

The Marquise of O, and Other Stories Study Guide

The Marquise of O, and Other Stories by Heinrich von Kleist

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Plot Summary

The Marquise of O- by Heinrich von Kleist is an anthology of three short stories by the German author. These dark stories explore the themes of human depravity as well as the wrath of man's judgment. The stories The Marquise of O- and The Earthquake in Chile both record the hardships two women undergo when they find themselves pregnant out of wedlock. The final story, The Foundling, is a chilling tale that describes how a much loved foster child comes to destroy both himself and his foster parents through his lust and desire for revenge.

The Marquise of O-, the longest of the three short stories included in this book, is a tale of deceit and the measure to which a person might go to repair their misdeed. The Marquise is raped, apparently unbeknownst to her, by a Russian count. The count proposes marriage to her in an attempt to cover up his misdeed. However, the Marquise discovers she is pregnant before the marriage can be arranged. The Marquise prints an ad in the local paper asking the father of her baby to come forward so they can be married. She is shocked when the count is the one who comes forward. The two are married and live separately the first year of their married life. After the baby is born the count gives the baby a large sum of money as a gift. He also signs his estate to his wife upon the day of his death. The two begin to correspond with each other and soon fall in true love.

The Earthquake in Chile is a tragedy in which a young couple sentenced to death because they conceived a child before marriage is saved from their fates by a great earthquake that destroys the city of Santiago. Although they are not killed by the earthquake the couple is later recognized by zealous church goers and killed in the street. Their infant son is later adopted by Don Fernando, whose own son is also killed by the angry crowd. This short story raises questions about the judgments of God as well as the hypocrisy found in the hearts of most people.

The third story The Foundling tells the tale of a young orphan boy who is adopted by a man and woman whose own son's death resulted from the boy's behavior. Although the couple treats him kindly the boy, Nicolo, grows to become a bigot and liar. Nicolo tries to seduce his foster mother in an attempt to destroy her reputation but only succeeds in killing her. He then orders his father away from the house his father willed to him. As a result of the evil in their hearts, the law sides with Nicolo and his father is told to stay away from him. The father, however, returns to his home one last time and kills Nicolo. As a result, he is sentenced to death but will not take absolution because he wants to go to hell and torment Nicolo further.



Marquise of O-

Marquise of O- Summary

The Marquise of O- by Heinrich von Kleist is an anthology of three short stories by the German author. These dark stories explore the themes of human depravity as well as the wrath of man's judgment. The stories The Marquise of O- and The Earthquake in Chile both record the hardships two women undergo when they find themselves pregnant out of wedlock. The final story, The Foundling, is a chilling tale that describes how a much loved foster child comes to destroy both himself and his foster parents through his lust and desire for revenge.

The Marquise's story begins with her act of placing an ad in the local newspaper asking the father of her unborn baby to come forward. The Marquise is introduced as a very well-bred widow busy raising two children from her previous marriage. Although she knows the ad will inform the world of her condition and bring about their scorn, she is determined to marry the baby's father both for the sake of the child and the sake of her family.

After the death of her husband the Marquise and her children move in with the Marquise's parents. A war breaks out in Italy and the Marquise's father, a colonel, is ordered to defend the citadel. Before the ladies and children can be moved to safety the citadel is attacked by Russian troops. During the skirmish the colonel's house, where the women are hiding, catches fire. The women become separated in the confusion and the Marquise is attacked by a group of Russian soldiers. Count F, also a Russian, hears her screams and comes to her rescue, chasing the men away. The marquise faints and the two are alone for several moments before servants arrive to care for the lady.

Still under heavy fire the colonel, most often referred to in the story as the commandant, is called to surrender. He does so willingly and goes in search of his family. Meanwhile, the Count is seen helping to put out the fire in the commandant's house and ending the remaining battles. The commandant finds his family and learns of his daughter's attack. She has revived and wishes to go and thank her rescuer but is forced to remain in bed. The commandant thanks the Count and tells the general what has happened. When the general hears of the Count's bravery he praises the man and asks for the names of the men who attacked the Marquise so they can be put to death. The Count claims he did not see any of them clearly and will not give names. As the family tries to decide how to properly show their gratitude to the Count, they learn he has been killed in battle. The count's last words claim that the bullet which killed him avenges a woman named Julietta, a woman with the same name as the Marquise. The Marquise is distraught at this news. Soon the Marquise begins to suffer with bouts of giddiness and nausea, she jokes with her mother about feeling the same way she did when she was pregnant with her second daughter.



To everyone's surprise Count F**, who is supposed to be dead, shows up for a visit and proposes marriage to the Marquise. The Count was apparently mortally wounded but did not die from his wounds. He rejoined the army and stopped at the home of the commandant on his way to Naples. The Count tells the family he feels very strongly about marrying the Marquise in order to pacify his soul. The Marquise has sworn not to marry again but in light of the situation asks for a little time to consider the proposal. Although the Count asks for some definite answer, the family persuades him to stay so the he and the Marquise can become better acquainted. The family is distressed by the Count's odd behavior and wonders if he is sane. That night at dinner the man makes pleasant conversation telling the family of the time he was recovering from his injury. He explains that during this time a vision of the Marquise was present at his bedside taking care of him. The lady reminds the Count of a graceful, beautiful swan he knew as a child. The family decides to make inquiries about the Count's background while he is away on his trip to Naples. If these turn out positively, the Marquise will consider his proposal of marriage.

While the Count is in Naples, the Marquise begins to suffer with her unusual sickness again. This time she notices her abdomen is beginning to swell. She calls for a doctor who tells her she is pregnant. She does not believe the man because she does not recall that she has had any relations with a man since her husband died. The Marquise tells her mother how horribly the doctor treated her and what his diagnosis was. Although she does not believe she is really pregnant, the marquise calls a midwife for a second opinion. The midwife concurs with the doctor's diagnosis. As soon as the midwife leaves, the Marquise is given a note from her mother stating that her father insists she leave his house. Intending to convince her parents she did not wrong, the marquise goes to their rooms. Her father allows her into his room but as the marquise begins to plead her case he reaches for a pistol which accidentally discharges. Believing her father intended to kill her the Marquise packs her things and her children's things. They are in the act of leaving when her brother tells her she is to leave her children behind. The Marquise refuses and leaves with her children.

The Marquise takes up residence in her country house in V**. She intends to live her life here in solitude where she will stay busy with her studies and her children. She commands her porter to allow no visitors into the house. As the marquise ponders how her third child will be accepted by society, she invents a unique way of finding the father. It is at this point that she places the newspaper ad which begins this story. In the meanwhile the Count returns from his journey to Naples and is told by the Marquise's brother of the Marquise's shameful condition. The Count shocks the brother by saying he still intends to marry the Marquise and that she is a more moral person than any of them. The count rides his horse to the house in V** where the porter will not allow him in so he sneaks into the back yard where he locates the Marquise. He tries to tell her he believes in her innocence and still wants to marry her but the Marquise insists he go away. The count returns to the Marquise's parents' home where he is shown the newspaper article. He seems relieved after he reads the article, as if he knows what he must do next.



Frau von G**, unhappy with the way her husband has treated the Marquise, considers seriously the meaning of the article has placed in the newspaper and the reply by the baby's father. The commandant believes his daughter intends to deceive him by having a man come who will concur the Marquise's story. The mother, however, believes there may be more to the story especially after they receive a letter from the Marquise requesting the father of the baby be sent to the house in V**. Frau von G** asks permission to visit the Marquise and try to determine her motives but the commandant refuses to allow the trip. Intent on discovering the truth of the matter Frau von G** makes the trip without her husband's permission. She tells her daughter the man who had fathered the Marquise's baby had come to their house. She tries to get the Marquise to guess his identity, but the Marquise is unable to name anyone. The mother selects a name of a person recently hired to work at the house and the Marquise remembers a time when she woke from sleep to see the same man walking away from her. It is at this point Frau von G** truly believes in her daughter's innocence.

The two women go back to the house of the commandant where Frau von G** tries to convince him of their daughter's innocence. She waits in her daughter's room to see if her husband will apologize to their daughter. If he doesn't apologize Frau von G** claims she will leave him. Soon the commandant comes to the Marquise's room where they reconcile to each other in an emotional and almost sexual manner.

On the third, the day the baby's father is to arrive, the family waits nervously. They are distraught when the Count arrives, believing he has only come for a visit. However, he claims he is the baby's father. The mother is surprised the family had not recognized this before. The Marquise is sickened that the man who is the father of her baby is such a devil. She vows she cannot marry the Count and leaves the room. Her father, however, arranges the marriage. He even has the Count sign papers giving up all conjugal rights in the relationship. The two are married but live in separate houses until after the baby is born. At its birth the Count gives the baby a large sum of money and also gives the Marquise paperwork stating that in the event of the Count's death, she will inherit his entire estate. Once again Frau von G** acts as reconciler and arranges for the count to visit the house often. It is through these visits that the Count and the Marquise become acquainted with each other and truly fall in love. They are married a second time and live happily.

Marquise of O- Analysis

This story could almost be termed a mystery as the reader seeks to discover who the father of the Marquise's baby is and how the impregnation happened. Although it is easy to believe the Count is only trying to cover up the indiscreet behavior of his fellow soldiers, he gives several hints indicating that it is he who caused the Marquise to be in her current condition. The first of these hints is statement that the bullet that almost killed him was Julietta's avenger. While the Marquise believes the Count was speaking of another woman with the same name, he was actually speaking about her. The second hint is the Count's insistence that he and the Marquise should be married right away. The Count apparently believes by getting married right away, he can cover up the



fact that the Marquise was pregnant before their marriage. The third clue that the Count is the father is his lack of shock when he is told the Marquise is pregnant. The Count is more unhappy the pregnancy has already been discovered than he is that the Marquise is actually pregnant.

The ways in which both the Marquise and the Count are depicted in the story are interesting. They are both seen as exemplary characters. The Marquise is the mother of well-behaved children and appears to be morally decent. The Count is a decorated member of the armed services, the Marquise's family can find no one who has anything bad to say about him. The Count relates to them only one indiscretion in his life from which he is trying to redeem himself. At one instance, the Count describes the Marquise as a swan. The Count threw mud at this swan but the swan cleaned herself of the dirt and came clean easily. This swan allegorically represents the Marquise whom he believes will be unaffected by his attempt to throw "dirt" at her.

Note that von Kleist portrays his female characters as strong and intelligent while his male characters appear to be weaker and less intelligent. For instance, Frau von G** uses her intelligence to discover that her daughter is really innocent. Her husband, however, almost refuses to believe his otherwise exemplary daughter could have been deceived without her knowledge. The Frau von G** goes against her husband's command not to have contact with her daughter, and even threatens to leave her husband if he does not apologize to the Marquise. Likewise, the Marquise shows her great moral strength in the way in which she behaves herself after she is diagnosed with pregnancy. Instead of falling apart, she wills herself to care for her children and live out the rest of her life in solitude. The Marquise also comes up with an ingenious way to discover the identity of her baby's father. However, her ad in the paper not only seeks the identity of the father but also lets others know of her condition. This also is a reality she realizes she must learn to live with.

Von Kleist's male characters, however, are weak and appear to be motivated only by emotion. Consider first the Count's act of raping the Marquise. He first rescues the lady from a group of attackers, then apparently while she is still unconscious from the shock of her attack, commits the crime from which he "saved" her. Although he is praised as a hero, the Count refuses to name any of the Marquise's attackers, perhaps a ploy to cover his own guilt. The commandant's behavior is also weak and childish. When he learns his daughter is pregnant, he refuses to believe she has no recollection of the act that led to her pregnancy. When Frau von G** tries to talk reasonably with her husband, he only responds by shouting and telling her not to talk to him about the pregnancy. It is only after both articles have appeared in the paper and his wife has determined for sure her daughter has no idea who the father is that the commandant will apologize to his daughter for his childish and unforgiving behavior.



The Earthquake in Chile

The Earthquake in Chile Summary

Jerónimo Rugera is about to hang himself in the jail cell where he is incarcerated. Jerónimo was fired from his job when his boss discovered Jerónimo was having a relationship with the boss's daughter Josefa. The girl, Josefa, was sent to a convent where the two continued their relationship in secret. When the girl gave birth to a baby boy she was put in jail and sentenced to death. Jerónimo has also been imprisoned for his role in the girl's impregnation. The day has come for Josefa's execution and Jerónimo plans to kill himself at the same time. As he prepares his hanging rope, there is suddenly an earthquake that collapses the walls of the prison in which he is being held. In shock Jerónimo leaves the prison, walks out of the city gates and collapses on a hillside.

When Jerónimo revives, he thanks God for his salvation from the earthquake but then the ring on his finger reminds him of Josefa. He asks the crowds of people escaping from the city if they know whether or not Josefa's execution actually took place. He finds no one who can give him a definite answer but believes she is dead. He continues to search and finds Josefa bathing her baby in a stream.

Jerónimo learns that Josefa had also been saved by the earthquake and had gone in search of her baby. The convent where she had left the child in the care of the abbess had caught on fire with the baby inside. Josefa rescues the child from the burning building. She is about to embrace the abbess in relief when the abbess and almost all the nuns are killed when part of the convent falls on top of them. When she saw the flattened prison, Josefa was sure Jerónimo had been killed and slipped into the woods where she prayed for his soul. The two rest with a group of people who also escaped the destroyed city. The next morning Josefa is approached by a father whose wife is too badly injured to nurse her son. He asks if Josefa will nurse the baby. She agrees and the couple is readily accepted into the group of survivors.

The group learns of a church service to be held in the city and decide to attend. Josefa and Jerónimo go with them. Even after Don Fernando, the leader of the group, is told of Josefa and Jerónimo's sins he refuses to suggest they stay behind. In the church, however, things take a turn for the worse. The priest preaches that it was the moral depravity of the town that caused the earthquake. He makes special pains to point out Josefa and Jerónimo's circumstances. A man in the congregation announces the couple is present in the church and the crowd immediately tries to kill the two. Don Fernando leads the two from the church in an attempt to save their lives but the bloodthirsty crowd kills the couple. In the confusion Don Fernando's own baby is also taken away from him and killed. Josefa and Jerónimo's baby is not killed and Don Fernando and his wife adopt the child as their own.



The Earthquake in Chile Analysis

This story seems to be a comment on the extent of God's mercy compared to the mercy of human beings. Both Josefa and Jerónimo credit their salvation from the earthquake to the power of God. They are happy to be alive and go about trying to help other survivors. They are surprised how quickly they are accepted, even among people who are familiar with their failings. When the people are later stirred up by the priest who blames the earthquake on people, such as Josefa and Jerónimo, who have committed moral sins, the couple is killed by the outraged mob. It seems these people believe their act of judging and murdering the two young lovers is less sinful than the couple's original sin of sex before marriage.

Notice the places in the story where it seems God's wrath is being focused upon those who put Josefa and Jerónimo in the positions where they find themselves. For instance, the building collapses on the critical nuns and the spot where Josefa's father's house once stood is turned into a lake of boiling reddish water reminiscent of descriptions of hell. The archbishop who is so cruel to Josefa is also crushed and killed in his cathedral. It is also remarkable that both Josefa and Jerónimo survive the quake and are reunited with each other in the confusion following the disaster.



The Foundling

The Foundling Summary

Antonio Piachi and his son travel to the town of Ragusa. Since there is a plague in the town, Piachi and the boy attempt to return home but are stopped on the road by a young boy who says he is suffering from the plague. The boy grasps Piachi's hand and kisses it. Piachi is first horrified as a result of this rash act but feels pity for the boy when he falls unconscious. The police come after Piachi and arrest him when they find the sick boy in his possession. Piachi, his son and the boy are all taken back to Ragusa. The boy gets well but Piachi's son becomes sick and dies.

When Piachi learns the boy, called Nicolo, is an orphan he takes the boy home with him. Piachi and his wife, Elvira, raise the boy as their own. As the boy gets older, Piachi teaches Nicolo his business and Nicolo takes over as clerk. Piachi only disapproves of Nicolo's habit of visiting a local Carmelite monastery as well as his affection for women. Nicolo is married at twenty. This marriage appears to cure Nicolo's lust for women. At this point Piachi and Elvira are so happy with the boy that they give him nearly all the proceeds of their estate even before their death.

Known to few others than her husband, Elvira suffers with a depressive side to her personality. This depression is the result of a childhood experience. As a thirteen year old girl, Elvira was nearly killed in a house fire. She was saved by a Genoese who was badly injured during the rescue. Elvira sat by the young man's side for three years before he died as a result of his injuries. It was during the time that Elvira nursed the young man that Piachi became acquainted with her.

Meanwhile Piachi continues to see Xaviera Tartina, one of his former girlfriends. One night he returns from a party with Xaviera wearing a Genoese costume. Elvira happens to catch a glimpse of Nicolo in the costume and passes out, believing she has seen the man who saved her from the fire. Nicolo quickly changes from his costume and no one ever knows it was he who Elvira saw.

Nicolo's wife dies in childbirth and before she has even been buried Elvira catches a woman in Nicolo's room. Piachi also encounters the girl in the house and forces her to trick Nicolo into a "meeting" with Xaviera at a particular church. When Nicolo appears at the church, he instead finds he has been tricked into attending his own wife's funeral. Nicolo believes Elvira is responsible for this trickery and makes up his mind to get revenge on her. Nicolo believes he has found a way to get revenge on Elvira when he passes her room and overhears her talking to a strange man. When he looks in the room, however, Nicolo finds no strange man, only a portrait of a young cavalier.

One day Nicolo takes Xaviera to see the portrait. Both Xaviera and her daughter believe the portrait looks like Nicolo. The experience makes Nicolo think Elvira might actually be in love with him. Playing with some ivory letters that spell his name Nicolo discovers the



letters also spell the name of the man to whom Elvira spoke. He believes she used the anagram Colino only to cover her desires for him.

Determined now not only to get revenge on Elvira but also take advantage of her Nicolò dresses in the Genoese costume once more and hides in front of the painting in Elvira's room. When Elvira finds the likeness of the savior standing in her room, she passes out. Nicolò is about to take advantage of her when Piachi enters the room to find his son standing over his wife. Piachi tells Nicolò to leave his house but Nicolò decides to take advantage of his foster father and has him removed from the house since Piachi had made Nicolò the legal owner of the house.

Elvira dies as a result of her scare and because Nicolò promises to marry Xaviera and take her off the monks' hands, these monks convince the government officials to side with Nicolò. An injunction is drawn stating Piachi must have no more contact with Nicolò. Piachi returns to his home and kills Nicolò. He is found trying to stuff the injunction down Nicolò's throat. Piachi is condemned to death as a result of the murder but refuses to take absolution. He does this because he wishes to go to hell where he can further torment Piachi.

The Foundling Analysis

The central theme of this story seems to be the idea that even when surrounded by good, evil will still persist in the world. This is demonstrated by the fact that even though Nicolò is surrounded by the love and respect of his foster parents, he chooses to reject this love. Instead of following his foster father's loving example, Nicolò gives in to his own lust and need for revenge. It is this action that leads to the ultimate destruction of the entire family. Note, however, that after Piachi kills Nicolò, Piachi also becomes obsessed with the need for revenge. This need for revenge causes Piachi to refuse to be absolved from his sin before he is hanged. Piachi believes that by refusing absolution he will go to hell where he will be free to continue to torture Nicolò. It seems paradoxical that such a good person would rather spend the afterlife torturing the man who caused the death of his wife instead of with the wife whom he seemed to love so much.



Characters

Marquise of O-

The Marquise of O-, also called Julietta, is a wealthy widow with children from her former marriage. She leads an exemplary life and stays busy teaching her children who are very well-behaved. Along with being very rich, the marquise is also very intelligent. She is distraught when she discovers she is pregnant without knowing the reason but soon makes the best of a bad situation. She takes her children away from the home of her parents, who have basically disowned her as a result of her disgrace, and moves with them to her country home. The marquise sets herself up to live in solitude until the baby is born. Despite her lack of knowledge about who might come forward, the marquise places an ad in the paper inviting the father of the baby to make himself known so that the two of them can be married. In some ways the marquise can be compared to the Virgin Mary. Both became pregnant without their knowledge and both had to suffer the same of their "sin." Like the Virgin Mary, the marquise is also described as being blameless in her behavior, not one who would become pregnant out of wedlock. Unlike the Virgin Mary, however, the father of the marquise's baby does come forward and marries her. Although she regards the count as a devil at first, they soon grow to love each other.

Count F**

The count is the man who claims to be the father of the marquise's baby. He is first seen in the story as the savior who runs the mob of soldiers who are attacking the marquise away from her. She faints after the count has run the others off and although it is not detailed in the story, it must be at this point the otherwise gallant count takes advantage of the marquise. In a later battle the count suffers a bullet wound which the marquise is told results in his death. However, he rises from the dead and travels to the marquise's house where he offers a whirlwind proposal of marriage. It seems he suspects the marquise is pregnant and wants to marry her before the pregnancy is discovered in order to save either himself or her from the disgrace.

Frau von G**

Frau von G** is the Marquise's mother. Her primary role in the story is first the reconciliation of her own family after the news of the Marquise's pregnancy is discovered. She is also instrumental in encouraging the Count to visit their home after his first marriage to the Marquise. It is through these visits that the Count and the Marquise truly fall in love with each other. Frau von G** is a very intelligent woman in the way she manipulates her husband in order to get him to apologize to their daughter. While she acts in a manipulative manner, she appears not to be a woman with a general nature of manipulation. Even as she attempts to influence her husband's behavior she



worries that the emotional strain on the man may be too much for him to bear. She prepares nourishing food for him to eat after the reconciliation and specially prepares his bed so he can rest.

Herr von G/Colonel G**/The Commandant**

The commandant is the Marquise's father. As a military man, he is not at all prepared to have any hint of unsavory behavior among the members of his household. As a result he throws his daughter out of the house when he learns she is pregnant. He does not listen to her side of the story or consider her previous exemplary behavior. The commandant also tries to take the Marquise's children away from her, an act the Marquise's mother will not allow. When the commandant does realize how wrong he was in his hasty judgment of his daughter, he almost overwhelmed with his emotions of guilt during their reconciliation.

Josefa

Josefa is the heroine of the story *The Earthquake in Chile*. As a result of her relationship with her tutor, Josefa is sent to live at a Carmelite convent. She and her lover continue their relationship while she is at the convent, however, and Josefa becomes pregnant. Josefa's pregnancy is secret until she goes into labor at the convent. Even in her condition she is put in jail and condemned to death for her sin.

One striking aspect of Josefa's personality is that she is portrayed as a selfless and moral lady. Her only fault seems to be her pregnancy. Even when Josefa meets with people who once held her in disdain, she treats them kindly and helps them. This includes nursing the baby of one lady hurt too badly by the earthquake to nurse her own child.

Jerónimo

Jerónimo is the father of Josefa's baby in the story *The Earthquake in Chile*. He loves Josefa so much that he risks his life trying to free her from prison. At the point she is about to be executed Jerónimo is following a plan to end his own life. Jerónimo's plans are interrupted by the earthquake. After he regains his senses, Jerónimo's first thoughts are of Josefa. He seeks information from all those around him to find out if she lived or died. When he finally discovers she is alive, he devotes himself to her and his baby.

Piachi

In the story *The Foundling* Piachi adopts Nicolo after his own son is killed by the plague. He is kind to the boy and raises him as his own son. After Nicolo attempts to rape Piachi's wife, however, Piachi turns against the boy. He murders the lustful Nicolo and



stuffs an indictment down Nicolo's throat. Piachi is so angry at his son for his actions that he refuses to take absolution so that he can go to hell and torture Nicolo further.

Nicolo

Nicolo is the foundling in the story *The Foundling*. He is adopted by Piachi and Elvira after Piachi's son is killed by the plague. Although Nicolo is treated kindly by his foster parents, he grows to become a bigot and womanizer. Nicolo's desire for revenge results in the death of his foster mother. He is then murdered by his foster father after Elvira dies and Nicolo forces Piachi to leave his house. Nicolo is so hated by his foster father that he refuses to take absolution so that he can go to hell and torment Nicolo more.

Elvira

Elvira is Piachi's wife in the story *The Foundling*. She is distraught at the death of her step-son but welcomes Nicolo as a foster son. Elvira is portrayed as a better than life character. She dedicates herself to the man who saved her life from a house fire and sits by his bed for nearly three years as he suffers with the injuries he receives during her rescue. It is while Elvira is caring for her savior that Piachi meets Elvira. After the injured man dies, he marries Elvira even though he is older than she. Nicolo believes he has found a weakness in Elvira's character when he hears her talking to the portrait of the man who saved her life. Nicolo uses this information to try to seduce Elvira. Elvira becomes mortally ill when she sees Nicolo dressed in the same manner as the man who saved her life.

Colino

Although he does not actively appear in the story Colino is a central character in the story *The Foundling*. Colino is the man who saved Elvira from a house fire when she was a young girl. He is injured during the rescue and dies from his injuries three years later. By chance Nicolo, the boy whom Elvira and Piachi adopt, looks like Colino. Nicolo's name also contains the same letters as Colino's name. Because of this coincidence Nicolo believes his foster mother has a crush on him and tries to seduce her by dressing up so that he looks like Colino looks in the portrait that hangs in Elvira's room.



Objects/Places

A Newspaper Article

It is through this article that the Marquise hopes to discover the identity of the father of her baby.

A Teacup

It is upon picking up this cup that the Marquise has a sensation just as she had in a former pregnancy.

A Pistol

This gun accidentally goes off as the Marquise's father is taking it from the wall of his bedroom.

The Citadel

This citadel is where the Marquise is attacked and then "saved" from her attackers by the Count.

Country House in V**

The Marquise and her children find refuge at this house after the Marquise is thrown out of her house by her father.

Santiago, Chile

Santiago is the city where Josefa and Jerónimo are saved from their death sentences by an earthquake but then later murdered by a crowd of people outside a church.

Ragusa

Ragusa is the city in The Foundling where Piachi's son dies of an epidemic and Piachi brings home Nicolo.



An Injunction

After Piachi kills Nicolo in the story *The Foundling* he stuffs this piece of paper down Nicolo's throat.

Ivory Letters

In *The Foundling* Nicolo is playing with these letters when he discovers the letters of his name also make up the name Colino.

Life-sized Portrait of a Cavalier

This portrait of Colino hangs in Elvira's bedroom in the story *The Foundling*. Elvira keeps the portrait covered with a drape.

Genoese Costume

In *The Foundling* Nicolo is wearing this costume when he first surprises Elvira in the dining room. He later wears it again when he tries to seduce his foster mother.



Themes

Depravity of human nature

The moral wickedness of humans is one theme that is repeated in all three of these von Kleist short stories. Although this theme is not as strong in *The Marquise of O-* as it is in the other three stories, it can be found in the person of the Count. Although he appears to be morally irreproachable, he is actually the one who raped the Marquise. Not only did he rape her, he committed this act under the guise of "saving" her from other attackers.

The theme of depravity becomes much more clear in the story *The Earthquake in Chile*. Although the pair of young lovers is punished for their act of premarital sex, the writer communicates a sort of sympathy for this couple. After all, it was simply social standing and the anger of a parent that kept the two young people from being married. It is instead the people of Santiago in general who act in a morally wicked way. Outraged by a priest who declares the earthquake was caused by God's wrath against the young pair the people take matters into their own hands and kill Josefa and Jerónimo. Apparently the people forgot that God also holds wrath for those who murder.

Moral depravity is also a theme in the final story *The Foundling*. Nicolo is in a way responsible for the death of Piachi and Elvira's son yet the couple still accepts the orphaned boy and raises him as their own. Nicolo is given every privilege any natural son would have had. In fact, Piachi even signs the rights to his business and home over to the boy while Piachi and his wife are still living. Despite this kind treatment from his foster parents, Nicolo's intent to seduce his foster mother ends in her death. He then throws his foster father out of his house and has an injunction drawn up stating Piachi is to leave Nicolo alone. It is at this point Piachi gives over to the depravity of his own soul and murders his adopted son. He then refuses to take absolution with the hope that he will go to hell where he can further torture Nicolo.

Faultless heroine

Each of the three short stories included in this book contain a female character described as "irreproachable" with the exception of one tragic flaw. In the story *The Marquise of O-*, the Marquise is described as being an exemplary person. After her husband's death she moves in with her parents to help care for them and to raise her two children. In the middle of this exemplary life, however, the Marquise becomes pregnant. Although she really has no recollection of the act that got her pregnant, the Marquise is - by her family.

In the story *The Earthquake in Chile*, Josefa has a problem similar to that of the Marquise. Josefa is also described as being morally irreproachable with the exception of her act of becoming pregnant out of wedlock. As a result of her father's anger, Josefa



and Jerónimo are not allowed to be together as they would like, so they are forced to have a relationship in private. It is this hidden relationship that results in Josefa's impregnation and resulting death sentence.

Elvira, the main female character in the story *The Foundling*, is also presented as a faultless heroine. Her one flaw is her love for the young man who saved her from a house fire when she was a child. Elvira still has a portrait of this man in her room and she professes her love to this man even after she has been married to Piachi. Although he doesn't understand what he has discovered, Nicolo uses this man's portrait against his foster mother in an attempt to seduce her. It is this emotional strain that results in Elvira's death.

Hopelessness

One theme that is sensed by the tone of von Kleist's stories is the hopeless quality of human life. Of the three stories *The Marquise of O-* is the only one that has a happy ending. Even in the midst of this story, there are threads of this hopelessness. When the Marquise is ordered to leave her father's house, she resigns herself to the belief that no one will accept the idea that she did not have consensual sex with a man.

This theme of hopelessness is again echoed in the story *The Foundling*. Even with Piachi and Elvira's attempts to raise Nicolo as their own son, Nicolo still gives in to his wicked nature and causes the ruin of himself and his foster parents. This story turns the idea that through goodness and love people can promote the goodness of other people upside down. The feeling of the story is that no matter what one does, good or bad, they will be punished in a similar fashion.

The story *The Earthquake in Chile* is by far the most hopeless story of all three. Two young lovers survive an earthquake and are each saved from their death sentences. Even as they attempt to praise God for giving them back their lives and reuniting them with each other, the merciless crowd descends upon them and kills them. The story ends with the idea that even God cannot save those whom humanity has decided to persecute.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of all three short stories is the third person omniscient. The stories are told from no certain character's point of view but instead from an outside narrator. Use of this point of view allows the reader to have a glimpse into the thoughts and emotions of each character and does not limit the story to one point of view.

These stories are told most through exposition with only smatterings of dialogue here and there. This use of exposition helps the reader to concentrate on the action of each story rather than the characters' relationships with each other.

Setting

Each of the three short stories in this book has its own unique setting. The story the Marquise of O- is set somewhere in Italy. Because von Kleist bases this story on a true incident, he does not include the names of locations. He notes only that he has moved the setting from the north to the south. The action of the story takes place in the citadel where the Marquise is attacked, her parent's house and the country house where the Marquise flees with her children after her father throws her out of the house.

The story The Earthquake in Chile is set in the town of Santiago, Chile. Settings include the prison where Jerónimo is held and the convent where Josefa is banished. Josefa and Jerónimo are reunited in a valley outside the city that is compared to the Garden of Eden. The final scenes in the story are set in a church and the courtyard of this church. It is in this courtyard that Josefa and Jerónimo are murdered.

The Foundling begins near the city of Ragusa, and then moves to the city of Rome where Piachi and Elvira live. The major settings for the action of the story are places within Piachi and Elvira's house including Piachi's room, Elvira's room and the dining room of the home. Elvira's childhood home is also the setting of a flashback which gives the reader information about Elvira's past needed to understand the story. The final setting of the story is the Piazza del Popolo where Piachi is hanged for the murder of Nicolo.

Language and Meaning

Von Kleist's stories are well written and enjoyable. The language is neither too stiff nor too relaxed. Von Kleist's writing is very fluid and lacking in variety. However, von Kleist wants to impress the reader with his material and not his ability to write in a diverse fashion. One of the most interesting features of von Kleist's writing style is his use of hidden identities in the story The Marquise of O-. The language used in these stories is



very utilitarian. There are no descriptions, dialogues or occurrences that are not necessary to tell the story.

Structure

This book is separated into three separate short stories. The Marquise of O- is the longest of these stories at approximately 50 pages. Both The Earthquake in Chile and The Foundling are about 20 pages each. None of these stories is broken up into chapters, they are each a solid, unbroken narrative. Because these stories are so short, this structure works well. These stories are easily read in one sitting and since there are not breaks, the reader is not distracted by interruptions in the action of the stories. The lack of breaks also follows von Kleist's unornamented style of writing.

These stories are each centered on one single plot, there are no subplots in any of the stories. The stories are not definitely not slow paced, but also don't follow a fast pace. They are paced perfectly to keep the reader engrossed in the plot as von Kleist develops these plots. There are only two places in the stories where there are flashbacks. These include the beginning of The Marquise of O- where the action starts with the Marquise placing the newspaper article, then rewinds to detail the actions leading up to this article. There is also a flashback included in the story The Foundling. This flashback is necessary to give background information about Elvira's relationship with Colino.



Quotes

"In M**, an important town in northern Italy, the widowed Marquise of O**, a lady of excellent reputation and mother of several well-breed children, had the following announcement published in the newspapers: that she had, without knowing the cause, come to find herself in an interesting condition, that she wished the father of the child she was expecting to present himself; and that she was resolved, out of consideration for her family, to marry him." The Marquise of O**, p. 3

"After the initial scene of uncomprehending astonishment was over, and the Count had assured the parents, who had accused him of being dead, that he was alive, he turned to their daughter with great emotion in his face, and asked her before anything else how she felt." The Marquise of O**, p. 10

"When he had left the room, the family were at a loss to know what to make of such a display. Frau von G** said that the Count, having set out for Naples with dispatches, could not possibly wish to send them back to Z**, simply because on his way through M** he had not succeeded, in a five-minute conversation, to extract a promise of marriage from a lady with whom he was totally unacquainted." The Marquise of O**, p. 14

"She realized the impossibility of ever convincing her family of her innocence, understood that, if she were not to go under, she must come to terms with the fact - and only a few days had elapsed after her arrival in V**, when her grief gave way to a heroic resolve to arm herself with pride against the slings of fortune." The Marquise of O**, p. 29

"The count replied that she was worth more than the entire world which despised her, that he believed implicitly her protestations of innocence; and that he intended to go that very day to V** and repeat to her his offer." The Marquise of O**, p 31

"A whole series of young Russians now followed the first; and when, during one happy hour the count asked his wife why, on that fateful third of the month, when she had seemed prepared to receive even the most dissolute rake, she had fled from him as if from a devil, she replied, throwing her arms around his neck, that he would not have appeared to her as a devil, if at their first meeting he had not seemed to her an angel." The Marquise of O**, p. 50

"He was standing, as already described, by a pillar, and was just fastening the rope, which he hoped would release him from this wretched world, to an iron bracket attached to the cornice, when suddenly, with a crash as if the firmament were falling in, the greater part of the city was swallowed up, and buried every living creature beneath its ruins." The Earthquake in Chile, p. 54

"Then, noticing a ring on his finger, he suddenly remembered first Josefa, and then his prison, the tolling bells and the moment before the building collapsed. Deep sadness



again filled his heart; he began to regret his prayer, and the Being who reigns above the clouds filled him with horror." *The Earthquake in Chile*, p. 56

"It was as if, after the terrible blow which had shaken them all to the core, everyone was now reconciled." *The Earthquake in Chile*, p. 61

"Don Fernando and Doña Elvira then adopted the little stranger as their own son; and when Don Fernando compared Felipe with Juan, and the ways in which he had acquired them both, it almost seemed to him that he had cause to be glad." *The Earthquake in Chile*, p. 70.

"The thought that he might have aroused a great passion in this paragon of womanly virtue was almost as precious to him as the desire to take revenge on her; and as he now had the prospect of gratifying both desires at once, he waited impatiently for Elvira to return and for the moment when a single gaze into her eyes would dispel all his doubts and crown all his hopes." *The Foundling*, p. 85

"In short - because he agreed to marry Xaviera, whom the bishop wished to get rid of, evil prevailed, and the government was persuaded by this man of the church to issue a decree which confirmed Nicolo's right to the property and required Piachi to bother him no more." *The Foundling*, p. 89



Topics for Discussion

Do you believe the Count is really the father of the Marquise's baby? Why or why not?

Consider the Count's "death." Why is this fake "death" important to the story?

Explore the rape of the Marquise. Do you think it is possible she could have had no knowledge of her attack? Why or why not?

Discuss the mother's role in reconciling her family in the story *The Marquise of O-*. Why is the reconciliation important?

Explore the repercussions of Don Fernando's decision in *The Earthquake in Chile*. After having been made aware of the couple's death sentences do you think he should have insisted they not attend the church service? Why or why not?

Consider the reasons behind the murders of Josefa and Jerónimo. Although it appears God saved them through the earthquake, they are later killed anyway. What does this say about the power of God? What does it say about the nature of people?

Discuss Nicolo in *The Foundling*. How is it that he comes to treat so badly the people who took him in when he had nothing? Why do you think he acts the way he does?