

A Short Story Interpretation

Robert Malsberry

“**W**HY BE SO cruel as to take anyone to pieces?” Although in opening her short narrative, “A Cup of Tea,” Katherine Mansfield asks this question, she does exactly that—using all the subtle satirical writing genius at her command for the characterization of Rosemary. It would be difficult to give the subtle implications too much emphasis, for her narrative is polished in the subtle effect.

The reader is able to classify Rosemary in her society after the first paragraph. This classification becomes more static and more understandable as the fragmentary narrative progresses. Rosemary regards anything she comes in contact with as created solely for her exploitation. Everything is at her disposal, and must meet with her approval. She seems extremely pampered by her wealth and is at the summit of sophistication, but she is not happy. With all her riches and social position, her romantic life is barren. To her, the little creamy box in the antique shop symbolizes the romance she longs for. She does not know whether the shopkeeper's passing infatuation is worth the price of the box. But in her heart she demands to be compensated; she seeks a substitute. When faced with the cold dreary afternoon and darkening rain, Rosemary wishes she had the little box in her muff to cling to. She experiences a great pang and despises herself for giving way to her emotions. Outside the shop the reader is made to feel, along with Rosemary, this terrible and fascinating moment.—A young voice stammers, “—the price of a cup of tea?”

Does Rosemary take the girl home out of the goodness of her heart? Is she at any time doing a humanitarian deed? Do the girl's troubles, or starved condition actually impress Rosemary? Of course not! It was like “something out of a novel by Dostoevsky”—a meeting at dusk—such an adventure!—another stamp to add to her curious collection of “discoveries,” artists, and the like. Rosemary, who actually experiences a poverty of life, longs for adventure. It will be thrilling! She already imagines how exciting the story will seem when related to her friends.

As Miss Mansfield realizes, “Hungry people are easily led,” and Rosemary leads her little captive into the superficial atmosphere of her home. Rosemary, who could never experience hunger, is unable to appreciate the girl's condition; she almost faints before Rosemary realizes the dire needs of the girl and feeds her. Is Rosemary or society to blame for this complete lack of understanding between the two girls or the two groups they symbolize?

Just as cattle are fattened for slaughter, so Rosemary gets the girl ready to pour out her soul to those ears so accustomed to the amusing. But Philip interrupts the well laid plans—Philip, who knows his wife so well, even better than she knows herself! First he tells her that the girl cannot stay. Philip's wishes mean very little to Rosemary. But when Philip applies a little psychology, Rosemary is taken aback. She is utterly speechless! In her fit of emotion, Rosemary formulates a plan of action. The girl is paid to leave and to never return. Miss Mansfield thoughtfully spares the reader the unpleasant details of this final meeting between the two girls. Rosemary returns triumphantly to Philip. However, she wants reassurance, and for the first time her veil of sophistication momentarily vanishes. She asks Philip about the box. Of course she may have it. Her loneliness engulfs her as she asks the meaningful, "Philip, am I pretty?" She is a piteous creature, well symbolizing the superficial element in society, and a fascinating characterization.

Twenty-five Pounds of Dog Food for a Saint Bernard

Marmi Kingsbury

MY EYES BRIMMED with uncontrollable tears, yet I knew she would find a way, as mothers always do. Large, awkward feet just would not be crammed into delicate gilt slippers. My blond curls, which had been so carefully shampooed and pinned in place, were already becoming straggly at the ends. The party dress which I had thought was so different and mature in the shop, now somehow looked very childish. "Pink is a very good color for you, young lady," the sales girl had said; but now it seemed too delicate for someone my size. I guess I was too impressed with my own importance when she said, ". . . young lady," instead of, "little girl." My perfume was slightly overbearing; and the faint touch of lipstick, which I administered under the careful scrutiny of my mother, clashed horribly with the shade of my dress.

My brain was playing havoc with the proverb, "Pretty is, as pretty does," and all the time my heart sank lower.

The doorbell shrilled an ovation; I knew that it was too late to run away and hide; too late to fake a terrific headache or an upset stomach. He was here!