kind of matter-of-fact thought process directly contradicts the vision of a woman powerless against fate. As she does in other stories, Colette depicts Madame Arnaud as simply determined to do the best she can with what she has.

Colette's women are not all saints, either. Though she usually has the good in one person juxtaposed with mediocrity or even evil in another, these characters can be either male or female. In "The Rendezvous," for example, while Odette genuinely appears to be malicious, Cécil, her husband, is represented as a flirtatious lout. Similarly, Rose appears kind but a little simple, but later proves to be worthless and bourgeois as she refuses to help a wounded man who is suffering. Bernard is the hero of this story, which is surprising; Colette usually depicts positive female characters. However, she does not do so at the expense of showing positive male characters, as well. Even male characters who she obviously judges herself (such as her friend, the fifty-year-old man seducing a fifteen-year-old girl in "The Tender Shoot") she depicts with tenderness and with an even hand.

Similarly, while many authors might be tempted to depict the end of love affairs as extremely dramatic events, Colette implies through her impartial descriptions that life goes on. While she does show tragic consequences (such as Marco's ridiculousness in "The Kepi"), she keeps a sense of humor about it. After all, Marco's fees for her stories have now doubled. At the same time, her characters tend to get their just rewards. In "The Rendezvous," Rose is left alone and unwed; in "The Tender Shoot," the older man is chased off the property by two angry women throwing stones at him.

Characters

Coletteappears in Various Stories

Colette is by far the most important character in her stories. Although it is difficult to say that she represents herself accurately, she gives a uniform and convincing self-portrait that does not change, even from her very early stories to her later ones. In these stories, she is level-headed and has a strong sense of humor. When a half-crazy woman asks her repeatedly to read her own writing, Colette cannot help mocking a pretentious pattern in her speech. At the same time, she presents herself as an early feminist. While she does train her daughter to sew, she does not like to do it, and she has a hard time accepting the traditional values of the day. This is also reflected in her willingness to confront unpleasant, even taboo subjects, and place herself in unseemly situations. She is, for example, willing to visit the recent victim of an abortion, even though her friends and colleagues are not willing to associate themselves with that procedure during this time period. However, she is not infallible. For example, she does not end up going by herself to visit her colleague. Overall, Colette creates a vision of herself as an extremely curious person, one who is often drawn back into past memories and one with many friends, from whom she draws the inspiration for her stories.

Valentineappears in Various Stories

Valentine is a good friend of Colette's and appears quite a bit, especially in the early stories. Valentine is a kind-hearted woman, whose company Colette seems to enjoy. However, she has a tendency to be slightly superficial and shallow, overly preoccupied with fashions and other people's lives. She has certain failings, as well, that complicate her character. For example, she is unwilling to return a painting, even when it was bequeathed to her through a strange series of confused circumstances. Like many women of her time, Valentine is preoccupied with appearing young, and is baffled when her lover breaks up with her because she is too painted and false-looking; she does not understand the appeal of a "natural" look. In these stories, she often has her hair cut and is buying new clothes, trying to be very fashionable and find the most flattering thing. She and Colette also pursue other interests, and go to the country for grape-harvests and drives. Valentine appears in later works, as well, but only as a peripheral character. In the opening story of the Valentine series, Colette breaks off their friendship; however, the fact that this letter is followed by numerous stories of their time together, the reader wonders how serious Colette was about ending the friendship.

Colette's Daughter and Goddaughterappears in Various Stories

These two characters, while presented as mostly separate from each other in different stories, have similar properties which unite them. Together, they represent the youngest women in the book, and thus Colette's vision of the future for women. Her god-daughter, who appears in several dialogues for one voice, has a sardonic, precocious voice, and already has formed opinions on everything from literature to love to hats. Similarly, Colette's daughter appears as a minor focus in other stories, as Colette watches her growing up and dislikes how she must start to conform to society's expectations for women in general and her own separation from her mother in particular. The two young girls are generally depicted as funny, clever, and wise before their years.

Cloui/Chériappears in The Other Table - The Pearls

This is a wealthy young man, in and out of love through several stories.

Luluappears in The Other Table

This is the music hall singer who breaks up with Clouk/Chéri.

Bastienneappears in Bastienne's Child

This is a music hall performer who becomes pregnant.

La Roussalkaappears in The Misfit

This is a music hall performer who never fits in with the other girls.

Gitanetteappears in Gitanette

This is a former colleague of Colette's from the music hall who tells the story of a ruined friendship.

Gibicheappears in Gibiche

This is a music hall performer who has an abortion.

Carmen Brasco and Claraappears in Gibiche

These are music hall performers who go with Colette to visit Gibiche.

Mademoiselle Barberetappears in The Rainy Moon

This is the typist Colette uses and the sister of Délia.

Déliaappears in The Rainy Moon

This is the troubled young woman who tries to cast spells on her estranged husband.

Monsieur Mauriceappears in Monsieur Maurice

This is a lawyer who is searching for a new secretary.

Armandeappears in Armande

This is a young woman who may or may not be in love with a young man called Maxine.

Maxineappears in Armande

This is a young man who is infatuated with Armande.

Marcoappears in The Kefi

This is a middle-aged woman writer whom Colette befriends.

Paulappears in The Kefi

This is a friend of Colette's who introduces her to Marco.

Madame Armandappears in The Photographer's Wife

This is a married woman who attempts to commit suicide.

Objects/Places

The Bourgeoisieappears in All the Way in Flagstaff, Arizona

Bourgeois characters appear repeatedly throughout Colette's stories. She pokes fun at their middle-class values and traditions.

The Music Hall

This is the location for the stories in the second part. A place where dancers put on performances.

The Countrysideappears in Talk of Heroes

Characters from the city, particularly upper-class characters, often vacation, hide out, or must spend time in the country.

The Bedroom

Some of the most revealing love scenes take place in the bedroom. This is particularly the case for non-traditional relationships, such as those between older women and younger men.

Shops and Boutiques

Colette writes several stories about the everyday people she comes across in shops and similar locations.

The Audience

Several stories are told from the point of view of audience members, rather than the performers, giving the upper-class view of performances, which probably do not take place in music halls but rather in more prestigious theaters.

Bella-Vista

This is the resort where Colette stays in the eponymous story, where numerous animals are killed.

Jewelry

Jewelry, particularly pearls, plays an important role in many stories. In "The Photographer's Wife," Colette is going to see her pearl-stringer and spends a long time discussing the importance of these necklaces in her life. In "The Bracelet," two bracelets symbolize a woman's changed life.

The Kepi

The Kepi, a military hat, appears in the story of the same name and symbolizes the end of Marco's relationship with the soldier.

Green Sealing Wax

This is a favorite office supply of Colette's and is stolen by a neighbor to forge her husband's will.

Themes

Feminism

Although these stories were written before feminism became a movement per se, Colette has her own particular brand of feminism that comes through in her depiction of women. Unlike many authors of her time, she refrains from stereotyping her female characters. They come from a variety of social backgrounds, from the dance hall to the massage parlor to the upper-classes, have a variety of faults and a variety of good points. Overall, she works to depict her women characters in an even-handed and fully developed way that shows them as human beings and not just as women. Similarly, she describes many contemporary scenarios that entrap or limit women's potential in many ways. In her music hall stories, the dancers become pregnant or obsessed with money or obsolete when they grow too old for the best parts. Later, her stories about love show women having to bend in many ways to men's wills, whether this means adapting to a hand they consider grotesque or being murdered by their lovers. At the same time, however, Colette often depicts older women having affairs with younger men and teaching them lessons, her women do not necessarily become less attractive with age, but still keep the means through which they exercise their power.

The Imperfection of Love

While Colette does occasionally tell stories of happy couples, especially couples falling in love such as "Armande," her love stories are more often stories of people falling out of love, or falling in love for dubious reasons. In "The Flower of Age," for example, an older woman becomes disillusioned with her young lover when she realizes that he has the same failings as an older man. "The Rendezvous" is a perfect example of the kind of flawed love story Colette favors. While a traditional narrative might end with Rose growing and deciding to help save the wounded man, she instead reveals her limited nature and refuses to help, effectively ending any chances she had at marrying the protagonist. "The Tender Shoot" is also a typical anti-love story, in that the narrator describes a very romantic situation with a younger girl though Colette obviously disapproves, going into details about their courtship and their romance, only to find that she is under her mother's thumb. The fact that the two women chase the man away, throwing stones at him, is a particularly tragi-comic ending to what is supposedly a romance but has the advantage of scaring the man away from younger women for the rest of his days. Similarly, "The Kepi" shows the limitations of love, as when the young soldier finally sees Marco for who she really is, he falls out of love with her and breaks off their liaison.

Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy, particularly the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie and the upper classes, appears repeatedly as a theme throughout Colette's stories. Initially, her friend Valentine is the perfect example of this. Valentine cares more about appearances than about the actual reality of situations, and is quick to judge and gossip. This behavior, incidentally, is mirrored in the dialogues for one voice, particularly those of the masseuse and the shopkeeper. Ironically, the women at the music hall tend to be the most honest and straightforward characters in Colette's stories: while they may be manipulative and ambitious, they rarely hide behind conventional mores. There are a few exceptions to this, such as the two women who refuse to go see the dancer who's had an abortion because of what their families would say. Later on, hypocrisy appears as a strong element in many love stories, particularly in stories like "The Rendezvous," where Rose is more concerned with what things look like than by actually trying to do good. Similarly, stories in which women fall out of love with men when their rivals are no longer interested, or when they see that the first wife was dissatisfied with the man they have ended up with, also illustrate this hypocrisy. These women have no reason to suddenly dislike their partners, but the reactions of society have made them change their minds.

Style

Point of View

The vast majority of Colette's stories are written in the first-person. Interestingly, these first-person stories usually feature Colette herself or a fictionalized version of herself as the narrator. She presents herself as an extremely reliable narrator who sees things clearly, with a sense of humor about everyday life. Stories about other characters, which do not feature Colette, are invariably told from the third-person point of view. However, Colette allows her readers to sympathize with what might otherwise be unsympathetic characters by providing an especially profound third-person limited point of view, helping her readers to get into the minds of characters like music hall dancers, unfaithful wives, or murderers. In these stories, Colette herself never makes an appearance. One exception to the first-person point of view is the collection of dialogues for one voice. While these stories are technically in the third person because of the quotation marks surrounding all of the text, they give an intimate view of the speaker through the removal of the other speaker's responses. This kind of experimenting with point of view is most marked in Colette's early stories, though she does use the same technique that she uses for the dialogues for one voice occasionally in her later work, as well. On the whole, her short stories are remarkable for the consistency in these three points of view with little overlap between them and for the personal touch she is able to bring, even to the stories she chooses to tell in the third person.

Setting

With the exception of one or two stories set abroad, with characters on vacation, Colette's stories are set exclusively in France, usually at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, within France, they come from a vast variety of locations. In this collection of short stories, she takes her reader from the music hall to the countryside, from a dancer's apartment to the apartment of a wealthy couple, from Paris to the provinces. Some shift in time is visible in the stories, as she thinks about places she lived "years ago," or a character briefly discusses the Second World War. However, for such biting social commentary, her stories rarely carry broad markers of their time and place; it is not always obvious to a contemporary reader, for example, in which decade a story is taking place. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Colette's initial readers were probably very adept at picking up on the numerous clues she gives regarding the timing of these stories. Clues such as fashions, hairstyles, and popular songs all allude to particular moments in time.

Language and Meaning

While Colette's stories tend to be rather accessible, this is mostly through the large amount of dialogue she includes. The translations of the short stories in this collection

also make the speakers sound remarkably timeless and easy to follow. However, in more descriptive passages, Colette often plays with complex and beautiful language. She uses a mixture of long and short sentences, but even her short sentences tend to have complex structures. The mixture of description with dialogue creates stories that are very readable and enjoyable for a modern reader. While she can use some slang from the time period, her translators work this easily into the body of the story, and nothing stands out as inappropriate. Overall, however, her characters tend to use the language of their social classes. For example, the dancers at the music hall are blunter and use slightly more vulgar language than their upper-class counterparts. Colette is an expert at matching the correct vocabulary to the correct class, and her characters illustrate this in a variety of different ways. Moreover, even Colette's child characters are represented in a true-to-life way. When her daughter or her goddaughter speak, for example, they tend to be forthright and precocious, while still being believable as children.

Structure

The structure of Colette's stories can be slightly disconcerting for a modern reader. These stories are not structured in the same way as twentieth-century American short stories. Rather, they combine elements of European novels such as social commentary and lengthy descriptions with revolutionary changes such as true-to-life dialogue and uncensored situations. Due to this, readers today may be put off by seemingly unstructured stories. Many of Colette's short stories begin with a lengthy description of something that seems to have nothing to do with the ultimate story. For example, "The Photographer's Wife" begins with a lengthy discussion of Colette's history with pearls and ends up telling the story of an attempted suicide, or "Green Sealing Wax" begins with Colette's adolescent obsession with office supplies and ends up being the story of a forged will. However, the early descriptions in these stories end up informing the later narratives through their symbolism, often complexifying the narrative in interesting and innovative ways. Similarly, while modern readers may be put off by lengthy descriptions, these descriptions often offer important insight into the rest of the story. Several stories are included in this volume with no discernable narrative structure: they tend to read more as character sketches or portraits of a particular time and place. These kind of writings were more common to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readers. As it is, these sketches give interesting insight into the development of Colette's style, and help to draw a more complex picture of her life in France at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Quotes

"Goodbye, my dear Valentine. I am afraid you won't like this letter. We will never understand one another, my friend" ("A Letter," pg. 50.)

"Don't bother me with your grown-up opinions! "("My Goddaughter," pg. 27.)

"We scurry along, pressed for time, talkative, screeching like chickens, hurrying toward the illusion of living at high speed, of keeping warm, working hard, shunning thought, and refusing to be burdened with regrets, remorse, or memories" ("The Halt," pg. 107.)

"One sex practically eclipsed the other, dominating it, not only by numbers, but by its own particular smell and magnetic atmosphere" ("Gribiche," pg. 208.)

"To my cost, I have proved from long experience that the past is a far more violent temptation to me than the craving to know the future" ("The Riny Moon," pg. 351.)

Whenever I think of her, I always see her shored up by those scruples she modestly called fidgets and sustained by the sheer force of humble, everyday feminine greatness; that unrecognized greatness she had misnamed 'a very trivial life.'
("The Photographer's Wife," page 557)

"Oh, Marco! In one moment I destroyed you, I wept for you - I saw you" ("The Kepi," pg. 528.)

"I had an unjust feeling which refused to admit that this easy assurance quite caught the manner of a masculine female, adept at making women blush under her searching gazes" ("Bella-Vista," pg. 600.)

"Born into an unmonied family, I never learned a métier. I knew how to climb, whistle and run, but no one ever suggested that I earn my living as a squirrel or a bird or a deer" (Part I: Early Stories)

"Was I, in those days, too susceptible to the convention of work, glittering display, empty-headedness, punctuality, and rigid probity which reigns over the music hall? Did it inspire me to describe it over and over again with a violent and superficial love with all its accompaniment of commonplace poetry? Very possibly" (Part II: Backstage at the Music Hall)

"The human face was ever my great landscape" (Part III: Varieties of Human Nature.)

Love has never been a question of age. I shall never be so old as to forget what love is" (Part IV: Love.)

Topics for Discussion

Which aspects of characters from Colette's early stories appear in her later works? Give details and examples.

Colette's representations of women are nuanced and varied. Compare and contrast negative and positive representations of women in her short stories.

How is childhood characterized in Colette's stories? Compare and contrast "The Sick Child" with Colette's writings about her daughter and goddaughter.

Colette wrote many stories about the music hall. How does she use gender to contribute to this atmosphere? Give details and examples from specific stories.

Compare and contrast Colette and her friend Valentine. Discuss how the characterization of their relationship changes throughout Colette's stories.

Many of Colette's stories present love as a mixed blessing. How do Colette's short stories characterize marriage? Give details from individual stories.

Colette's male characters come in a variety of forms but usually serve as foils for females somewhere in the story. Describe the relationships among Odette, Cecil, Bernard, and Rose in "The Rendezvous" and their similarities and differences.