

# Je ne parle pas francais Short Guide

## Je ne parle pas francais by Katherine Mansfield

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# Characters

"Je ne parle pas français" is first and foremost a revelation of the character of Raoul Duquette, the narrator. In the first half we encounter him sitting in a cafe, musing about himself, his world, and other people. Raoul is a fraud; he calls himself a writer, but as readers learn more about him, they become aware of his real business in that cafe.

He is waiting; the others, whether they be women or men, always make "the first advances."

Midway through the story, Raoul recalls Dick Harmon. When they first met, Raoul was obviously attracted to Dick. They became fast friends and went everywhere together, but Dick had the disturbing habit of backing off.

As Raoul notes, when they were out together with "a little woman," Dick would depart "just when she would not expect him to get up and leave her, but quite the contrary." Eventually, just as if Raoul were that little woman (or as he calls himself, a "fox terrier"), Dick got up and left him, returning to England with no prior warning.

But Dick comes back to Paris, bringing with him Mouse. Apparently they had run away together to share the Bohemian life, but he abandons her on their first night in Paris, leaving her a note, saying that it would kill his mother were he to carry out their plan.

Raoul, who had arranged for their lodging and accompanied them to the rooms, witnesses this abandonment and is touched when Mouse reveals that she cannot return to England because she told everyone she was getting married. The reader knows the least about Mouse, perhaps because Raoul knows less about women than men. Earlier he lumped all women together: "But from little prostitutes and kept women and elderly widows and shop girls and wives of respectable men, and even advanced modern literary ladies at the most select dinners and soirees (I've been there), I've met invariably with not only the same readiness, but with the same positive invitation."

Raoul breaks his rule about making "first advances" by offering to come the next day to help Mouse, and she responded to his invitation by coming "out of her hole . . . timid . . . but she came out." Raoul Duquette, the cynic, never goes back to see her, but he is astounded by his responses to this woman whose suffering was real and spontaneous.



## Social Concerns

The setting for "Je ne parle pas français" is Paris — a world of small cafes, crowded hotels, and gloomy rooming houses, populated by artists, writers, pimps, prostitutes, and gigolos. In this post-World War I story, society has lost its moral center. Raoul Duquette, the main character, sees feeling as the only sign of human worth. The exploitation of others for his own personal amusement and gain has become such a habit that Raoul is unaware of any standard of judgment besides self gratification.

# Techniques

In "Je ne parle pas français," Mansfield comes closest to writing the kind of stream of consciousness fiction pioneered by Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). However, the story is not one long monologue without punctuation and paragraphing. It is broken up into short units, reflecting the narrator's shifting focus of attention which moves freely back and forth between the present setting, past events, and philosophical statements.



# Themes

Two important themes in the story are sexual ambiguity and victimization, what critic Kate Fullbrook calls the "inescapable victimization and universal warping of desire." The sexual orientation of each of the three main characters is in some way twisted or ambiguous. Raoul Duquette, the narrator of the story, had been repeatedly molested by an African laundress when he was a child, starting at the age of ten. His loss of innocence brought an early end to his childhood so that he "seemed to understand everybody and be able to do ... what he liked with everybody." His English friend Dick Harmon has never been able to break the bonds of a domineering mother and is apparently unable to maintain relationships with either women or men.

The young woman in the story, Mouse, may be fragile and delicately attractive, but she has masculine characteristics and several times is likened to a boy by Duquette. The story concerns the victimization of Mouse when she is abandoned in a strange city by both men.

They, of course, have both been victimized early in their lives by women.

The mask is a more general theme in this story. All the characters in some way mask their true feelings and identities from others and from themselves.

Raoul Duquette in particular practices a kind of conscious self-deceit. At one point, he describes himself practicing his pose as a man of letters in front of a mirror; he decides that if one looks the part, one must be the part.

## Literary Precedents

The most obvious literary precedent for "Je ne parle pas français" is Dostoyevsky's *Letters from the Underworld* (1864). In both works a self-absorbed man reveals his own nature, and both works end with stories from the narrator's past. When Mansfield's husband, John Middleton Murry, read the manuscript of the first part of the story, he wrote her, "It's utterly unlike any sensation I have ever yet had from any writing of yours, or any writing at all except Dostoyevsky's."

Another possible influence on this story might have been impressionist painters like Toulouse-Lautrec, Monet, Cezanne, Manet, and Matisse. Critic Rhoda B. Nathan has pointed out that the Paris Raoul Duquette inhabits is the Paris of Toulouse-Lautrec and that the technique of the story represents Mansfield's "attempt to do with language what the impressionists and post-impressionists were doing with brush and palette."

## Related Titles

"Je ne parle pas français" is unlike most of Mansfield's earlier stories, not only in its use of a first-person narrator as the central character of the story but also in its development of a masculine point of view. The story is also more open about sexual matters than most of Mansfield's earlier work, particularly in the unexpurgated version that Mansfield wanted published. Unfortunately, the censored version is usually published, and Mansfield's portrait of Duquette loses much of its edge.





# Copyright Information

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