Mistress Masham 's Repose Short Guide

Mistress Masham 's Repose by T. H. White

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Overview

One day, while rowing her leaky old punt on the Quincunx lake, Maria determines to explore the small island and its ruin, known as Mistress Masham's Repose. Family history has it that a seventeenth-century duchess, one of Maria's ancestors, had constructed this little temple so that she could take a quiet cup of tea with some of her illustrious houseguests: Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, and, perhaps, Jonathan Swift himself, whose satire, Gulliver's Travels (1726) provides the basis for White's story.

Pretending to be a pirate, Maria rows to the island, hacks through the undergrowth, and, to her surprise, emerges onto a carefully tended lawn. To her further amazement, she finds that the temple is not a ruin at all, but a shipshape, tidy building. Following a tiny pathway, Maria quickly discovers seveninch-high doorways cut into the bases of the pillars of the Repose. But, most thrillingly, she discovers, in a cradle made of half a walnut shell, a tiny, perfectly formed, living baby! She picks up the cradle and, in a flash, is assaulted by the infant's five-inch-high, speartoting mother, who pokes her smartly in the ankle with a pin-sized harpoon.

Maria quickly scoops her up, too, and returns to her lonely room in the palace, bearing her new "pets" home in triumph, like any good pirate bears his booty.

It is not long before two things happen to change forever both Maria's life and the lives of the tiny residents of the Repose. First, Maria realizes that her two little captives are not prospering under her tender care. In fact, they are positively pining away. She needs help, and the only one to turn to is her friend the Professor. And second, the existence of the Lilliputians (for such, the Professor assures Maria, is the distinguished ancestry of her new friends) is quickly discovered by the sharp-eyed Miss Brown.

About the Author

Terence Hanbury White was born on May 29, 1906, in Bombay, India. The only child of upper-middle-class parents, White spent just five years in the East before returning with his parents to England in 1911. White often remarked, in his later years, that his childhood was unhappy and traumatic because of his parent's stormy marriage.

He was left to his own devices by his feuding parents, and ultimately accepted with resignation and sorrow that he would be neglected while his parents bickered, separated, and reunited, only to bicker again.

However, his biographer, Sylvia Townsend Warner, points out that, far from totally defeating him, this precarious existence helped him to develop a lifelong interest in self-education. White eagerly pursued new skills throughout his life. Intensely curious, he spent many hours of his solitary childhood reading novels of danger and adventure and works of English history, and teaching himself the basics of some of his lifelong interests such as hunting and hawking. Still later in life, White became a pilot and deep-sea diver.

His education at Queens College, Cambridge, and later at Cheltenham College, where he studied English literature, prepared him for his early years as a teacher. From 1930 to 1936 he taught and then headed the English department of a preparatory school in Buckinghamshire. In 1937 White published the first book of his King Arthur novels. The Sword in the Stone. It was this book which launched his career as a professional writer. This novelistic blend of romance, adventure, and satire, deals with the childhood, early youth, and young manhood of the legendary King Arthur. It was immediately popular with both adult and young adult readers, and it formed the nucleus of The Once and Future King, White's most famous work, published in 1958. In 1939 White moved to Ireland where he lived until after World War II, writing, reading, and teaching.

In 1946, already at work on Mistress Masham's Repose, White moved to the Channel Island of Jersey. Upon publication of the novel in 1947, he purchased a home on the island of Aldemey in the English Channel, where he settled permanently. White continued to work on his King Arthur novel and in 1951 published The Goshawk, a minor classic in the field of falconry. Today, this account is still regarded as an excellent account of the interaction between man and animal. Always intrigued by the world of animals, White also published a translation of a medieval Latin bestiary, entitled The Book of Beasts (1954).

While White eventually formed a circle of close friends, he was never a very gregarious man, and much of his life was spent in seclusion from the activity of the London literary world. He preferred solitude and quiet in order to work at his best. By 1964, at the time of his death, T. H. White had achieved a worldwide reputation based upon his very successful books. He proved himself a master of both fantasy and realism, and created a memorable world, populated by lively and exciting characters.

Setting

The story takes place in England in the 1940s. World War II has taken a great toll on the expansive Ducal estate of Malplaquet. The heavy "war taxes," combined with generations of willful and extravagant spending by the owners of Malplaquet have left Maria, the present owner, impoverished, and her onceproud estate is a crumbling ruin.

Maria's parents have been killed in a tragic auto accident, leaving their only child in the care of a guardian, Mr. Hater (also the local Vicar) and the governess, Miss Brown, who may or may not be a distant relation. The only other people Maria sees on a regular basis are Mrs. Noakes, the cook, and the Professor, who lives in a small cottage on the outskirts of her great estate. Maria, Miss Brown, and Mrs. Noakes are reduced to living in only a few rooms of the enormous palace. The rest of the rooms are empty, the furnishings having been sold to try to meet the debts of the estate.

Rubble litters the hallways and corridors, now merely remnants of their formerly glorious selves. To get from one end of the palace to the other, Maria and Cook must ride a bicycle!

The story line develops rapidly, but the action always stays within the environs of Malplaquet, its grounds and outbuildings, including the Vicarage and the Professor's cottage. Illustrated profusely by Fritz Eichenberg, the book's setting of parklands and woodlands, waterways and islands, buildings and rooms both great and small comes alive.

For Maria, who knows the terrain of Malplaquet with the intimacy achieved by a lifetime of solitary exploration and games of pretend, the estate is a good friend. For the Lilliputians who have made their home in the Repose for nearly two and a quarter centuries, Malplaquet is the entire world, both safe haven and wilderness. For the Vicar and Miss Brown, Malplaquet exists only as a means to fulfill their selfish greed, for they intend to betray their ward, Maria, and her friends the Lilliputians. Amid the half-ruined buildings and overgrown woods of Malplaquet, a battle takes place between the forces of humanity and kindness and the forces of greed and avarice—a battle that threatens to destroy even the smallest shreds of decency.

Social Sensitivity

The most obvious problem, for many readers, is the menacing, cruel, and evil characters of the Vicar and Miss Brown.

From their early abuses of Maria, which includes threats and deprivation, to the final chapters that allude to a plot to murder her to gain control over the Lilliputians, these two characters are extremely dangerous. However, White lightens much of the threatening atmosphere by his humor, turning an unpleasant and alarming situation into one that amuses rather than frightens.

There is genuine danger for Maria, the Professor and the Lilliputians, but this danger is part of an overall theme and is necessary to the development of the intricate plot; it is not in and of itself as disturbing as a straightforward description might imply.

Literary Qualities

Although Mistress Masham's Repose is a novel of conflict, danger, and adventure, it would be a loss to overlook the deeper levels of meaning implicit in the work. Symbolically, Maria's predicament is an echo of the universal problem of tyranny and subjugation—a problem in the eighteenth-century days of Jonathan Swift as well as in the 1940s England of this novel. By making use of a lonely girl's dreams of friends and companionship, White presents a philosophical and political problem and makes it immediate and contemporary.

In large measure, this effect is brought about by White's skill in characterization and in his deft use of the English language. He has mastered the formal, mannered language of Gulliver's Travels and blends that style with a modern vernacular English with ease and wit. In addition, White captures the nuances of speech, and each of his characters uses patterns of speech which reflect his or her status and background.

White, like Jonathan Swift, resorts to the device of satire to express his opinions. One effect of satire can be the shattering of complacency and smugness. In nearly every chapter of this book, White calls upon the reader to re-examine long held values and opinions. Perhaps the greatest effect of good satire is its ability to stimulate new ways of thinking and to encourage a fresh approach to problems. It is not until Maria and the Professor, working together, are able to achieve this that they are able to triumph over adversity.

One element of Gulliver's Travels echoed by White in his novel is the context of credibility he establishes. Swift took care to build a framework of realistic details so that his fantasy elements would also be accepted as true, and White structures Mistress Masham's Repose along similar lines. By the time Marie discovers the Lilliputians, readers trust her and believe in her world. Therefore, the subsequent actions are also believable even when the events are fantastical. White establishes the same order and sense of dignity that marks Swift's classic novel.

Last, but not least, is White's use of humor as a literary device. While some of the humor of Mistress Masham's Repose is derived from Gulliver's Travels, White incorporates contemporary humor as well. Although White presents two evil characters, one of whom totters on the edge of murder, he has made these characters so hilarious that, in the long run, laughter helps to defeat them. The scenes involving their grudging alliance and complicated schemes to cross and double-cross each other are wonderful and subtle. When the determined Professor confronts the horse-mad, eccentric Lord Lieutenant, whose house is filled with a myriad of laborsaving inventions, all in the shape of horses, the result is nothing short of inspired lunacy. And Mrs. Noakes's struggles with the English language lead her into tangled knots of words and malapropisms from which she cannot escape. The chapter in which the Schoolmaster confronts Mrs. Noakes provides White with the material for an exercise in character development and conflict as these two characters meet, conquer their respective fears and misgivings, and unite to save their beloved Maria from catastrophe.

White's deft use of Swiftian and twentieth-century language produces a flowing, tightly plotted novel with enough twists and turns to satisfy even the most dedicated mystery reader, and with enough action to please the adventure story devotee. In terms of the complexities and beauties of the English language and of the varieties of speech, T. H. White is a master.

Themes and Characters

The main character in Mistress Masham's Repose is Maria. The last surviving member of a rather notorious English noble family, Maria is reduced to a state of poverty. She is a finely drawn character complete with an adventurous spirit, great curiosity, and a natural intelligence. She is not, however, a perfect person, for in her early treatment of the Lilliputians, she is selfish, bossy, and very demanding. But a basic streak of decency and fair play runs deeply through Maria's character, and this, along with the wisdom of her friend, the Professor, saves her from her own worst qualities. But perhaps the most significant aspect of Maria's character is her loneliness. Even her initial mistreatment of the Lilliputians can, in large measure, be explained by her intense desire for companionship. Having no parents and only the company of her hateful guardians, the Professor, and Mrs. Noakes, Maria takes refuge in a world of wild adventure and fantasy.

Consequently, when she finds the colony of Lilliputians, she is at once overjoyed at the prospect of companionship and overwhelmed by the unfamiliar responsibilities of friendship. Maria has never had a friend, so it is a tremendous challenge to her suddenly to discover an entire society with whom she can make friends. Because of the vast difference in their sizes (the Lilliputians dub Maria the "Girl-Mountain") the temptation to treat her new acquaintances as mere Mistress Masham's Repose playthings or pets instead of human beings with feelings and intellect gets the better of Maria, until, after a nearfatal accident involving her "favorite" Lilliputian, she is banned by the Schoolmaster-leader of the group.

With the help of the Professor, Maria finally develops enough strength of character to cope with the duties and needs of real friendship. She learns to give unselfishly and to respect the privacy of her new-found friends.

The Professor is one of White's greatest comic characters . Drawing upon cliches, White nevertheless creates a lively, well-rounded character. He is absent-minded (so much so that he often forgets to eat) and often lost in the world of abstract speculation. But White goes beyond a two-dimensional stock character—and renders, instead, a rounded and believable person. The Professor is not so lost in his own world that he cannot respond to the needs of Maria and her new friends. His concern for justice and fair play is a reflection of Maria's own character, except he is somewhat more intellectual. Where Maria's perceptions fall short, the Professor fills the gap from his wisdom.

Often crotchety and impatient (for he is eager to continue his research undisturbed), he is also full of humor and can be a man of decisive action when he feels Maria's life is in danger. The portrait of the Professor demonstrates White's skill as a master of characterization.

The Vicar, aptly named Mr. Hater, and Miss Brown form a deadly opposition to Maria and the Professor. These two characters are presented with scathing humor, and White

takes an almost fiendish delight in making them as horrible as possible. Mr. Hater is a large, red-faced, heavy-jowled man with not one iota of true religious feeling. His only concern is to find a missing parchment amid the ruins of Malplaquet—a parchment which, he hopes, will give him control over the remains of the estate, and which will release a considerable fortune now tied up in a complicated court battle. He intends to alter this document in his favor, and then marry Miss Brown (whom he detests), since she is a distant relation of Maria's. And so the Vicar prowls the ruins of the Great House, poking his fat fingers behind loose bricks, pulling up the occasional floorboard and generally terrorizing Maria. Then he drives off in his Rolls Royce (bought with embezzled money) to continue plotting in the grim comforts of the Vicarage.

Miss Brown, on the other hand, is "cruel in a complicated way," devising intricate webs of intrigue and subterfuge in a sustained effort to spoil the smallest of Maria's few pleasures. She, rather than Mr. Hater, is the more dangerous and deadly villain, which is revealed when she proposes to murder Maria after it appears their schemes have gone awry. Her schemes become infinitely more grandiose when she discovers the existence of the Lilliputians. While Maria and the Professor regard the Lilliputians as friends and allies, the Vicar and Miss Brown see them only as commodities, articles to be sold to the highest bidder. In their immense greed for power and the trappings of wealth, the two villains enter into an uneasy alliance—uneasy because, like most selfish characters, neither fully trusts the other. This innate lack of trust proves to be a critical factor in their ultimate defeat.

The Lilliputians themselves are, of course, vitally important characters, particularly the Schoolmaster, who serves as the leader, and the great Lilliputian explorer Gradgnag, whose dangerous expeditions have brought him to the farthest reaches of Malplaquet. The Schoolmaster, because of his wisdom, is the nominal spokesman for the group. Although he stands but six inches high, the Schoolmaster is an intellectual and moral giant, a patient instructor to Maria, and a brave soldier when the need arises. (The confrontation between the Schoolmaster and Captain, the Cook's elderly dog, is wonderfully funny and touching.)

Gradgnag the Explorer is an almost legendary figure to his fellow Lilliputians.

A throwback to the actual explorers of Jonathan Swift's era, Gradgnag is a tireless and intrepid chronicler of unknown lands, a bringer of knowledge and lore, and an inventive and resourceful soldier. White succeeds in presenting the Lilliputians without resorting to sentiment or cuteness, instead, painting a vivid and direct picture of a society evolved under conditions of stress and hardship. White takes pains to show that, like Maria and the rest of the normal-sized characters, the, Lilliputians have flaws, too. Some are proud and lazy, some are timid, but all are human and imperfect.

Mrs. Noakes, the Cook, and the horseloving Lord Lieutenant are like caricatures, yet each responds fully to Maria's crisis, drawing on inner reserves of strength and judgment when the situation demands it. In addition, they are both richly comic characters, and White draws on their individual qualities in order to create moments of pure hilarity.

Through the interaction of these characters, the themes of the novel are made clear. First, Maria must face up to her own selfish motivations regarding the Lilliputians. When she insists, to the Professor, that she can "tame" the little people, he gently asks, "Have you ever noticed that when something unusual turns up, you are immediately confronted with a moral problem?"

In fact, the Professor's question illuminates White's purpose in writing this book. In her struggle to control her own needs to better serve the needs of her new friends, Maria demonstrates some of the deepest lessons of maturation: giving instead of receiving; careful planning instead of heedless action; decision instead of indecision. The Professor's question is a profound one, and its answer is equally profound: Think. Only after Maria really learns to think does she begin to grow and mature. Only then is she able to see her goals clearly and to plan her strategies with unselfish ends in mind. She also learns to value herself as an independent and creative person when she learns this lesson. In fact, the Professor, too, comes to value himself more and to have more self-respect when he acts upon his own advice.

The downfall of Miss Brown and the Vicar, and the resulting improvement in Maria's circumstances is, in large measure, summed up by the Professor's admonition: "My dear, you are a great person yourself, in any case, and you do not need to lord it over others in order to prove your greatness."

Mistress Masham's Repose Mistress Masham's Repose is a book that presents serious moral and ethical questions under cover of a suspenseful, action-filled, and humorous plot. The novel takes a premise of Jonathan Swift's seventeenth-century novel, Gulliver's Travels, and transposes it to twentieth-century England. White assumes that the tiny race known as Lilliputians actually exists, and then examines how the so-called "normalsized" world would treat them. Using this premise, White poses further questions about the dominance of one race over another when one race is "bigger and stronger." Published in 1946, this book also represents a kind of cautionary tale addressed to a world recently shaken to its foundations by World War II. The questions posed by the attempts of nations to reconstruct entire societies disrupted and shattered by war and its privations are most serious. White eagerly tackles other philosophical matters in this novel. He poses the question: Does a society, no matter how wellmeaning, have the right to interfere in the internal affairs of another? And why does a society's sincere desire to help others often turn into a selfish desire to dominate them? By exploring the relationship between humans and Lilliputians, White questions the way that terms, such as "society" and "humankind," are defined.

Topics for Discussion

1. Maria is not a bad person, but in her initial dealings with the Lilliputians she makes some serious mistakes, and her behavior is less than admirable. What reasons can you give for this?

2. "You are a great person yourself. . .

and you don't need to lord it over others, in order to prove your greatness," says the Professor. And, by giving this bit of advice to Maria, he also expresses a major theme of this novel. How is this theme developed?

3. The Professor tells Maria that he is a failure. In what ways is this an unfair judgment of his own achievements?

What aspects of his own character does the Professor overlook in making this statement?

4. Why does the Professor avoid meeting the Lilliputians for so long? What does this illustrate about his character?

5. Miss Brown and Vicar Hater are both determined to gain control of Maria's estate, including the Lilliputians. In a discussion with Maria about this problem, the Professor says that, "Children are under dreadful disadvantages compared with their elders."

What are these disadvantages?

6. Why is it important that Maria's best friend is a professor? Why is it important that the leader of the Lilliputians is a schoolmaster?

7. In what ways does the treatment Maria receives at the hands of the Vicar and Miss Brown parallel the treatment the original Lilliputians received after Captain Biddel brought them to England?

8. In what ways will the lives of Maria, the Professor, and the Lilliputians be affected as a result of the adventures they share together?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read Gulliver's Travels, especially the section on Lilliput, and compare the way Swift and White describe Lilliputian society and temperament. White's Lilliputians seem to be a less sophisticated society than Swift's. What factors might have brought this change?

2. Some critics feel that Miss Brown and the Vicar are too evil, too onedimensional. Yet White points out that there are many subtle differences in the characters of these two people. Does White manage to avoid stereotyping in his creation of these two characters?

How does he manage this?

3. One of the reasons why Gulliver's Travels has endured as a classic is because of Swift's skillful use of satire. In what ways does White make use of the devices of satire and humor in Mistress Masham's Repose?

4. What qualities separate the good characters from the evil characters in Mistress Masham's Repose? What are the temptations faced by all the characters in the novel?

5. In what way is the estate of Malplaquet itself a "character" in the novel?

Would you say that this setting seems to have some qualities that are almost human?

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Related Titles

Since Mistress Masham's Repose is directly inspired by Gulliver's Travels and the philosophies of its author Jonathan Swift, a grasp of the themes and plot of this famous novel will be helpful to any reader of White's novel.

While Swift demonstrates a complex, sophisticated, and unsparing mind busily at work dissecting the foibles of his society, it is important to note that the strong note of pessimism which marks Gulliver's Travels is almost entirely absent in Mistress Masham's Repose. Maria's problems are resolved in a satisfyingly happy ending, while Gulliver's adventures end in a spirit of despair for the condition of humankind.

While both men are social critics and clearly see humankind's failings, White is buoyed by an optimistic and hopeful outlook that makes a happy ending almost inevitable.

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