

The Lovely Leave Short Guide

The Lovely Leave by Dorothy Parker

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Contents

The Lovely Leave Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	6
Key Questions.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	8
Related Titles.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10



Characters

Steve McVicker clearly loves and trusts his wife, even though he refuses a romantic interlude with her while on leave. He encourages her to see her female and male friends while he is away, and expresses his affection for her before he returns to his men. He is also dedicated to the war effort, and feels responsible for his men; they become the topic of conversation several times while he is home.

Mimi is slightly more complex. She is very patriotic, and proud of Steve for his participation in the war. But she is also jealous of the war's intrusion on their lives, and specifically jealous of the men who garner so much of Steve's attention.

"[Y]ou have a whole new life—I have half an old one," she tells him. As indicated by her preparations for the leave, and by statements such as "Perhaps a strange new life and strange empty miles and strange gay voices had no existence for two who were really one," Mimi is a romantic. At times this characteristic clouds her vision. She knew from the previous leave, for example, that "strange" lives, miles, and voices did indeed affect "two who were really one."

And when the story closes, Mimi tells a friend that the brief leave, characterized by fighting and a last-minute reconciliation, was "lovely."

One question regarding Mimi's character can be raised. She has a job, but we do not know what it is. She supports, yet feels disconnected from the war effort at a time when women were taking jobs that men, now soldiers, formerly held. Was Mimi part of this effort? Not every woman was, of course, but given Mimi's complicated relationship to the war, the story is noticeably vague about what she does outside the home. War-related work might have mitigated her sense of isolation somewhat.

Nevertheless, Mimi remains a more rounded character than Steve. Parker's flat and round characters offer both sides of a war story. Steve avoids feelings in order to stay focused on the war and to do his job, Mimi creates alternate feelings in order to handle her loneliness.



Social Concerns/Themes

"The Lovely Leave" is a war story written from the domestic point of view.

Set in the United States—most likely New York—during World War II, the story examines war's effects on a particular marriage, that of Steve and Mimi McVicker. What becomes more difficult than the absence suffered when the husband is away with his troops is his return home on leave from the army. Yet the tensions that occur between man and wife illustrate more than just another "battle between the sexes." This happily married couple recreates the cause of war in microcosm.

After Mimi learns that her husband has been granted a twenty-four-hour leave, she recalls a previous leave of his: "There he stood, in their little apartment, a dashing stranger in strange, dashing garments." Steve's strangeness was the first indication that all would not go well.

Mimi swears this will not happen again, and prepares for a romantic interlude, buying a seductive black dress, perfumes and bath oils, lingerie, cocktails, and flowers. But after his arrival, she learns his leave has been cut to one hour, and while home he prefers to bathe alone, read a magazine, and prepare for his departure. In a plot familiar to readers of Parker's fiction, Steve appears to be the insensitive male, while Mimi struggles to express how she feels.

The miscommunication in this story, however, is not grounded only in differences between genders. Throughout the war, Mimi has been communicating with her husband according to rules, most likely provided in a handbook for soldiers' wives, a document still used today.

Among these rules, the first of them was the hardest: never say to him what you want him to say to you. Never tell him how sadly you miss him, how it grows no better, how each day without him is sharper than the day before. Set down for him the gay happenings about you, bright little anecdotes, not invented, necessarily, but attractively embellished. Do not bedevil him with the pining of your faithful heart because he is your husband, your man, your love. For you are writing to none of these. You are writing to a soldier.

Unable to state how she feels to her husband in a letter, Mimi finds communication in person even more difficult.

Preoccupied with the war and his preparations, Steve does not want to hear Mimi's complaints of loneliness. He tries to avoid the issue with comments such as, "That's nonsense," "Don't do that kind of talk," and "I can't go through this kind of thing." When Mimi responds with anger and coldness, he finally tells her, "I can't talk about it. I can't even think about it—because if I did I couldn't do my job." This, of course, is precisely why the rules of communicating with soldiers are offered to soldier's wives.



Yet the solution—rules that inhibit communication—becomes part of the problem. Steve and Mimi enter into domestic conflict when their communication is thwarted by war and the new rules it imposes. Similarly, wars occur when communication breaks down, when discussion and negotiation are no longer possible. Steve and Mimi enact the process of conflict generation and renewal.



Techniques

"The Lovely Leave" is one of Parker's more fully narrated stories. A third-person, limited omniscient narrator tells the story from Mimi's point of view. This is entirely appropriate since the main issue in the story, the inability to communicate freely, arises from Mimi. Once Steve arrives, however, the dialogue between husband and wife takes over. Ironically, a great deal of conversation takes place about the fact that enough conversation is not taking place.

Dialogue alone could tell us much of Steve and Mimi's story, but the third-person narrator contributes significantly to the story's structure. Without it, there would be no flashback to establish a history of disappointing leaves, suggesting an ongoing problem that Mimi tries, but fails, to solve. Also, her elaborate preparations for his visit, which suggest the extent of her romanticism, are conveyed by the narrative voice. Finally, we learn about the rules of communication that Mimi must follow, and that link the issues of marriage, war and communication, from the narrator.

As in "The Waltz" and "Here We Are," the story's closure proves to be circular. Mimi's last remark that the leave was lovely returns us to the story's title.

Given the fact that a previous leave and the recent leave were both marked by miscommunication and argument, we have reason to believe the next leave will be as unfortunate. The characters in Parker's fiction are often trapped into patterns of behavior by convention or circumstance.



Key Questions

Although it has broad appeal, "The Lovely Leave" may be of particular interest to women who are, or have been, married to soldiers, or to men who were soldiers with women left behind. Some background history regarding women on the home front during World War II may offer some useful points of departure in discussing the story.

1. Retell (or rewrite) "The Lovely Leave" from Steve McVicker's point of view. How would he explain his behavior?
2. Do you find Steve's preoccupation with his soldiering convincing? Why does he not use his hour to make love with his wife?
3. Imagine your spouse is a soldier, and you have to write to him or her a letter according to the rules that Mimi must follow. What would you say?
4. Which character has the largest claim to your sympathy?
5. Is another, different kind of ending possible for this story? What might it be?
6. Is Mimi's nervousness and shyness convincing? Why or why not?

Literary Precedents

In some ways, Mimi McVicker can be compared to Penelope, the long-suffering wife of Odysseus. Parker was familiar with that Greek myth, but in both poetry and fiction she rewrites the tale, making the waiting wife a little less patient and compliant than Penelope. As in the Penelope section of *The Odyssey*, "The Lovely Leave" is a war story told from a domestic point of view. We see the effects of war on the women who wait at home.

A number of Parker's contemporaries wrote war fiction that may have influenced Parker, or that offer interesting comparisons. Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1924; enlarged 1925; see separate entry), as well as his war novels are relevant, since Parker was a great admirer of his work. Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918; see separate entry), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925; see separate entry) and *Between the Acts* (1941), and Stevie Smith's *Over the Frontier* (1938) provide, like Parker, an examination of war and its effects from a woman's point of view.



Related Titles

Parker wrote a second story set in World War II, "Song of the Shirt, 1941," in which an upper-class woman, unaccustomed to work of any kind, tries to sew clothing for the war effort. Parker's other two war stories, "Soldiers of the Republic" and "Who Might Be Interested," concern the Spanish Civil War.

As a more fully narrated story (rather than an interior monologue or dialogue), "The Lovely Leave" can be compared with Parker's other narrated stories—"Horsie," "Big Blonde," "Such a Pretty Little Picture," "Mr. Durant," "I Live on Your Visits," "The Wonderful Old Gentleman," and "Lolita."



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