The Dolls House and Other Stories

by Katherine Mansfield

SUMMARY

The Doll's House and Other Stories is a collection of four short stories written by Katherine Mansfield between 1920 and 1924. All the stories are set around the time that Katherine Mansfield was writing and are about the lives of the middle-class woman, Bertha Young. On this particular day Bertha is blissfully happy. She has a loving husband, a lovely baby, interesting friends and no money worries. That evening she has a dinner party. Through an open door, she sees something that destroys her happiness in an instant ...

Mr Reginald Peacock's Day is about the self-absorption and vanity of a professional singer and singing teacher, Reginald Peacock. While his wife works hard looking after the house and children, Reginald flirts with the pretty young women he gives singing lessons to. In the evening he goes out to dinner with a female admirer. Reginald is so pleased with himself. He cannot understand why he and his wife do not get on ...

The Doll's House is a story about the cruelty of children towards each other. Three middle-class girls are given a beautiful doll's house as a present. They allow their excited schoolfriends to see the doll's house. But there are two sisters from a very poor family whom they despise and laugh at; they will not let them see the doll's house. Finally, the youngest daughter lets the sisters into the garden ...

The Garden Party is another story about the insensitivity of the middle-classes. A family is giving a garden party. There is a marquee, flowers and wonderful food. Then Laura, one of the daughters, hears that a man in a small house nearby has been killed in an accident. Laura tries to stop the party. But her family insist that the party continues. After the party, Laura, still dressed in her beautiful clothes, goes to visit the family of the dead man ...

These four stories show Katherine Mansfield at her best. Delicately and subtly, she paints a precise picture of middle-class lives and attitudes. Her ear for dialogue is unfailing. Each story has a twist at the end that is unexpected and thought-provoking.

ABOUT KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Katherine Mansfield was the pseudonym of Kathleen Beauchamp, born in 1888 in Wellington, New Zealand. Katherine's father was a partner in a shipping company; he later became chairman of the Bank of New Zealand. While at school Katherine wrote stories for the school magazine. She was sent to a London school at the age of 14, together with her two sisters. There she met Ida Baker, who was to become her lifelong friend and companion. Katherine fell in love with England but reluctantly returned to New Zealand, three years later. She studied music for two years and started to read and write with great seriousness. Several of her stories were published in a New Zealand magazine and at the age of 20, Katherine came back to London, determined to become a professional writer.

From an early age Katherine hated conventionality. At the age of twenty-one she had an affair with a New Zealand violinist, Garnet Trowell, and became pregnant by him. She then married George Bowden and left him the same day. She fled to Bavaria, and had a miscarriage there. It was these experiences that were the background for her first collection of stories, In a German Pension. These were published in 1911, when Katherine was only 23.

In 1911 Katherine met her future husband, the literary critic, John Middleton Murray. Katherine started living with Middleton Murray in 1912. They married in 1918, but throughout their relationship spent time apart from each other.

Katherine was a lively, witty conversationalist with a sharp, sometimes cruel sense of humour. She became friends with many of the most famous literary figures of the time, including D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. However, her health began to deteriorate in her twenties. By the age of twenty-eight she knew she was suffering from tuberculosis, a disease that, at that time, was almost always fatal. In order to improve her health, Katherine started spending part of every year in the south of France and Switzerland. However, her health continued to deteriorate. Nonetheless, she worked very hard, pushing herself to write and publish two more collections of short stories.

In 1922, at the age of 33, Katherine joined the Fontainbleau Institute, run by Gurdjieff, the esoteric
During her short life Katherine Mansfield published three collections of short stories: *In a German Pension* (1911), *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920), and *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (1922), published the year before she died. She also wrote a long short story called *Prelude*, published in 1918, at the age of thirty. After her death, two more collections were published; these were *The Dove’s Nest* (1923) and *Something Childish* (1924).

Katherine’s work was greatly influenced by the Russian dramatist and short story writer, Anton Chekhov. From 1903 his work started appearing in translation. Katherine is held to be the main channel for his influence in England. Like Chekhov, Katherine’s work is based on penetrating observation of the upper classes. She is both affectionate and merciless in her portrayal of the upper-class lifestyle, its pleasures and pretences. Like Chekhov, Katherine’s work is a subtle combination of comedy and pathos. Her stories vary in length and atmosphere. However, it is very easy to recognise a ‘Katherine Mansfield’ story - there is a quality of lightness and precision that is perfectly suited to the short story form. Often there is a twist at the end of the story that reveals the deeper truth.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK
1. Read the information on Katherine Mansfield in the *Introduction*. Read this information to your students. Then divide the students into small groups. Tell them they have eight minutes to write down as many facts as possible. The winning group is the one with the most correct information.
2. Ask students to look at the picture of the woman on the front cover of the book. Put students in pairs and ask them to describe her physical appearance and how her character and background might be. Finally, ask students why this picture is on the front cover and how it might relate to the stories.

ACTIVITIES WHILE READING THE BOOK
Bliss
1. Teach the word symbol as students will need it in this activity. In groups, students discuss why they think the story ends with the words below and what the author is telling us. Then have a whole class discussion.

‘But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flowers and as still.’

2. In small groups, students discuss what, in their opinion, Bertha does after the end of the story. Ask them first of all to write down the options. For example, Bertha could tell her husband that she saw him kiss Miss Fulton. Alternatively, she could remain silent. When students have done this, ask them to decide what Bertha actually does and to give their reasons. Then discuss as a whole class activity.

Mr Reginald Peacock
In groups, students discuss the following question:
What do you think the author is trying to say in this story? They then write a paragraph in answer to it. Each group reads out their paragraph. When a group makes a new point this point is written on the board. Then as a whole class activity, write a paragraph that makes all the points on the board.

The Doll’s House
In pairs, students play the two Kelvey girls at the end of the story. They talk about their day at school and the cruelty of the girls. They also talk about the doll’s house and the lamp.

The Garden Party
Ask students to imagine that Laura is unable to visit the woman whose husband has been killed. Instead she writes a letter to the woman. In pairs, students write this letter.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK
1. In groups, students say what they have learnt from the stories about the lives and attitudes of the middle classes of that time, as Katherine Mansfield sees them.
2. In students discuss the following question.

What are the similarities between the stories?

Glossary

Bliss
charming (adj) very pleasing or attractive

monkey (n) a small, brown animal with a long tail that uses its hands to climb trees and lives in hot countries

pear (n) a sweet, juicy fruit that has a round base and becomes thinner nearer the top

poem (n) a piece of writing arranged in patterns of lines and sounds which often rhyme

The Doll’s House
doll (n) a child’s toy that looks like a small person

jug (n) a container for liquids with a handle and a spout

rope (n) a very strong, thick string made by twisting threads of nylon or other material

skip (v) to move forwards with quick steps and jumps

The Garden Party
broad (adj) very wide
equipment (n) all the special things you need for a particular activity

marquee (n) a large tent

Published and distributed by Pearson Education

© Pearson Education 2000
Activities before reading the book

Read the Introduction. These are the titles of the four stories in the book. Match the titles with the sentences describing the stories.

The Dolls House   The Garden Party   Mr Reginald Peacock’s Day   Bliss

(a) We see how one neighbouring family gives an expensive party and the other is affected by a sudden death.
(b) Bertha’s feelings show her love of the moment and her satisfaction with her home, her family ... Yet pain is not far away. Before the day is over, Bertha’s safe, happy world is destroyed and she faces an uglier, crueler reality.
(c) We see the friendliness which rich children show towards each other and their unfriendliness towards s children poorer than them.
(d) We see the way a music teacher behaves towards his pupils and towards his own family.

BLISS

While reading

Read to the end of page 10

1 Answer these questions.
   (a) How is Bertha feeling today?
   (b) Complete this sentence describing Bertha’s feelings:
       She still had that feeling of perfect ........................., as if she had swallowed a piece of ..........................
   (c) How does Bertha feel towards:
       her husband her nanny her baby Miss Fulton?
   (d) How does Bertha’s husband feel about Miss Fulton?
   (e) How do we know that Bertha and her husband have quite a lot of money?
   (f) What kind of people do Bertha and her husband know?
   (g) Who does Bertha admire the pear tree with?

2 Work in pairs. Discuss these questions.
   (a) Would you like to have a life like Bertha’s? Say why/why not.
   (b) Do you like Bertha? Say why/why not.

MR REGINALD PEACOCK’S DAY

While reading

Read to the end of page 24.

1 Answer these questions.
   (a) Why does Reginald feel angry with his wife in the mornings? What does this make us realise about him?
   (b) How does Reginald see himself?
   (c) Describe Reginald’s relationship with these people:
       (d) His wife his female students
       (e) In Reginald’s opinion, what is an artist like? How should an artist live?
       (f) Do you like Reginald? Say why/why not.
       (g) Why do you think the author has given Reginald the surname, ‘Peacock’?

2 Work in pairs.
   Student A: Play Reginald’s wife. Tell Reginald what you really think of him.
   Student B: Play Reginald. Answer Mrs Peacock as you think Reginald might answer her.

After reading

Read to the end of the story.

1 Answer these questions.
   (a) ‘Why weren’t all men like Mr Peacock?’ Who thinks this? Why do you think this person likes Reginald so much?
   (b) ‘I could have anyone I liked by lifting a finger.’ Who thinks this? What does it show about this person?
   (c) ‘But why didn’t you tell me before?’ Who says this and why?
   (d) ‘If we were friends I could tell her so much now! ... even about the way Lord Timbuck talked to me ...’

2 Answer these questions. Reginald uses these words to his wife at the end of the story:
   ‘Dear lady, I should be so charmed - so charmed!’
   (a) Who else does he say something similar to?
   (b) What do these words show us about Reginald?

3 Describe Reginald from the point of view of the Countess.
THE DOLL’S HOUSE

While reading
Read to these words on page 34: ‘... And they had never skipped so high or run in and out of ropes so fast before.’
1 Are these sentences true or false? If they are false, correct them.
(a) The dolls house stays outside because it smells of paint.
(b) Kezia likes the father and mother dolls best.
(c) The names of the Burnell children are Isabel, Kezia and Else.
(d) The schoolgirls are especially friendly to the Burnell girls because they want to see the dolls house.
(e) The Kelvey children’s mother is in prison.
(f) Lil is the eldest of the two Kelvey girls.
2 Work in pairs. Discuss and answer these questions.
(a) How are the schoolgirls cruel to the Kelveis?
(b) Why are they cruel, do you think?
(c) In your opinion, what makes children cruel to each other?

After reading
1 Answer these questions.
(a) Who is kind to the Kelveis?
(b) How is this person kind to them?
(c) Why is this person kind, do you think?
(d) Who is unkind to the Kelveis?
(e) Why is this person unkind?
2 What do you think the author is saying:
(a) about children?
(b) about adults and their relationship to children?
3 Answer these questions.
(a) How does this story make you feel?
(b) Which for you is the saddest part of the story?
(c) Do you think the story ends happily or unhappily?
4 Find the word significance in your dictionary. Then discuss this question in pairs.
What is the significance of the lamp in this story, do you think? Give reasons for your opinion.

THE GARDEN PARTY

While reading
1 Answer these questions.
(a) What preparations are made for the garden party?
(b) What do we learn about the young man who was killed?
(c) Why does Laura want to stop the garden party?
(d) What reasons does Laura’s mother give for refusing to stop the party?
(e) How does the hat change Laura?
(f) What does Mrs Sheridan decide to send to the dead man’s family? Why does this worry Laura?
2 Describe Laura. How old is she, do you think? How is she different from the rest of her family?

After reading
1 How does Laura feel when she sees the dead man? Why does she feel this?
2 Work in pairs. Discuss these questions.
(a) At the end of the story, Laura says, ’Isn’t life... ’ Finish her sentence for her.
(b) Why do you think the story ends like this? What is the author trying to say in this story?
3 Write a short description of how Laura’s life might be. Will she remain kind, do you think? Or do you think she will change? Give reasons for your opinion.
4 Describe Laura from the point of view of the dead woman’s wife.

Activities after reading the book
1 Who says these sentences and in which story?
(a) ‘Does it, Mr Imagination?’
(b) ‘I shall be so thankful not to have another taxi alone after the terrible time I had before.’
(c) ’You love me. Yes, I know you love me.’
(d) ‘You’d like to look at him, wouldn’t you?’
(e) ’Open it quickly, someone!’
(f) ‘You disobedient little girl!’
(g) ’Come on. Nobody’s looking.’
(h) ‘How strange cats are!’
2 Which story in the book do you like best? Give reasons for your opinion. Write three or four paragraphs about this.
3 Would you like to meet the author? Say why/why not. Write three or four paragraphs about this.