

Mainly in Moonlight Short Guide

Mainly in Moonlight by Nicholas Stuart Gray

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Overview

Gray believed that people need something joyously unexpected in their lives as an escape from day-to-day problems and as inspiration to make life's challenges easier to overcome. Mainly in *Moonlight* is a collection of short stories about the impossible. They tell about sorcerers both powerful and inept, princes caught in spells and set free from spells, dazzling castles, and fearsome quests. The reader enters a world of marvels and adventures.

While many writers use fantasy elements in stories, few use them as skillfully as Gray. His precise and beautiful language brings strange lands to glittering life, and his use of humor gives his stories a unique personality.

About the Author

Nicholas Stuart Gray was born on October 23, 1922, in Scotland. As a young boy, he made up stories and plays to amuse his brothers and sisters, and as a means of escape from a difficult family life. He left home as a teenager and began his lifelong career in the theater. Eventually he worked as a stage manager, actor, director, and playwright, and his first play was produced before he was twenty years old. As an actor, he starred in his own plays as well as those by Shakespeare and other classic playwrights.

In Britain in the early 1950s, few children attended the theater. At that time, virtually the only kind of theater considered suitable for children was pantomime. These plays were not the silent mime the name implies, but a hodgepodge mixture of a loose story line, songs based on pop music, comedy routines, and other odd bits to please the adults who accompanied their children to the show. Children usually found these latter elements incomprehensible, while adults were normally bored by the scenes geared toward the children.

Gray believed that in a culture of television and movies the future of English theater depended on attracting a new audience of children and that this required higher quality plays to replace the half-planned and frivolous skits.

Determined to write plays that children could understand but that would not talk down to them, he based most of his plays on traditional fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, and Charles Perrault. When first performed in London, his plays, such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Tinder-Box*, became instantly popular with both children and adults.

Later, Gray also wrote novels and short stories based on traditional forms. Some of his books, like *The Seventh Swan*, were closely based on his plays. Others, such as *Over the Hills to Fabyon*, were based on original fantasy concepts.

Nearly all his works, whatever their genre, deal with that special place where reality and enchantment meet.

Setting

Gray's stories are set in an unnamed land that seems to lie half in and half out of the kingdom of magic. The time is in the dim past, long before machinery and skyscrapers, yet almost every story begins with "Once, and not so long ago."

Gray's fabulous lands are always ruled by a king or queen; travelers journey on horseback (or by magic); and common people work as shepherds, huntsmen, or apprentices to sorcerers. As the title *Mainly in Moonlight* indicates, night is as important a setting as day. For Gray, night is a realm of dark beauty and mystery, not a place of evil.

Gray's settings were influenced by two real-life locales: his native Scottish highlands and the theatrical stage. Northern Scotland is a wild, beautiful land of craggy mountains, ancient forests, and glistening lakes. It retains an ancient heritage of tales and legends. Even today, Highlanders tell stories of the Fair Folk (elves), giants, and heroes like Robert Bruce, King of Scotland. Gray's other influence, the theatrical stage, is a place of illusions, of sudden light and equally sudden darkness, and of scenery that changes before the audience's eyes. Gray often seems to see his storybook world in terms of dazzling stage effects and dramatic lighting.

Social Sensitivity

The stories of Mainly in Moonlight provide almost no direct references to conditions or events in the present-day world. But as with traditional fairy tales, Gray's stories can be applied to a variety of human situations and conditions.

Moreover, since his stories deal with such themes as human growth, the scrupulous use of power, and the nature of courage, they can provide a springboard for discussions about many issues. Even the tales with a darker tone contain no graphic descriptions of harm or violence. Suspense is created by the sophisticated use of language and by pacing rather than by lurid details.



Literary Qualities

Gray's stories are a mix of appealingly quirky characters and marvelous events. What unites these elements is Gray's vivid language. In short stories there is not much time to get to know each character, and Gray describes each graphically, giving their physical characteristics as well as an idea of their temperaments. Traditional fairy tales contain few specific descriptions, but Gray provides details that make his unreal landscapes as clear to the mind's eye as the view from a kitchen window or down one's own street. When he describes the door to a magician's private room, he says that it was of bronze, with iron lintels, and that it was fastened with nine locks, which could be opened only when nine separate spells were recited. He later describes one sad king as having white hair, defeated eyes, and a face that was "lined all over like a cracked mirror."

Gray creates an effective mood within his stories; some stories seem full of laughter, while others almost crackle with menace. One way he builds atmosphere is with dialogue. When the kidnapped princess of "A Message in a Bottle," now rescued, is told that she is about to be magically whisked home, she says, "Not too much whisking, if your don't mind. It tangles my hair."

This sentence perfectly captures the rather frivolous intent of the story.

Plainly this is a tale that is headed for a happy ending.

Gray makes masterful use of suspense and surprise. In "According to Tradition," he sends two brothers on a hunt for a princess who is being held captive in a forest "where no one dared to follow." He describes the tangled trees and rainy weather to set the scene. Then he hurls a series of odd events at the brothers. With each event, Blaise, the undependable older prince, gets himself into worse trouble, and his brother Christopher works desperately to smooth things over. The reader gets caught up in the suspense and expects a certain outcome—whereupon Gray reveals an unanticipated ending that gives the whole story a different shape.



Themes and Characters

Gray portrays both human and animal characters, as well as a few beings that are neither. The humans include rulers, magicians, princes and princesses, and an assortment of other folk. The animals include everyday varieties, such as cats, dogs, and goats, as well as extraordinary beasts, such as unicorns, phoenixes, and the silver-clawed white lion of "According to Tradition." In Gray's stories, the cats and goats are just as likely to talk as the silver-clawed lion. His characters include such odd creatures as the "Face in the fire," the attendant spirit of legendary English sorcerer John Dee, and the puffball who delivers mail.

Gray's characters exhibit a full range of virtues and vices, from nobility and generosity to selfishness and indecision.

Few of Gray's creations are actually evil. Many characters who first appear to be villains turn out to be something else entirely. For instance, the sorcerer in "A Message in a Bottle," who kidnaps a princess and enchants a forest, is merely a magician of minor talent who has stumbled across more power than he can control and who thoroughly regrets it. One of the few really unscrupulous people is the title character in "The Man Who Sold Magic." Perhaps significantly, he has less magic than many of the other sorcerers in the book.

Most of Gray's characters are somewhere between good and evil, usually closer to good. There are light-hearted young men and women, such as Gillian, who rescues a duke's son from a spell that has lasted for a hundred years. In "A Message in a Bottle," Muffler, the kind goatherder (whose further adventures are recounted in the novel *Grimbold's Other World*), uses his ability to communicate with animals to help rescue a princess from a bumbling sorcerer. We also meet Princess Alexa, who knows that she would be better at questing than her brother Mark and gets a chance to prove it.

There are also more somber characters, whose adventures bring them closer to the darker and wilder districts of magic. These include the anxious, generous Christopher and his reckless brother Blaise in "According to Tradition" and the dutiful King Jerrard, who risks a dangerous journey for his people's sake in "The Thunder Cat."

Gray's animal and other nonhuman characters are as vividly drawn as his human ones and frequently help humans overcome obstacles. Sometimes though, the beasts are the obstacles, as in the title story "Mainly in Moonlight," where one creature after another complicates Colin's quest.

Sometimes, as with the letter-carrying puffball in "A Letter to My Love," they help complete a pattern that began a century earlier. And occasionally, as in "The Thunder Cat," they provide glimpses of a wonder almost beyond understanding.

Many of the characters, whether humorous or serious, learn something about what is important in life. Ralf, the selfish, spoiled prince in "The Silver Ship," for example, thinks



that having his own way is all that matters. Then he is taken on an enchanted journey and given impossible tasks to perform in complete solitude. When the kindness that has surrounded him all his life is taken away, he realizes how crucial it is to him. Afterwards, he can never again feel the same about getting his own way at the expense of others.

Almost all of Gray's characters encounter magic, either as victims, rescuers, or as would-be magicians.

Repeatedly, characters are confronted with the dangers of using magic carelessly since it can backfire or cause unpredictable results. Gray makes it clear that this applies not just to magic but to all power. The responsible use of power is important in everyday life as well as in the realms of magic, in childhood and adulthood alike.

Even the magicians sometimes learn a thing or two. In "The Sorcerer's Apprentices," the sorcerer Alain says, "I have learned . . . that it is dangerous to lose one's temper, when there is power in one's hands." While his hapless apprentices learn to behave a little more carefully around magic, Alain also comes to learn about the responsibilities of sorcery.

Gray's stories develop a variety of themes. He has said that he has always been curious about how people might behave when faced with an improbable situation—such as encountering a unicorn that talks. He delights in arranging these surprise encounters between ordinary people and some odd being. That is surely part of the basic appeal of fantasy stories: just how would one behave if a sorcerer appeared in the yard?

Another subject that is important to Gray is the way people change and grow.

Several of his characters either reform or come to some realization about the world because of their encounters with magic. The powerful and universal theme of growth and learning is not applicable solely to tales of fantasy. The everyday world is filled with unexpected or amazing occurrences that require us to call up new strength in ourselves or see things in a new way.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why do you think Gray chose to tell the story "The Reluctant Familiar" from the point of view of the attendant spirit instead of that of John Dee or the Princess? How might the story have been different if it had been told by one of the other characters?
2. In "The Lady's Quest," what character traits enable Princess Alexa to prove that she was right about being better at questing than her brother? What problems do these traits help her solve? How does she go about solving the problems?
3. Why does Gavin's father not alert him to what the peddler in "The Man Who Sold Magic" is really doing?
4. In "The Thunder Cat," how does King Jerrard's agreeing to search for the cat show that he is a good king? What other evidence does the story give that he is a good king?
5. In "The Sorcerer's Apprentices," Martin hears of a prisoner kept in the castle and searches for him. The prisoner turns out not to be what Martin expected. What does Martin's discovery of the prisoner's true nature and situation reveal about the sorcerer's nature?
6. Traditional fairy tales often use repetition of phrases or events to give a story shape or rhythm. What event is repeated in the title story "Mainly in Moonlight"? How does Gray vary it slightly each time? What phrase is repeated?
7. The wizard in the title story "Mainly in Moonlight" asks the hero, Colin, "Did you think it possible to speak with a sorcerer and be unharmed?" How does the rest of the story answer that question?
8. Ralf is not a likable character in the beginning of "The Silver Ship." At what point in the story do you think he changes and becomes more humane? Why did you choose this point in the story?
9. In "A Letter to My Love," why do you think Gray uses the puffball, a creature of his own invention, as a magical messenger, rather than a more traditional mythical beast?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Gray often uses surprise endings to cast a different light on the entire story.

Choose from "According to Tradition," "The Man Who Sold Magic," and "The Thunder Cat." Which story makes most effective use of the surprise ending? Why did you choose the story you did?

2. To Gray, all species of cats, tame or wild, are creatures of magic. Use examples from the stories to describe the role played by cats in Gray's work.

3. In "The Sorcerer's Apprentices," Alain is described as a very powerful wizard. Besides the door that is locked with nine locks and nine spells, what are some other specific descriptive details that Gray uses to show the extent of Alain's power?

4. Gray believes that a person with power, magic or otherwise, should use that power responsibly. Which story characters do you think best demonstrate that idea? Why did you choose these characters?

5. Compare the use of magical elements in the stories "The Reluctant Familiar" and "The Man Who Sold Magic." What effect was Gray trying to produce for the reader in each story?

How did that influence the way he portrayed magic?

6. In which stories is humor used most effectively? What specific lines of dialogue, unexpected events, or descriptions add to the humorous effect in these stories?

7. Which character in any of the stories do you think undergoes the greatest change for the better? Tell how that character changes, and why you chose that character above all others.

8. Which character or characters would you most want to read more stories about? Why? What problems or events would you like to see the character or characters encounter?

For Further Reference

Gray, Nicholas Stuart. *The Boys*. New York: Meredith Press, 1969. This nonfiction work is an informal account of various cats who have lived in Gray's household. It gives some biographical information and another example of how Gray describes cats.

Greaves, Margaret. "Nicholas Stuart Gray." In *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*, edited by D. L. Kirkpatrick.

New York: St. Martin's, 1983. This article gives some biographical information, a list of Gray's writings and theatrical activities, and an evaluation of his work. Greaves focuses on several novels and stories in order to illustrate characteristics of Gray's writing.

Wintle, Justin, and Emma Fisher. *The Pied Pipers*. New York: Paddington Press/Two Continents, 1974. This book contains an interview with Gray that gives insight into his feeling about using traditional stories and the importance of fantasy literature.



Related Titles

Besides *Mainly in Moonlight*, Gray has published two other collections of his short stories, *The Edge of Evening* and *A Wind from Nowhere*. Both books feature tales of enchantment similar to those in *Mainly in Moonlight*. Two of Gray's longer novels feature characters who also appear in stories in *Mainly in Moonlight*.

Over the Hills to Fabydon concerns characters from "A Letter to My Love."

Fabydon is a kingdom that is able to relocate whenever the king feels that it is in danger. Unfortunately, the present king of Fabydon is very nervous and frequently feels that Fabydon is endangered. Conrad, the Crown Prince briefly introduced in "A Letter to My Love," is an important and memorable character in the novel. *Grimbold's Other World* tells more about Muffler, whom we meet in "A Message in a Bottle."

Grimbold, the title character in the novel, is a wise and powerful cat; the other world of the title is a shimmering night kingdom that may be Gray's most beautiful and fascinating creation.

The Apple Stone, *Down in the Cellar*, and *The Warden of the Weir* are set in recent times. In each novel, a family of ordinary children becomes involved in a magical situation. *The Stone Cage*, loosely based on the ancient tale of Rapunzel, is told from the point of view of a cat who is a witch's apprentice.

Gray's plays include *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Imperial Nightingale*, and other adaptations of traditional fairy tales. He has also written a theatrical version of *Sir Gatuain and the Green Knight*, a medieval story about King Arthur and his knights. All of Gray's works feature his smooth and witty style and an array of unusual characters and unexpected situations.



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