Marriage a la Mode Study Guide

Marriage a la Mode by Katherine Mansfield

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Introduction

"Marriage á la Mode," published in 1921 as part of the collection *The Garden Party, and Other Stories,* was the last of Katherine Mansfield's stories dealing with the shallow London bohemian art world, a world which Mansfield knew all too well. The story has often been compared to the better-known "Bliss," published the previous year. Like its predecessor, "Marriage á la Mode" satirizes the shallow denizens of the art circles, while presenting an unfolding (apparently irretrievable) domestic drama.

In "Marriage á la Mode," Mansfield creates a world ruled by parasitic, immature, and unful- filled adults. Both the characters themselves and Mansfield's choice of imagery convey the essential hollowness of these people's lives. Every detail in the story adds to this impression, from a strawberry bonnet to conversational quirks. Again, Mansfield demonstrates her talent for keen characterization and subtle observation.

Mansfield also delves into the psychology of her main protagonists—the husband and wife—by giving voice to each character. While these characters, both the victim and the victimizer, may hardly be likable people, their evocation at Mansfield's skillful hand leads to a clear picture of them, the world they inhabit, and the way they want to live. The brief story could be called a "slice of life," yet Mansfield, as she does in so many of her works, chooses a significant period, one that will inevitably lead to profound change.

Mansfield's contemporary readers remarked on the clarity of vision in *The Garden Party*. Though in many stories, the incidents were slight, perhaps even commonplace, this in no way detracts from their power; indeed, Mansfield's genius derives from her unsentimental way of drawing attention to the day-to-day events which add up to the sum of a life.

Author Biography

Katherine Mansfield was born Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp in Wellington, New Zealand, October 14, 1888. She began writing at a young age, and her stories appeared in school publications when she was only nine years old. From a prosperous family, Mansfield was sent to school in England while still a teenager. She published stories in the *Queen's College Magazine*. After the completion of her education, she returned to New Zealand, but Mansfield found life in her native country unexciting and provincial. She longed to return to England, and she eventually persuaded her parents to allow her to go back as well as provide her a small allowance. Thus, at nineteen she made her home in England. After a hasty and short-lived marriage, Mansfield went to a German health spa, where she got the ideas for many of the stories that comprised her first collection, *In a German Pension* (1911). These stories focused on themes of sexual relationships, female subjugation, and childbearing, and critics have found in them some of her most effective portrayals of the female psychology. *In a German Pension*also established her reputation as an important new writer.

Mansfield had returned to London to write *In a German Pension*, and she continued to work on her short stories over the ensuing years. Between 1911 and 1915, she published short stories and book reviews in numerous magazines. She also met the editor and critic John Middleton Murry. He helped get her stories published in a magazine he edited. Further, Mansfield and Murry worked together editing the *Blue Review* and *Rhythm*. The couple married in 1918. The two were a part of London's literary scene, and Mansfield counted among her friends such important writers as Virginia Woolf.

While many of Mansfield's stories reflect the contemporary London world, the death of Mansfield's brother in 1915 reinforced her resolve to incorporate childhood memories and experiences in her fiction. Her next two collections, *Bliss, and Other Stories* (1920) and *The Garden Party, and Other Stories* (1922), contain many of her most well-known New Zealand stories, such as "Prelude" and "At the Bay." The success of these volume established Mansfield as a major talent.

By 1918, Mansfield had been diagnosed as having tuberculosis. After suffering a bout of the disease in the early 1920s, she was forced to leave England and her husband and friends for warmer climates. Mansfield disliked this enforced isolation. Despite her illness, Mansfield wrote almost continuously. She died January 9, 1923, at the age of thirty-four. After her death, Murry edited her private papers and published additional short stories, contributing to the enhancement of Mansfield's literary reputation. Over the decades, Mansfield's stories (including some she did not want published and some unfinished stories), letters, and journals have been published, and she continues to be a widely read author.

Plot Summary

The story opens with William on his way to the train station in London. He is on his way to see his wife and children, who live outside the city. William remembers that he has not brought a gift for his children, and this realization causes him to reflect on the changes that his life has undergone recently as his wife Isabel has come to embrace more modern attitudes and friends. William purchases a melon and a pineapple for his sons and boards the train. Though he tries to concentrate on papers he brought from the office, William cannot stop his thoughts from drifting to Isabel and the way things used to be between them. While William thought they were happy in their small city house, Isabel was in reality lonely and pining for new company and contemporary friends. After she made friends with Moira Morrison, Isabel began her self-transformation, which included the acquisition of the house in the suburbs.

When William arrives at the station, he is pleased to find Isabel waiting for him alone, but as they exit, he sees her menagerie of friends: Bill, Dennis, and Moira. The three adults, including Isabel, have a distinctly childish air, crying out loudly and usurping the fruit William has brought for the children. The adults pile into the taxi. Then another of Isabel's friends, Bobby, comes out of a store with his arms full of packages. Immediately thereafter, the shop owner also emerges; Bobby neglected to pay for his purchases, but Isabel does so.

That afternoon, Isabel and her friends go for a swim, but William stays behind to spend time with the children. Unfortunately, they are asleep, and William spends the time alone. From the garden, William hears the conversation of Isabel and her friends as they come up the road: they are talking about who will look after William.

That evening, the adults dine together but then afterwards everyone is so tired that they all go to bed. It is not until the next afternoon, as he is waiting for his taxi to take him to the train station, that William finds himself alone with his wife. She notes that she has not seen much of him, nor have the children (they had a previous engagement). Then the taxi arrives, and William leaves his home.

The next day finds Isabel and her friends lounging outside. The postman brings a fat letter for Isabel, from William. She opens it, surprised to find pages and pages of correspondence. Isabel reads the first line—*"My darling, precious Isabel"*—and feels suffused with emotion: confusion, excitement, fright. She decides that the letter is ridiculous. Her laughter attracts the attention of her friends, who want to know what is so funny. She tells them she has received a love letter from William and then proceeds to read it aloud. After she has finished, Bobby wants to reread it. Isabel, however, surprises them by withdrawing into the house with the letter in hand.

Alone in her bedroom, Isabel recognizes how vile her own behavior was. She pictures herself and her friends ridiculing William, and she wonders why and how she could have read his letter aloud. She realizes that she has become a shallow, vain person. From outside the voices of her friends call her to go swimming. Isabel knows she must make

a decision, either go with them or stay alone and write William back. Although she knows she should stay, she decides to go with her friends and vows to write William later.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Marriage a la Mode is the brief story of a 1920s English husband and wife, viewed through the husband's perspective of their life and the changes that he finds unsettling. William is on his way to the train station for the ride home when he remembers that he has not bought any gifts for his two children, Paddy and Johnny. The last several times he has brought them sweets, which they bemoan in favor of something more unique, but they have every toy imaginable, and his creativity lags.

William remembers how Isabel, his wife, looked at him when he told her that, as a child, his only toy was an old towel with a knot at one end. William remembers her laugh and notes that it is a decidedly new laugh that she uses today.

Upon seeing a fruit cart, William's dilemma of gifts for the boys is solved; he will take a pineapple for Paddy and a melon for Johnny. Settling into his train seat with the awkward bundle, William watches his companions stow away their briefcases and golf clubs. With dispassionate eyes, William watches the scenery go by, including a red-faced girl running alongside the train in a vain attempt to catch it.

Soon, the passing scenery changes to a more pleasant view with rolling fields and a river in which children splash. William's thoughts drift to Isabel. William can imagine her in any setting and in his mind she always greets him with such delight and attention. William isn't sure what is happening lately, but Isabel isn't the same woman he married. William feels like a stranger in their home.

When challengekd, Isabel adamantly denies that her new friends are changing her love for him, but William cannot help but feel a darkness settling over their marriage and his soul. If only he and Isabel had not gone to that party hosted by Moira Morrison where Isabel was introduced to these new friends with their new ways of thinking, perhaps things would be different. It wasn't too long after that party that Isabel announced the house she shared with William was too small and undignified and he finds himself in a new house where he cannot find the life he used to know.

The train is nearing his stop now and while William puts away his papers, he thinks about the wonderful holidays he used to spend with Isabel and their boys. William winces when he thinks how Isabel would chastise him for his sentimentality now.

William's heart leaps a bit when he sees Isabel standing alone at the station but his joy is short lived when he realizes that several of her new friends are waiting in the car. They had been gathering a few items to take with them for the weekend at William and Isabel's house by the sea.

Isabel chides William for his choice of fruit for the boys and encourages him to bring appropriate treats the next time. Paddy and Johnny are asleep when the adults arrive

home, so William's plans to play with them are sidelined. Isabel and the others head off for a swim but, William stays behind to walk through his house where he finds odd pieces of art and smudged poems on crumbled papers. Each time he returns home, there is something new that is supposed to be artistic, but it offends his senses just the same.

William can hear the others coming back now from the water and it is apparent that they have been discussing what to do with him and Isabel asks them to be nice to William, because he'll be leaving again tomorrow night. They realize that William has overheard their conversation and they flood him with greetings in an attempt to cover up the rudeness.

Isabel and her friends discuss whether to dress for dinner, given that some of them are too hungry to wait for formalities. They try to engage William in conversation, but as soon as the appetizers and wine are open, he is completely forgotten in favor of the topic of the color of one's legs when they are under water.

Isabel is the perfect hostess smiling all the while she manages the courses of the casual meal and she wishes that Bill, who is a painter, would paint the scene for posterity but he declines because the light is not quite right. After the meal, there is more meaningless conversation until all their yawns signal the time to retire for the night.

The first opportunity William has alone with his wife is when she waits with him for his taxi on Sunday afternoon. Isabel has made a comic attempt to carry his suitcase when she sees him struggling downstairs with it, so they walk in silence until she can put the case down at the end of the walk. Eyeing the horizon on the road, Isabel halfheartedly mentions that she had not had much time to see William this weekend, and promises that the next time will be better.

Her relief at the sight of the arriving cab is almost palpable. Isabel apologizes that Paddy and Johnny are out with their nanny and asks William to take care of himself in London this week. With a little kiss, she waves goodbye and disappears back into the house.

The sense of darkness coming over William in his train car cannot be alleviated by the pastoral scene rolling outside his window, and he decides to write to Isabel.

Monday morning finds Isabel and her friends lounging in lawn chairs, shielded from the sun by pastel colored umbrellas, their drowsy demeanors punctuated only by sleep and thoughts of the lunch menu. When the postman rides up, the group is happy for the distraction but there is only one letter--the one for Isabel from William.

When Isabel reads the letter, she does not know William's motives, and the group implores her to read it to them. Without hesitation, she begins to read William's love letter, which declares that he has no intent to restrict her happiness. Isabel continues, and her guests mimic William's sincerity and laugh whole heartedly at the sentimental lines.

Suddenly Isabel can't bear their laughing and she runs into the house and into her bedroom with the letter crushed in her hand. Isabel can hear her friends' derision ringing in her ears and feels an overwhelming protectiveness toward William. Isabel chastises herself for having betrayed his confidence to them.

While she cries into her pillow at her shame, Isabel feels that the whole world knows how shallow she is; even this bedroom knows the secret of her superficial vanity. The shouts of her friends from outside her window rouse her from her reverie and she must decide to immediately write to William and declare her love or go swimming with them.

Deciding that the letter would be too hard to compose, Isabel vows to do it some other time and runs down the stairs laughing with her new laugh.

Analysis

William and Isabel are at cross purposes in their marriage; she preferring to adopt modern thinking and style, he hanging onto the simple life they had. Isabel is caught up in the existential thinking and bohemian lifestyles of the privileged classes in the 1920's. This is also a period of time when women are experiencing many new freedoms and fighting for new rights, and she is ripe for the causes.

It is ironic that Isabel's new friends are shallow and narcissistic, without any regard for the bigger issues formulating in the world as a whole. Their self centered and petulant behavior bores even themselves, at points, and there is such an overwhelming theme of futility, wasted talent, and resources. Their self indulgence is perpetuated at the expense of other people's finances and even emotional states.

The author's presentation of William's state of mind is so vivid that his pain at the crack in his married life is almost palpable. William is such a noble character, and his love for Isabel is much fuller than hers for him, evidenced by his indulging her whims and finally, vowing not to be the source of any restriction of her happiness.

The author's choice of revealing the art and poetry through William's gaze shadows the sense of disillusionment shared by most people in the post World War I era, and more poignantly, William's own sense of hopelessness at the state of his own marriage.

Unfortunately, Isabel does not see that she is being victimized under the guise of her new avant-garde way of life. The people who claim to be her friends are using her naiveté and her husband's money to proliferate their lifestyles. Their derision at convention has driven a wedge between Isabel and William and she chooses, possibly disastrously, to let that split come to completion.

Characters

Dennis Green

Dennis is the least distinguished of Isabel's friends. He seems quieter than the rest, and he is apparently a writer.

Bill Hunt

Bill Hunt, another of Isabel's friends, is apparently a painter, although he refuses to paint the friends around the dinner table because the "light's wrong."

Isabel

Isabel is one of the main characters in "Marriage á la Mode." She is the object of her husband William's desire, as well as the cause of his frustration. At the time the story begins, Isabel has already firmly ensconced herself in a shallow lifestyle. She has chosen to trade in their former, quaint way of life for one in which she surrounds herself with thoroughly modern friends and attitudes. Her fixation on contemporary values presents itself through her parenting ideas—she gets rid of the children's old toys because they were "so 'dreadfully sentimental'"— as well as her exchange of her oldfashioned husband for her modern friends.

Isabel has already made this change by the time the story opens; William refers to her as the "new Isabel." Through the course of the story, however, Isabel undergoes an even more significant transformation. When she receives William's letter, she feels a wave of mixed emotions; she is confused, frightened, but "more and more excited." Unable to process her own reaction, she instead turns William's declarations of love into an object of ridicule to be shared with her friends. Though Isabel experiences a pang of regret, recognizing her own "vile, odious, abominable, vulgar" behavior, she still chooses to go swimming with her friends instead of responding to William's heart-wrenching letter. By the end of the story, Isabel has firmly committed herself to this form of life, one in which genuine affection and emotion are jettisoned in favor of the facile; her transformation is clearly indicated by the story's final sentence: "And, laughing in the new way, she ran down the stairs."

Bobby Kane

Isabel's friend Bobby's most obvious characteristic is his lack of money, which could be construed as his leeching off Isabel and thus William. He comes out of the shop with his arms full of packages, but "'They're none of them paid for.'" Isabel quickly pays the shopman, and Bobby's frightened face is transformed into one of radiance. He also

fulfills the role of the effeminate man, one that Mansfield frequently has in her stories; he is flamboyant and active, both in his physical actions and his verbal expressions.

Moira Morrison

Moira is Isabel's friend, the one who, in her words to William, would "rescue your wife, selfish man." Through Moira, apparently, Isabel was introduced to her new set of friends. Moira seems shallow and foolish, both in her appearance (she is dressed in a hat that looks like a huge strawberry), in her conversational topics, and her tastes.

William

The majority of the story is presented through William's eyes. William is a self-proclaimed sentimentalist. Ill at ease among Isabel's new friends, William longs to return to the past, when he and Isabel were happy (or so he believed) in their simpler life. By the time the story opens, William exists in a state of extreme isolation. This is indicated in many aspects of the story: he spends only one day out of the week with his family and the rest of his time is spent working and living in London; he hardly sees his two young children as they are either asleep or whisked off to a previously planned activity; he is deserted by Isabel and her friends the afternoon he arrives; he spends no time alone with his wife until he is about to leave them at the end of the weekend. Such isolation distinctly contrasts to his perception of the life he and his family used to lead; he recreates a scene from the past with his children and Isabel that indicates his delight in being part of a close-knit family. Yet, evidently, his delight was not shared by his wife.

William's motivation for writing to his wife is unclear. While Isabel characterizes it as a "love letter," the only line quoted from it— "God forbid, my darling, that I should be a drag on your happiness"— shows that William recognizes his lack of importance in Isabel's current life, and would seem to indicate a willingness to withdraw from her life if that is truly what she wants. However, this topic is little explored. More definite is Isabel's lack of response to William's letter, and that William will get very little satisfaction in that regard.

Themes

Marriage and Family

The theme of marriage is perhaps the most important in "Marriage á la Mode," for the story raises the question of what a marriage should be and also points out that, unfortunately, two people may have different needs and expectations of the marriage. By the 1920s, when the story was written, women had begun to demand more equality and take a more dynamic role in their relationships. Thus, in one sense, Mansfield describes a truly modern marriage as Isabel gets what she wants from the relationship: the house by the shore, the unconventional friends, the lack of commitment to her family. Yet, the marriage described in "Marriage á la Mode" hardly constitutes any relationship, let alone a relationship supposed to embody one of the closest bonds that two people can form.

William and Isabel have little affinity for each other, let alone time to spend with each other. It is hard to imagine them as happy as William believed they once were, and the question arises of how William managed to be deluded for so long. Did he trick himself into believing they were happy, or did Isabel pretend to be happy? Or perhaps was Isabel happy then, and only later did she long for a more modern lifestyle and friends? Mansfield never answers these questions, but the story also makes clear that the reasons behind the present state of the relationship between William and Isabel do not matter—only the present has relevance. Also, while William seems to truly love his wife, it is difficult to know whether he loves the real Isabel—who is the "new" Isabel—or whether he loves his idealized vision of her.

Isabel's relationships with her immature friends in a real sense are in direct opposition to the supposed relationship between a husband and wife; her bonds to the friends are based on shallowness, superficiality, parasitism, and triviality, while the bonds between a husband and wife should be based on true feelings of affection, mutual respect, and the willingness to give to the other. In one sense, however, Isabel's relationships with her friends does mockingly resemble the marriage relationship in their collective ostracism of William.

While Isabel is comfortable in an environment in which true love, passion, and friendship do not exist, William cannot fit it. This is partially because he has no ability for the facile, as do Isabel and her friends, but partially because he loves his wife and wishes to fulfill their earlier dreams of marriage—a marriage in which husband and wife maintain closeness and create a family. William holds onto more traditional ideas of marriage and family, yet that Isabel and the children have moved outside of London—which means he only sees them over the brief weekend—demonstrates his willingness that Isabel should be happy, even at his own expense.

Change and Transformation

Although by the time the story opens up, Isabel has already changed into this new "shallow, tinkling, vain" creature, the theme of change and transformation is still important to "Marriage á la Mode." Isabel's transformation is what has brought the current state of misery to William's life. Instead of surrounding herself with family, Isabel chooses to immerse herself in a host of friends as shallow as herself. Further, Isabel's change reflects the drive towards the modern and away from anything that speaks of the traditional or old-fashioned. As such, the children are deprived of their old toys because Isabel finds them "dreadfully sentimental." Isabel believes that the boys' exposure to anything old fashioned—from toys to the Royal Academy—will give the boys poor taste, which they will only have to unlearn later.

The "new" Isabel (as Mansfield repeatedly refers to her) appears to have undergone an even more permanent change in regard to her relationship with William. She reads his love letter aloud to her friends, but immediately thereafter recognizes how "vile, odious, abominable, vulgar" were her actions. Instead of turning this low point into a positive—and writing to William and reestablishing a connection with him—Isabel chooses to further affiliate herself with her friends and go swimming. More than anything else, this choice seems to affirm Isabel's embrace of her new lifestyle, for she actively allies herself with the people she had just harshly judged, who ridicule her husband—thus she becomes one of them herself.

Friendship

Although Isabel's newly acquired friends are shallow and superficial, they are important to understanding the story because of the power they hold over Isabel. For the friendship of the likes of Moira, Bobby, Bill, and Dennis, Isabel is willing to make her husband miserable and virtually ignore her children. More importantly, Isabel is willing to turn her herself into a person she herself does not even like. When she shares in their coarse laughter at William's letter, Isabel clearly demonstrates that she has joined their ranks.

Many readers may find Isabel's liking for these friends inexplicable, for they show few admirable traits except perhaps for their ability to put up with each other. The story also subtly points out that the bonds of these friendships seem to rest as much on monetary attraction as on mutual liking. For instance, Bobby Kane relies on Isabel to pay the candy store clerk, instead of purchasing his own treats. Isabel even alludes to their leeching off her household when she "couldn't help wondering what had happened to the salmon they had for supper last night. She had meant to have fish mayonnaise for lunch and now . . ." Clearly, part of Isabel recognizes that her friends are taking a good deal from her. Unfortunately, she is not willing to recognize just how much she is giving them.

Style

Point of View and Narration

"Marriage á la Mode" is told primarily from William's point of view, but the story does shift to Isabel's point of view to make its final statement. The story opens with William's thoughts as he boards the train in London. He is concerned with buying a gift for his children and wonders about his upcoming meeting with Isabel. Such an opening clearly demonstrates that family is most important to William. This long scene can be compared to his meeting with Isabel, whose conversation revolves more around her friends. In a sense, Isabel even negates the children by refusing to give them the fruit William purchased for them, instead keeping it to share with her friends. The brief weekend continues to be funneled through William's point of view, which is effective because it allows Mansfield to depict William as he truly is amongst Isabel's circle: alone and on the outside.

The end of the story, however, switches to Isabel's point of view. There is no artistic way to avoid this shift, for in order to effect the proper ending, readers need to see Isabel's (and her friends') reaction to William's letter and her subsequent actions. Isabel's alliance with her friends against William marks the story's culmination. Stylistically, however, Isabel's and William's points of view reflect Mansfield's writing style and are fairly indistinguishable. Both sections, as well, never delve too deeply into the thoughts of the characters. Instead, Mansfield's narration presents William's and Isabel's major concerns and reactions to situations and then depicts both of them embarking on a set course of action.

Satire

"Marriage á la Mode" satirizes—or uses humor, wit, or ridicule to criticize—the pretentious, phony bohemian art society in which Isabel has chosen to involve herself. While Mansfield's story makes no grand pronouncements on this shallow segment of society, her disdain for Isabel and her immature friends is clear. The group speaks in childish exclamations and conducts pointless conversations; once the verb "childishly" is used to describe Bobby's words. They indulge in no meaningful activities—it is alluded that Bill is a painter, but he refuses to paint the friends at the dinner table. They are self-obsessed and full of self-importance. Ironically, they are determined to keep William out of their inner circle, a circle of which he has no interest in being a part.

Physically and emotionally, Mansfield makes them appear foolish and ridiculous. Moira is first introduced wearing "a bonnet like a huge strawberry" and jumping up and down, giving a reader the image of a giant, jumping strawberry, not a woman at all. As a group, the friends reject traditional adult behavior. None of them apparently have anything better to do on a Monday than laze around Isabel's house. All of them appear content to sponge off of Isabel (and thus William). Bobby is presented as the most childlike of

them all with even his very moods dependent on others. When the candy shopman comes after him as Bobby neglected to pay for his purchases, Bobby looks "frightened," but a moment later, after Isabel has taken care of the bill, he "was radiant again."

Symbolism and Imagery

Mansfield's primary symbols and images used in "Marriage á la Mode" revolve around food. William brings home a melon and a pineapple for the children; Moira's hat looks like a strawberry; the day's purchases include fish and candy; the friends are depicted around the dinner table, eating voraciously. Overall, these images, such as Bill "stuffing his mouth with bread," imply both the selfishness of Isabel and her friends—for instance, dining on fruit at the expense of the children—as well as their spiritual emptiness. As Isabel says, "We're all starving. William's starving, too." Indeed, they are all hungry for something that cannot be fixed by eating a large meal. Although they do not know it, Isabel and her friends lack a purpose or greater meaning in their lives. William, on the other hand, is hungry for the simple life he and Isabel once shared.

Historical Context

Postwar Art

After the devastation of World War I, in which millions of people died, artists expressed their disillusionment with society. Art that emerged in the postwar period showed a marked departure from past forms. Artists rejected traditional ways of expressing their ideas, and dramatists, novelists, and poets all took bold new steps. In the plays of Bertolt Brecht, characters would often step out of their roles and directly address the audience. In painting and sculpture, artists turned to expressionism—using shapes, line, and color to communicate complex emotions to the audience. Spanish painter Pablo Picasso, who worked in Paris, helped create a style of art called cubism, which used shapes to show the abstract structures of the objects they painted instead of accurately depicting their physical appearances.

The Bloomsbury Group

The Bloomsbury group was one of London's foremost intellectual and artistic circles. Members of this group—who included writer Virginia Woolf, painter Vanessa Bell, novelist and essayist E. M. Forster, art critic Roger Fry, and economist John Maynard Keynes—rejected Victorian ideas on religious, artistic, social, and sexual matters. Such literary luminaries as George Bernard Shaw and William Yeats also could be found in attendance at the Bloomsbury group's regular Thursday night meetings. In 1917, Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf's husband, set up the Hogarth Press. It published Sigmund Freud's works in English, T. S. Eliot's poetry, and Mansfield's short stories, among other pieces.

The British Economy

In late 1920, Britain headed into a cycle of economic depressions, which only ended during World War II. Unemployment quickly reached 1.5 million, where it remained for most of the decade. The upper classes, which predominated in finance, demanded the restoration of a free market, cuts in spending, and balanced budgets. With such restraints, the government was able to afford little relief to the unemployed. Working-class people, in particular, who were more subject to the ups and downs of the trade cycle, were adversely affected.

The Modern British Woman

During World War I, many women had joined the ranks of male workers. They were needed in the factories, as men went to war. Millions of British women entered government departments, factories, and private offices. They worked in capacities ranging from doing clerical jobs to producing munitions. Such increases in economic

opportunity for women presented an important opportunity for women's emancipation, as well. By 1918, the Franchise Act gave all women over the age of twenty-eight the right to vote (all men over the age of twenty-one were given this right by the same law). Soon the first British female sat in the House of Commons. Women, however, did not have equal voting rights as men until 1928, when the Representation of the People Act, known as the "flapper act," was passed.

As in the United States, young British women made stylistic changes that reflected their freedoms, such as wearing shorter skirts and bobbing their hair. Despite these advances, most married women remained dependent on their husbands. Working women were paid less than men for equal labor and did not have equal opportunity for employment. For instance, women were not to be found as the heads of large companies, as judges, or as university professors.

The Modern World

The decade of 1910 was a period of great technological change. Before World War I, telephones were the convenience of the upper classes. In 1918, wall telephones were considered the height of modernity. By the early 1920s, wireless sets (radios) were being installed throughout England. Radio broadcasting in England began in 1922 and became a popular form of entertainment, as did attending talking movies. Also, automobiles, which prior 1914 were only enjoyed by the wealthy, became much more common.

Critical Overview

"Marriage á la Mode" is often compared by critics to another of Mansfield's stories, the more wellknown "Bliss." In both works, Mansfield sets a domestic drama against the satirical background of the pretentious English bohemian art crowd. While both stories were characterized in 1949 by John Middleton Murry, Mansfield's husband, as "semisophisticated" failures concerning "quite simple women who have taken up with the stupider *intelligensia,*" the majority of critics see neither story as a failure. "Marriage á la Mode" is only one of Mansfield's stories set against the London art crowd of which Mansfield was a rather reluctant participant.

"Marriage á la Mode" was first published in December 1922 and was included in Mansfield's collection, *The Garden Party, and Other Stories.* Early critics generally enjoyed the volume, seeing it as a solid addition to Mansfield's body of literary work. D. K. Laub, writing for the *Detroit News,* calls her a "genius" and comments on her "refreshing originality—both in point of view and literary style . . . it is superb." The reviewer for *The Nation and the Athenaeum* particularly applauds her way of recreating the ordinary world. "In none of her stories are we left with the feeling that the subject has been picked up, examined, and set down completely known. . . . We have the impression rather of being for a few moments privileged spectators of lives that were going on before we observed them, and that will continue when our attention has been drawn elsewhere." The reviewer for the *Spectator* actually preferred this collection to the previously published *Bliss, and Other Stories*. "Nothing happens in any of the stories [in *The Garden Party*]. . . . This shows a more surer selfknowledge than the author displayed in "Bliss," where events were often allowed to intrude."

Malcolm Cowley, who reviewed *The Garden Party* for *Dial,* readily asserted that Mansfield's stories had "literary qualities" and "was almost as good as 'Bliss,'" but pointed out some limitations, namely Mansfield's reliance on certain stock characters or situations. "There is a woman: neurotic, arty, hateful, and a good, stupid man whom she constantly torments," writes Cowley, "He suffers and she laughs, and he loves her still." One notable exception to the general praise earned by the book was Conrad Aiken's *Freeman* review: "The delight that many of these stories afford on the first reading is intense; it wanes a little on the second, and we notice the cleverness—fatal sign! And on the third reading—but is there a third. One can not dine on the iridescent?"

Contemporary critics rarely see "Marriage á la Mode" as one of Mansfield's most significant stories, yet it still holds importance in the body of her work. As Saralyn R. Daly points out in *Katherine Mansfield,* with this story Mansfield "moved to the condemnation of groups," or, as described by Marvin Magalaner in *The Fiction of Katherine Mansfield,* "the flamboyant, articulate, utterly silly pseudo-bohemian set is the target of Mansfield's scorn." Mansfield knew of the world she wrote about. The poet Elizabeth Bowen writes in her introduction to the 1956 edition of Mansfield's *Stories* that these very types that she ridiculed in "Marriage á la Mode" were those who preyed upon Mansfield and her husband. Jeffrey Meyers, in *Katherine Mansfield, A Biography*, also finds the story to be important for what it demonstrates about her relationship with Murry

and about her ideas on marriage in general. While Meyers discounts the satire as "far too facile," he finds that the story highlights Mansfield's attitude toward the sanctity of marriage. As Mansfield once wrote, "To know *one other* seems to me a far greater adventure than to be on kissing acquaintance with dear knows how many."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the characters' attributes in "Marriage á la Mode."

Despite her early death at age thirty-four, Katherine Mansfield produced a prodigious body of work, one which continues to bring her acclaim to the present day. She first came to the public eye with her "New Zealand" stories—stories that drew on her childhood. The American writer Willa Cather wrote in her discussion of contemporary writers, "To my thinking, she never measured herself up so fully as in the two remarkable stories about an English family in New Zealand, "Prelude" and "At the Bay." But Mansfield lived out her adult life in Europe—in England and on the Continent—and her connections there brought her into close contact with the blooming literary and artistic world populated by such illustrious artists as Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. It is not surprising, then, that in several of her stories Mansfield focused her energies and talent on examining this world filled, in addition to artists of true talent, with those who only held artistic pretensions. Such stories, like "Marriage á la Mode" and "Bliss" have been grouped together by critics for their similar satirical condemnation of the artistic sub-world of the London intelligentsia and for their portrayal of the problems of married life. Indeed, Cather's assessment of Mansfield— "It was usually [her] way to approach the major forces of life through comparatively triv ial incidents. She chose a small reflector to throw a luminous streak out into the shadowy realm of personal relationships"—applies equally to "Marriage á la Mode." Taking place over a period of little more than one day, this story displays the grim shell of a marriage—what remains after the wife has chosen to ignore her husband and children in favor of her superficial and trivial friends.

Sylvia Berkman writes in her study of the writer's work that "Mansfield had no affection for the modern metropolitan young woman. Almost without exception the young women she presents are callous, temperamental, selfish, and unreasonable." Berkman's description aptly fits Isabel, the young wife in "Marriage á la Mode." As the story opens, Isabel's husband, William, already knows where her loyalties lie, yet he continues to cling to the hope that the "new Isabel" will give way to the old Isabel, the woman with whom he had previously shared a life. That Isabel had seemed content to take holidays on a farm and romp with their small children. William "hadn't the remotest notion in those days that Isabel wasn't as happy as he." Now William has been demoted from playing any part in Isabel's happiness; instead he has been relegated to the solitary role of provider, enabling Isabel to have a house by the sea, which seems to primarily serve as a lazy setting for her to entertain her equally lazy friends.

Mansfield succinctly sets the stage for the domestic drama about to unfold. As the story opens, William's thoughts focus on his wife and children. He wonders if Isabel will meet him at the station, but what he wants most is to see his wife alone. He imagines her "at the station, standing just a little apart from everybody else" or "sitting in the open taxi outside." His wish seems to come true when he first arrives, but subsequent events

immediately make clear that William will not get what he wants from Isabel; though she is standing "apart from the others, and . . . she was alone," the taxi waiting outside is surrounded by her friends. This scene sets the tone for the rest of the weekend, which is a continual perversion of William's true desires.

Isabel and her friends have little use for William. This sad truth is first demonstrated by their conversation in the taxi, which revolves around their co-opting of the pineapple and melon William has brought as gifts for the children. Later that day, they ridicule him behind his back. When Moira declares they ought to have a gramophone that plays "The Maid of the Mountains"—an extremely popular musical production of the time—Isabel attempts to defend him, but as are all her efforts, they are superficial. "That's not fair to William," she cries. "Be nice to him, my children! He's only staying until tomorrow evening." Instead of defending her husband, she is merely defending his presence to her friends. Her choice of words—the reminder that they must suffer his company for a scant time—also subtly indicates how small a role he plays in their lives.

Various scholarly criticism of William hardly defends the man either; Berkman contends that "his unhappy soliloquies . . . are scarcely masculine," Saralyn R. Daly asserts in *Katherine Mansfield*. She also writes that he is a "neutral figure who wins sympathy only because the group which causes his misery is cruel and tasteless." Mansfield biographer Jeffrey Meyers characterizes him as "plodding." An exploration of William's plight and his reactions to it, however, lead to a more thorough understanding of the symbols and message of the story as a whole.

Marvin Magalaner in *The Fiction of Katherine Mansfield* points out that "William is particularly drawn to the world of childhood in his revulsion from the perverse adult world of his wife's pals." While going to the train station and on the train, William thinks of his own small sons and the gifts that he will bring them. He acknowledges the differences between the way he would raise them and the new way Isabel wants to raise them. While she feels it is necessary for them to have "Russian toys, French toys, Serbian toys" instead of the "old donkey and engines," William admits that when he was a child he "used to go to bed hugging an old towel with a knot in it." Looking out the train window, William sees the landscape with fields and animals, but what most captures his attention is a river "with naked children splashing in the shallows." Even his descriptions of Isabel bring him back to the state of childhood innocence and naiveté. He pictures Isabel as the rosebush of his childhood garden, and "he was still that little boy" who delighted in shaking the rain-soaked petals upon himself. He now rejects images of the adult Isabel, instead preferring to remember her when they were on vacation, when "Isabel wore a jersey and her hair in a plait; she looked about fourteen."

William's retreat into childhood—though in one sense, pitiable—makes sense as a counterbalance to the distorted world in which Isabel now lives, in which the adults take on the roles of greedy, mean children; they are horrifying in their refusal to grow up. Mansfield constantly characterizes Isabel's friends as childlike—Moira jumps around in a hat that looks like a "huge strawberry," and at one point Bobby Kane even speaks "childishly." The group of friends deny all adult conventions—none of them seem to work nor set out to accomplish anything meaningful with their lives.

The only actual children present, William and Isabel's sons, serve as a counterpoint to William's wish for the past with Isabel—which he in turn views through the fantasy lens of a child—and the group's childish behavior. But the children are never seen. They are asleep when William arrives on Saturday, and the next day their governess whisks them away on a previously arranged activity. Thus, they only exist in William's recollection of them playing in their former London home. Then they acted like real children, "having rides on the leopard skin thrown over the sofa back, or . . . playing shops with Isabel's desk for counter." The minimal role played by the real children highlights their usurpation in Isabel's world by her childlike friends. Instead of mothering her children, Isabel nurtures her adult friends.

Mansfield also makes use of imagery and symbolism to define the group. For instance, Moira calls Isabel "Titania," who is the queen of the fairies of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In Shakespeare's play, Titania is bewitched by a halfman, half-animal creature, just as Isabel is bewitched by her grotesque companions. Isabel's companions also sponge off the fruits of William's labor. This is aptly illustrated when Bobby Kane leaves Isabel to pay the shopkeeper for the candies he has chosen. The metaphor of the group's voracious and parasitic nature is also carried to the physical level, as Mansfield describes the scene at the dining table, where they all eat "enormously" of the food made available through William's work. In contrast, William only feels a "dull, persistent gnawing." Magalaner points out that this "seems clearly to be a pang of psychological hunger. His marital situation allows for no nourishment either for the children or for himself."

Isabel's lack of empathy—indeed, her lack of interest—for William's feelings is made abundantly clear by the last scene of the story. While the story had previously been told from William's point of view, Mansfield shifts to Isabel's point of view. This is the only time readers get any sense of what Isabel really thinks, but it only serves to emphasize her attraction to her friends, her forsaking of her family, and the group mentality that dominates her life. Much of the scene's dialogue is not even attributed to any specific character, which gives the message that all the characters are alike and thus interchangeable. While Mansfield has given different characters specific characteristics, for instance, Bill is a painter and Dennis is a writer (though no evidence of their artistry is evident), they all react in the exact same manner, sharing along with Isabel in the mockery of William.

In the final scene, the adults are again portrayed as a group of children in their aimless questions and in Moira's recent discovery of the blissfulness of sleep. More importantly, the group responds to an adult situation with the cruelty of children. Isabel receives a letter from William. Although the contents of the letter are not revealed, with the exception of one telling sentence, "God forbid, my darling, that I should be a drag on your happiness," clearly William has sent to his wife what he per ceives to be an accurate picture of their marriage, its problems, and perhaps ways to fix it. Instead of recognizing the seriousness of the situation, Isabel's friends, and Isabel herself, only ridicule William. "It's the most marvelous find," says one, and Isabel invites them to "Gather round," for a reading of it.

The group responds abysmally to the letter, reveling in its expression of feeling and mocking William's lover-like declarations. Isabel surprises herself by withdrawing from her friends. At this point, she recognizes how "vile, odious, abominable, vulgar" was their behavior. J. F. Kobler in *Katherine Mansfield, A Study of the Short Fiction* asserts that Isabel "honestly struggles with the question [of whether to write William or rejoin her friends to go swimming]," however, Isabel's "struggle" seems almost too short-lived to so deem it. Despite her knowledge that she should stay in and respond to William, she chooses to join her friends, telling herself that "I shall *certainly* write." Unconsciously, Isabel is firmly allying herself with her friends, and defending her actions. In so doing, writes Kobler, "Isabel demonstrates that her real nature—her inborn qualities—may be at work." While Isabel, indeed, may have better qualities than she demonstrates in the story, by its end, she has firmly allied herself against her husband and even more ominously, demonstrates her ability to defend her indefensible actions. With such a devastating ending, Mansfield hardly portends a happy outcome for William and Isabel.

Source: Rena Korb, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Magalaner contrasts Mansfield's use of "domestic tragedy" with "broad social satire" in "Marriage á la Mode."

"Marriage à la Mode" is in the tradition of "Bliss," both stories in which a domestic tragedy is played out against a background of broad social satire. In both instances, the flamboyant, articulate, utterly silly pseudo-bohemian set is the target of Mansfield's scorn though in the former story they play a greater role in the personal catastrophe than in the latter. Both Bertha Young and her husband, though they enjoy the company of people like Eddie Warren and the Norman Knights, maintain a distance from the circle—observers rather than participants. And the character who brings down their flimsy marital structure, Pearl Fulton, is instantly recognizable as another outsider. In "Marriage," it is precisely that the husband cannot be seduced into the bohemian circle while his wife Isabel is charmed away from reality by its members which produces the rupture. Though Isabel has a momentary epiphany of a sort before the charm takes hold again, it is the husband's turn, in this story, to recognize the impossibility of life with his wife so long as she is unable to free herself from its pernicious influence.

The author makes clear that, to William at least, life before the advent of the bohemians had been idyllic. Even in urban London, he had been able to grow petunias and to revel in the innocent joy of his young love for Isabel—for him similar in retrospect to the sublime experience of the boy in "Something Childish But Very Natural." William is particularly drawn to the world of childhood in his revulsion from the perverse adult world of his wife's pals. As he looks out of the train window, what attracts him is "a wide river, with naked children splashing in the shallows." His thoughts on the train are of his own children and the gifts he would bring to them. Though it is painful to think of his grown-up Isabel, he can remember with pleasure his wife on vacation in the old days, wearing "a jersey and her hair in a plait; she looked about fourteen." Even he himself, in reverie, is "still that little boy" who used to shake the rain-soaked rosebush over himself.

This freshness and natural beauty of childhood acts as a sustaining force in William's life when he is unable to bear the present state of his marital affairs. He will not bring anything mechanical or sophisticated to his children; rather he chooses a pineapple and a melon, the delights of nature, to please them. His worry is that even this simple gift may be diverted to the bohemians who surround his wife. "Isabel's friends could hardly go sneaking up to the nursery at the children's mealtimes. All the same, as he bought the melon William had a horrible vision of one of Isabel's young poets lapping up a slice . . . behind the nursery door."

By nightmare juxtapositions of this kind, Mansfield balances the fresh beauty of childhood and nature with another view of childhood, ugly and grotesquely perverse. "Be nice to him, my children," says Isabel *not* to Paddy and Johnny but to her bohemian circle. And the group is, without doubt, painted as a pack of horrible children whose freshness is utterly missing and whose relationship to nature is hardly pastoral. William has good reason to worry that the fruit intended for his little ones will be diverted by the

clownish, insatiable adults. Moira Morrison's bonnet is "like a huge strawberry," a perversion of nature, and she "jumped up and down" like a youngster. The effeminate Bobby Kane buys children's candy from a shop and, childlike, forgets to pay for it. Bill Hunt, like a perverse, overly imaginative child, imagines that the packages containing the fruits really conceal "de-cap-itated heads!" These are people playing at being children and failing to carry off the pretense. Their encounter with nature at the water (so different from the view of the naked children bathing that William sees from the train window) is capped by their visit to a pub for "sloe gin."

As she does in "Bliss," Mansfield makes full use of the imagery, and perhaps the symbolism, of food. Usurpers not only of William's hearth and his wife, the bohemian crew figuratively eats William out of house and home. Even the title of the story hints at the motif of eating. The displacement of one set of children by the other is dramatized by the fate of the love offering William brings to his family— the pineapple and melon rejected for his own offspring by Isabel and turned over by her to the outsiders.

Imagery of food abounds, from the sweets of Bobby Kane to the fish which the group must accept if it wishes to have ice. They speak of anointing themselves with butter. They dine on sardines and whiskey. And even when the talk turns to the color of one's legs under water, Moira describes hers as of "the palest, palest mushroom colour." All eat "enormously" except, apparently, William, the "stranger" to the group and, now, to his own wife. Within him, instead, there is a "dull, persistent gnawing," now grown "familiar," which abates only when William is able to get his mind off his marriage. This gnawing sensation, though not attributed to a specific bodily source in the story, seems clearly to be a pang of psychological hunger. His marital situation allows for no nourishment either for the children or for himself. Isabel has turned her attention elsewhere. His choice of the fruits as gifts had been his way, unconsciously, of offering at least to the deprived children (and he is, as has been noted, one of them) the nourishment of love, but even these had gone to fatten the usurpers of his contentment.

Freudian implications aside, Mansfield's concentration on the imagery of food and eating represents an appropriate rendering of the "vile, odious, abominable, vulgar" presence of grossness in the band of usurpers: a grossness now beginning to rub off on Isabel. As in "Bliss," all the pseudo-sophisticated small talk of the ballet, of aesthetic considerations, and the like cannot hide the elemental coarseness of the bohemians. Their role as destructive parasites is thoroughly established. As a consequence, they are stamped with the parasite's symbolic mark and made voracious eaters of the substance of another creature. Indeed, the reference to the "mushroom" quality of Moira's legs under water is less obscure when one realizes that the mushroom is a parasitic fungus. No less interesting in this regard is Bobby Kane's last name, reminiscent of another Cain who lived at the expense of his brother.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is invoked too in the story through Moira's habit of calling Isabel "Titania." That Isabel should be queen of the fairies is doubly meaningful in "Marriage à la Mode." That she should be estranged from her husband also fits the pattern. Most significant is the bewitching of Titania in Shakespeare's play so that the exquisite queen finds Bottom a handsome and desirable companion. She cannot see

the ass's head as gross and grotesque nor does she recognize how far she has fallen from her usual high standards. Bewitched, Titania offers the absurd Bottom "what thou desirest to eat," and Bottom, half man, half animal (like bohemians) chooses to "munch your good dry oats." Ironically for the modern couple, William is no Oberon nor is the idea of bewitching Isabel his. It is left for the less noble and exalted William to deplore the charm that has been placed upon Isabel but to be unable except for a brief moment to break the spell. The modern Titania never entirely wakes from the dream and her husband, therefore, must seek to escape the nightmare through renunciation and flight.

Meaningfully, in the picture of midsummer that Mansfield offers, both protagonists live in dream: William seeking relief in the fantasy of his childhood past and his married life before the descent of the bohemians; Isabel in the nightmare spell itself cast by her companions. There is evidence, however, that the wife has invited her bewitched state — that she had never been truly content with the idyll of normal marriage and motherhood. Perhaps the reader is to see the bohemian clan as merely the expression of Isabel's inner state, dramatized for fictional presentation. As Bertha Young in "Bliss" finds in Pearl Fulton both a nemesis and a secret sharer, so in this story Moira Morrison may function both as enchantress and as the expression of Isabel's deepest nature, evoking in the wife what Isabel most wishes to have evoked. Perhaps the presence of both elements in Isabel explains the painting that William sees in the sitting room:

On the wall opposite William some one had painted a young man, over lifesize, with very wobbly legs, offering a wide-eyed daisy to a young woman who had one very short arm and one very long, thin one. . . .

William's simple, natural offer of love is made to a woman whose aspect is distorted and grotesque— a combination of two persons of varying appearance. The auguries for a successful marriage are not auspicious.

Source: Marvin Magalaner *The Fiction of Katherine Mansfield,* Southern Illinois University Press, 1971, pp. 86-91.

Topics for Further Study

Read one of Virginia Woolf's short stories, such as "The New Dress," and compare her style and the feelings she evokes to Mansfield's work.

Choose one of the artistic movements of early twentieth-century England, such as cubism or dadaism, to investigate. Then imagine you are a journalist, and write an article about this movement.

Read one of Katherine Mansfield's "New Zealand" stories, such as "A Doll's House," "Prelude," "At the Bay," or "The Garden Party." How do the characters, situations, and settings in these stories compare to those in "Marriage á la Mode"? Which type of story do you prefer, and why?

Moira Morrison is involved in the contemporary London art scene. Conduct research to find out more about that period in London art. What kind of art do you think Moira is most interested in? Why?

Critics have disagreed about William's character. Some find him effeminate, some find him dull, while others merely find him unbelievable. Analyze William's character in terms of his love for Isabel, his alienation from the group, and the believability of his actions.

Critics such as Marvin Magalaner have commented in detail about Mansfield's use of food imagery in "Marriage á la Mode." Conduct research to find out the psychological implications inherent in these images and in the group's voracious appetites. Then decide if you think Mansfield uses these images to full effect.

Mansfield biographer Jeffrey Moore categorized the satire in "Marriage á la Mode" as "facile." Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? How do you think Mansfield could have better satirized Isabel and her friends? Rewrite one of the group scenes, using satire.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: London's population is around 7.4 million.

1990s: London's population is around 7.0 million.

1920s: Cubism, dadaism, and surrealism are all new artistic movements that develop among European painters, and these movements influence other artistic fields. Cubism relies on geometric forms, shapes, and designs; dadaism denounces conventional artistic standards; and surrealism draws from the unconscious and the world of dreams.

1990s: The field of visual arts offers many formats and incorporates multiple media, such as words and television images. Some artists implement modern technologies and create interactive pieces.

1920s: British women over the age of twentyeight have the right to vote (since 1918). Not until 1928 will women be made equal to men in terms of voting.

1980s and 1990s: Women hold important political positions in Great Britain. Margaret Thatcher served as the country's prime minister from 1979 to 1990.

1910s and 1920s: The average British household has three children.

1990s: The average British household has less than two children.

1910s: During World War I, only about a third of the native Germans who have made their homes in Britain remain in the country.

1990s: Immigrants from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa—some 253,000 people—come to reside in Britain.

What Do I Read Next?

"Bliss" by Katherine Mansfield, published a year earlier than "Marriage á la Mode," is one of the author's most well-known and anthologized stories. Like "Marriage á la Mode," it concerns a domestic drama played at against a background of ridiculous, artsy Londoners. Critics often compare these two stories.

The French writer Colette's 1910 novel *The Vagabond* depicts a modern woman trying to achieve social and artistic independence.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) examines one day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class Londoner.

Keri Hulme, a contemporary New Zealand writer, explores the dynamics of a cobbled-together family in her novel *The Bone People* (1983). The winner of England's Booker Prize in 1985, it was praised for its evocation of the Maori people— the original inhabitants of New Zealand.

Evelyn Waugh's 1945 satirical novel *Brideshead Revisited* follows the family and friends of a wealthy English family.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) explores the jazz era generation that emerged in the United States during the 1920s. This novel reveals the new morals and cynical attitude of younger Americans.

Anton Chekhov's short story "Misery" was considered by Mansfield to be a masterpiece, and she used a similar approach in her own story "The Lady's Maid."

Further Study

Bell, Quentin, *Bloomsbury Recalled,* Columbia University Press, 1995.

This memoir written by the son of Vanessa and Clive Bell, members of the Bloomsbury group, recalls the notable people involved in that dynamic scene.

Boddy, Gillian, *Katherine Mansfield, The Woman and the Writer,* Penguin Books, 1988.

This overview of Mansfield's life includes numerous photographs and discussions of the major short stories.

Mansfield, Katherine, *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield,* edited by John Middleton Murry, Ecco Press, 1983.

These selections from Mansfield's journals are edited by her husband.

—, *Selected Letters of Katherine Mansfield,* edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, Clarendon Press, 1989.

These are selected letters written by Mansfield.

—, *Selections, Critical Writings of Katherine Mansfield,* edited by Clare Hanson, St. Martin's Press, 1987.

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Tomalin, Claire, *Katherine Mansfield, A Secret Life,* Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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