

Mistress of Mellyn Short Guide

Mistress of Mellyn by Eleanor Hibbert

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Mistress of Mellyn Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Adaptations.....	8
Key Questions.....	9
Literary Precedents.....	11
Copyright Information.....	12



Characters

Martha Leigh narrates the story from a distance of many years. She introduces herself with a physical description and a brief version of the "prescribed formula" that brings her to a position as governess in an unknown family in an unfamiliar part of the country. She is a "gentlewoman" in "penurious circumstances." Having failed to marry by the age of twentyfour, a governess's position is her only other option. Martha describes herself as plain, with brown eyes that she has been told are "too bold." And she does have a bold personality. Even on the train journey to her duties in Cornwall, she allows herself to enter a fateful conversation with a strange man.

Throughout the story, she is very aware of conventions, but if common sense, human judgment or, finally, love, prompt her to overstep convention, she does. She is a gentlewoman, but not a prig. Martha is not too good to take "tippie tea" with the housekeeper or too cowed by the remote master of the house to make a confident equestrian of his neglected daughter. Her boldness of character shows, too, in her curiosity and imagination.

She realizes that curiosity is a character flaw, but it is her desire to find answers to the mysteries around her that engages her more fully with the life of the family and ultimately brings happiness to herself and others.

If Martha has a second character flaw, it is that she relies too much on first impressions in her judgments of people. By the time she meets Connan TreMellyn, she has already formed an opinion of him based on the insinuations of others and her perceptions of his relationship with his daughter.

When she does meet him, she finds him a gaunt, aloof man who gives "an impression of both strength and cruelty." Those traits are there, as are the arrogance and insolence she also detects. However, as Martha gets to know him, first in wrangling with him over Alvean's training, then in resisting his attraction to her and her own to him, she sees in him the opposite of each of those traits. She anticipates resistance and disapproval where it does not exist. She anticipates lies and equivocations and finds honesty. He remains mysterious and unreachable in some ways, though. This results in insecurity and a lack of trust in her feelings toward him, a lack that is only overcome at the end of the novel. Martha never learns anything that excuses his early conduct. She learns the reasons behind the conduct, though, and learns that he is capable of changing. He is impulsive, loving, honorable and capable of great kindness, and their marriage gives both of them the opportunity to become fully-rounded human beings.

He can be a gentle and caring mate and father, while she is able to finally unite all the parts of her personality. They establish a relationship in which she can be Marty, and stern Martha, and, on occasion, Miss Leigh. Together they teach those around them never to give up hope.

Social Concerns

this, her first novel as Victoria InHolt, the author establishes her interest in an issue that will inform all of the Holt novels and will become more pronounced through three decades, that is, the independence of women and their right to live a full life, one in which mind and heart are balanced.

Martha Leigh, the narrator, is intelligent and well educated, but is forced to earn her living as a governess because she will not compromise her sense of herself to attract a husband.

While she maintains a sense of the class difference between herself and the TreMellyns and their friends, she is never anything less than as dignified, decent, cultured, and intelligent as her social betters.

Her independent spirit and selfconfidence are directly connected to the picture of the institution of marriage that Holt constructs. Connan TreMellyn, the master of Mellyn, is a widower whose first marriage, to Alice, was arranged by their families. He and his young wife ended up in an unhappy, loveless marriage, which was marred by infidelity and, finally, an illegitimate child, apparent desertion, and violent death. Holt and her narrator avoid a moralizing tone in confronting infidelity, sexual indiscretion, and illegitimacy. The unhappiness of both partners and the tragedy to which it leads are clearly the result of their quiescence in a tradition whose time has passed. The love of Martha and Connan is a surprise to both of them, but at no point does Martha lose her desire to "show him I was his match."

Their marriage effaces class concerns and presents a marriage of equals, providing a direct critique of the human cost of unquestioning obedience to foolish conventions and outmoded traditions. Questioned by Connan upon his proposal of marriage about who should be the "master of the house" Martha answers, "I do not think that either a husband or his wife should be master in that sense. I think they should work together and if one has an opinion which he or she feels to be the only right one, he or she should adhere to it," a response that Connan acknowledges to be "wisdom [that] puts our foolish folklore to shame." The family they form with the child, Alvean, Alice's daughter, not Connan's, and Gilly, is one held together, not by duty or blood but by love and mutual respect.



Techniques

Mistress of Mellyn is both a romance, in its concentration on the slowly-developing love of Martha and Connan, and a mystery, or series of mysteries.

As with the lovers in Shakespeare's romances, these lovers meet with ambivalence, spar, and must overcome great obstacles before reaching their happy ending. The mystery is intertwined with the love story, placing doubts in their paths, doubts about character and culpability. If Connan's wife left him for another, perhaps he drove her to it with his philandering.

Lord Treslyn's conveniently-timed death raises the suspicion that Connan and Lady Treslyn, who have been lovers, are not only cruelly toying with Martha, but are guilty of murder. All of these signs and suspicions must be sorted out before the lovers can reach a true understanding. As each new question or new mystery arises, it appears to be an obstacle. In retrospect, each obstacle is shown to be one more point of understanding that must be reached before all of the secrets of the past are exposed and love and trust can be established.

The many moments of suspense and revelation by which the plot proceeds made this novel a perfect candidate for serialization. Reading on the installment plan prompts the imagination and builds expectation in readers. Most chapters end with a sense of vague dread most effective in increasing the reader's desire to keep the pages turning. The novel did, in fact, appear in serialized form in the Ladies Home Journal through the spring and summer of 1960.

Reinforcing the tension created by the obstacles encountered in the plot are contrasting pairs of people and symbolic things. Connan and Martha meet with a complete lack of knowledge and understanding of each other.

Their personalities and experiences are totally different. The relationship of Alvean with Gilly is characterized by jealousy and suspicion, though they are later revealed to be half-sisters.

Celestine Nansellock and Lady Treslyn appear to represent two kinds of rivals for Connan's affection, sisterlike concern and dark, sexual passion, respectively. But Celestine is finally revealed to be the truly evil character. Celestine's guilt reinforces the idea that the power of the past is more dangerous, because it is more insidious, than the machinations of a femme fatale in the present. Even the houses, Mellyn and Mount Widden, that face each other across the bay symbolize different qualities. Mellyn has "conflict within" and contains dark secrets. The unthreatening facade of Mount Widden is later revealed to house dust, decay and murderous passion. Slowly, the lovers move closer together, the estranged children are brought together in a new, loving family, and the houses are united in peace and harmony.



Themes

The critique of outmoded traditions in *Mistress of Mellyn* is given greater weight by its concern with the ways, both positive and negative, in which the past penetrates the present. Martha is charmed by the quaint Christmas customs of Cornwall, but she scoffs at the local superstitions. Her disbelief is shaken as she takes up residence in Mellyn, a fortresslike mansion on the Cornish coast, where from the outset, she feels she is being secretly observed and that the presence of the first wife, Alice, is all too palpable. Despite her admiration for old houses, she soon feels in this house the full weight of the oppressive past, with its religious persecutions, unhappy liaisons, and destructive sexual *droit du seigneur*. The apparent stability and continuity represented by the house disguises a disturbing underside: a dank "hidey hole," which can hide or imprison, hidden peepholes, an unused chapel, and deserted rooms in which Alice's clothes still hang, a reminder of the more recent, but still painful, past.

Ultimately, Martha realizes that ghosts do not walk; it is the force of the past as it perverts those in the present that one must fear, not the past itself. The violence in the novel, Alice's death and the threats to Martha's life, come from a much closer source. They are the work of Celestine Nansellock, longtime neighbor and seeming friend of the TreMellyn family. Her motivation, a desire, not for Connan or his wealth, but for the house itself, is a shockingly literal reminder of the damage done when too much value is placed on the past.

While Celestine poses a direct threat that has its motivation in the overvaluing of things past, the past exercises an insidious, damaging effect, as well, on the children in the novel. They are in their own way outcasts because of the past. It is Martha, herself an outcast because of her status above the servants but below the TreMellyns and their society, who is able to repair the damage done when children are held to account for the sins of their parents.

Martha thinks that Connan rebuffs the affection and desire for approval of his young daughter because he is unnaturally cold. She attempts, with a combination of encouragement and teaching, to raise Alvean's self-esteem and her value in her father's eyes. She eventually learns, though, that Connan is not fond of Alvean because she is not his daughter; she is the daughter of his late wife and his friend and rival across the bay, Geoffry Nansellock.

Martha is responsible for the transformation of their relationship, which Connan acknowledges, saying, "You made me see her as a lonely child, suffering from the sins of grown-up people."

Similarly, Gilly Polgrey, the illegitimate offspring of Geoffry Nansellock and a servant girl, who committed suicide, is said to be "mad" and to be a visible sign of the working of God's will to punish transgressors. Martha rejects both the label and the imputation that God would punish innocent children. She insists from the outset that Gilly is just "different" and, over time, she gains the child's trust and brings her as far out of her

defensive shell as she will ever come. Gilly is Alvean's half-sister and she joins the family that Connan and Martha make, proving that love and human concern can repair the damage done by the past, so that the past will not blight the future.

Adaptations

Mistress of Mellyn was adapted for stage performance by Mildred C. Kuner. Paramount purchased the film rights, but a film has never been produced.

Key Questions

Mistress of Mellyn is genre fiction of the popular gothic romance variety.

Most readers who choose to read Victoria Holt novels are familiar with the genre and know what to expect from the books. Because this novel is typical of the genre in so many ways, it offers an excellent opportunity to discuss the appeal of romance reading. Discussion might center around what readers expect from gothic fiction. Plots of this and other novels in this genre by Holt feature variations in setting, but little variation in situation. Readers obviously enjoy the books because they know what to expect, rather than because they like to be surprised. Another possible point of discussion is how much variation is acceptable in the plot and characterizations. How does realism enter into expectations?

And, because the novel focuses on bringing lovers together, it invites stimulating discussion of relationships and gender roles, both real and ideal, and the role that reading plays in shaping readers' views and expectations of life.

1. Are Martha and Connan realistically portrayed in terms of motivation and action? Is Martha a convincing Victorian woman?

2. What role does setting, including the houses and countryside, play in *Mistress of Mellyn*?

3. How significant is it that this novel is set in the nineteenth century?

How might it change if it were set fifty years later? In the present?

4. How does Holt use Cornish customs and beliefs to reinforce the sense of place and the novel's atmosphere?

5. Holt adds supernatural overtones to some scenes. How is the possibility of the supernatural used? Is it effective?

6. This novel is often compared to *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*. How is this novel different? The same? Which is more enjoyable and why?

7. What are your feelings about Connan TreMellyn's relationship with Alvean? Did your feelings change at any point?

8. Considering what they do not have in common — temperament, class and sexual experience — do you think Connan and Martha are well matched?

9. What does the family raised by Connan and Martha have in common with many modern families? What problems are they likely to have encountered?



10. Does the novel end as you expect? What led you to expect the happy ending? How would you have reacted if the ending had been unhappy or mixed?

Literary Precedents

Early reviews of *Mistress of Mellyn* noted the novel's resemblance at many points to both Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938). Bronte's novel features an orphaned governess who is thrown into unfamiliar circumstances and ends up falling in love with her employer.

In the background is a first wife and an unhappy marriage. The present is haunted by this unhappiness. Du Maurier updated the story and moved it forward to the stage when the pair are married and the mystery of the man's first wife dominates and nearly destroys the new marriage. The novels are narrated by the woman who has been introduced into this new situation. The only chance of happiness that either couple has is in the solution of a mystery about the man's relationship with his first wife. In each, the man is a troubled character who combines the traits of a romantic lead with the possibility of dark villainy. The secrets that are exposed free the couples to go on with their lives, but leave a cloud of melancholy that cannot be dispelled. It is in this last point that *Mistress of Mellyn* strays significantly from these precedents. The final pages of the novel come forward into the present and offer a retrospective on a marriage that has been fruitful and happy. This match has repaired the damage of the past.

Less often noted is the shared background of those two novels in the gothic novel of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some aspects of *Mistress of Mellyn* look back to this earlier precedent. In particular, the unalloyed happy ending of Holt's novel links it to novels like Ann Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* (1791) and *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Like *Mistress of Mellyn*, these novels satisfied readers' craving for an adventurous female heroine whose bravery and curiosity is rewarded with a happy marriage.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994