

The Challenge of Modernism

A Cup of Tea

Short Story by Katherine Mansfield



READING 5B Analyze the moral dilemmas and quandaries presented in works of fiction as revealed by the underlying motivations and behaviors of the characters. **5C** Compare and contrast the effects of different forms of narration across various genres of fiction. **RC-12(B)** Make complex inferences about text and use textual evidence to support understanding.

DID YOU KNOW?

Katherine Mansfield . . .

- published her first story at the age of nine.
- inspired Virginia Woolf to comment, “I was jealous of her writing—the only writing I have ever been jealous of.”
- was the model for a character in her good friend D. H. Lawrence’s novel *Women in Love*.

Meet the Author

Katherine Mansfield 1888–1923

“I want to be all that I am capable of becoming,” Katherine Mansfield once declared. Although she lived to be only 34 years old, Mansfield made an enormous mark on the English short story. Striving to map her characters’ inner lives, she pioneered a new style of writing characterized by mood and suggestion rather than by dramatic action. Her stories illuminate the subtle realities of personal relationships and class divisions.

Budding Writer Mansfield was born in Wellington, New Zealand, to Harold Beauchamp, a prosperous businessman, and his wife Annie, an ambitious social climber. Mansfield was close to her grandmother but had ambivalent feelings for her mother, who paid her shy, awkward daughter little attention. Katherine found an outlet for her feelings in fiction. “I imagine I was always writing,” she later said. “Twaddle it was too. But better far [to] write twaddle . . . than nothing at all.”

Rebellious Spirit In 1906, Mansfield returned to Wellington after three years at Queen’s College in London, full of new ideas about personal fulfillment and women’s rights. Finding her native country provincial, she begged her father to allow her to return to England. It took two years, but at last he agreed. Just weeks after her return, Mansfield

fell in love with violinist Garnet Trowell. When their relationship soured, she married musician G. C. Bowden, but left him the day after their wedding to return to Trowell. Despairing over her daughter’s behavior, Mansfield’s mother sent her to a health spa in Germany. Mansfield’s observations there gave rise to her first short-story collection, *In a German Pension* (1911).

Symbol of Innovation Around 1912, Mansfield began a stormy relationship with English critic John Middleton Murray. Inspired by his call for a literature that was imbued with “guts and bloodiness,” Mansfield began to write with brutal honesty about her own childhood. Mansfield and Murray finally married in 1919, but they spent all—save a few months—of their married life apart. Dogged by poor health, Mansfield traveled often in search of a more congenial climate. During her last years, she lived as an invalid, often alone, fighting a losing battle with tuberculosis. Amazingly, in the midst of these travails, she wrote many of her most powerful works, including *The Garden Party* (1922), recognized by many as her finest collection. Today, Mansfield is hailed, in the words of one critic, as “a symbol of liberation, innovation, and unconventionality.”

Author Online

Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML12-1126



● **LITERARY ANALYSIS: THIRD-PERSON LIMITED POINT OF VIEW**

Katherine Mansfield is renowned for depicting characters' subtle reactions to the seemingly trivial events of everyday life. In "A Cup of Tea," Mansfield accomplishes this in part through her use of the **third-person limited point of view**. The narrator is an outside voice that relates the thoughts, feelings, and observations of just one character. Readers may feel as if they are "looking over the shoulder" of the point-of-view character, getting emotionally involved in that character's experiences. In "The Duchess and the Jeweler" (page 1140), Virginia Woolf also uses third-person limited point of view, with passages in stream of consciousness that express her main character's inner life. For much of the story, however, Woolf observes her main character from outside instead of inside.

As you get to know this story's point-of-view character, a wealthy young woman named Rosemary, consider how the narrator reveals her thoughts and emotions. Think about how Rosemary perceives herself and others, and note how the story's point of view affects your impression of her.

● **READING SKILL: MAKE INFERENCES**

You know from your experiences with fiction that writers don't explicitly state everything that goes through their characters' minds. Instead, they leave it up to the reader to **make inferences**, or logical assumptions, based on evidence and experience. One thing you'll often have to infer is a character's **motivation**, or the reasons driving his or her actions. As you read this story, think about what motivates Rosemary to act as she does. In a chart like the one shown, jot down notes about her actions. Consider evidence from the text as well as your own experiences, and then record what you can infer about Rosemary's motivation.

Action	Evidence or My Own Experience	Possible Motive
Rosemary, a woman who can shop anywhere she likes, particularly enjoys one little antique shop.	The owner of this shop is "ridiculously fond" of serving Rosemary and flatters her incessantly.	



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

What makes someone feel SUPERIOR?

How do people with a high status, or standing in society, perceive those who occupy lower positions? That's the question explored in "A Cup of Tea," the story of a remarkable encounter between two women, one poor and the other privileged.

DISCUSS With a group of classmates, generate a list of factors that determine a person's status in society. Then discuss how a person's standing in society can affect his or her self-image, perception of others, and outlook on life. How does society treat those with high status? How do those with high status treat the people around them? Share your observations with the members of another group.





A Cup of Tea

Katherine Mansfield

BACKGROUND In the early 1900s, when “A Cup of Tea” was written, class distinctions were quite evident in Britain. The best schools and neighborhoods were reserved for the rich, who tended to avoid contact with people of lower classes whenever possible. An upper-class wife never worked inside or outside the home. Instead, she spent her days shopping and entertaining. It was considered improper for her to associate with people of lower classes unless they were serving her in some way.

Rosemary Fell was not exactly beautiful. No, you couldn't have called her beautiful. Pretty? Well, if you took her to pieces . . . But why be so cruel as to take anyone to pieces? She was young, brilliant, extremely modern, exquisitely well dressed, amazingly well read in the newest of the new books, and her parties were the most delicious mixture of the really important people and . . . artists—quaint creatures, discoveries of hers, some of them too terrifying for words, but others quite presentable and amusing. **A**

Rosemary had been married two years. She had a duck¹ of a boy. No, not Peter—Michael. And her husband absolutely adored her. They were rich, really rich, not just comfortably well off, which is odious and stuffy and sounds like one's grandparents. But if Rosemary wanted to shop she would go to Paris as you and I would go to Bond Street.² If she wanted to buy flowers, the car pulled up at that perfect shop in Regent Street, and Rosemary inside the shop just gazed in her

Analyze Visuals ►

What personality traits are conveyed by this painting?

A POINT OF VIEW

In lines 1–7, Mansfield introduces the story's **third-person narrator** as well as the main character. How would you describe the narrator's **tone** in the description of Rosemary?

1. **duck**: a British expression for a darling person or thing.

2. **Bond Street**: a London street famous for its fashionable shops.



dazzled, rather exotic way, and said: “I want those and those and those. Give me four bunches of those. And that jar of roses. Yes, I’ll have all the roses in the jar. No, no lilac. I hate lilac. It’s got no shape.” The attendant bowed and put the lilac out of sight, as though this was only too true; lilac was dreadfully shapeless. “Give me those stumpy little tulips. Those red and white ones.” And she was followed to the car by a thin shopgirl staggering under an immense white paper armful
20 that looked like a baby in long clothes. . . .

One winter afternoon she had been buying something in a little antique shop in Curzon Street. It was a shop she liked. For one thing, one usually had it to oneself. And then the man who kept it was ridiculously fond of serving her. He beamed whenever she came in. He clasped his hands; he was so gratified he could scarcely speak. Flattery, of course. All the same, there was something . . .

“You see, madam,” he would explain in his low respectful tones, “I love my things. I would rather not part with them than sell them to someone who does not appreciate them, who has not that fine feeling which is so rare. . . .” And, breathing deeply, he unrolled a tiny square of blue velvet and pressed it on the
30 glass counter with his pale fingertips.

Today it was a little box. He had been keeping it for her. He had shown it to nobody as yet. An exquisite little enamel box with a glaze so fine it looked as though it had been baked in cream. On the lid a minute creature stood under a flowery tree, and a more minute creature still had her arms around his neck. Her hat, really no bigger than a geranium petal, hung from a branch; it had green ribbons. And there was a pink cloud like a watchful cherub³ floating above their heads. Rosemary took her hands out of her long gloves. She always took off her gloves to examine such things. Yes, she liked it very much. She loved it; it was a great duck. She must have it. And, turning the creamy box, opening and shutting
40 it, she couldn’t help noticing how charming her hands were against the blue velvet. The shopman, in some dim cavern of his mind, may have dared to think so too. For he took a pencil, leaned over the counter, and his pale bloodless fingers crept timidly towards those rosy, flashing ones, as he murmured gently: “If I may venture to point out to madam, the flowers on the little lady’s bodice.”⁴ **B**

“Charming!” Rosemary admired the flowers. But what was the price? For a moment the shopman did not seem to hear. Then a murmur reached her. “Twenty-eight guineas,⁵ madam.”

“Twenty-eight guineas.” Rosemary gave no sign. She laid the little box down; she buttoned her gloves again. Twenty-eight guineas. Even if one is rich . . .
50 She looked vague. She stared at a plump teakettle like a plump hen above the shopman’s head, and her voice was dreamy as she answered: “Well, keep it for me—will you? I’ll . . .”

But the shopman had already bowed as though keeping it for her was all any human being could ask. He would be willing, of course, to keep it for her forever.

B MAKE INFERENCES

Why does Rosemary enjoy patronizing this particular shop? Record your inferences about her **motivation** in your chart.

3. **cherub** (chĕr’ēb): an angel depicted as a chubby child with wings.

4. **bodice** (bōd’īs): the part of a dress above the waist.

5. **guineas** (gĭn’ēz): units of British money equal to one pound and one shilling, used mainly for pricing luxury items.

The discreet door shut with a click. She was outside on the step, gazing at the winter afternoon. Rain was falling, and with the rain it seemed the dark came too, spinning down like ashes. There was a cold bitter taste in the air, and the new-lighted lamps looked sad. Sad were the lights in the houses opposite. Dimly they burned as if regretting something. And people hurried by, hidden under
60 their hateful umbrellas. Rosemary felt a strange pang.⁶ She pressed her muff to her breast; she wished she had the little box, too, to cling to. Of course, the car was there. She'd only to cross the pavement. But still she waited. There are moments, horrible moments in life, when one emerges from shelter and looks out, and it's awful. One oughtn't to give way to them. One ought to go home and have an extra-special tea. But at the very instant of thinking that, a young girl, thin, dark, shadowy—where had she come from?—was standing at Rosemary's elbow and a voice like a sigh, almost like a sob, breathed: "Madam, may I speak to you a moment?" **C**

"Speak to me?" Rosemary turned. She saw a little battered creature with
70 enormous eyes, someone quite young, no older than herself, who clutched at her coat-collar with reddened hands, and shivered as though she had just come out of the water.

"M-madam," stammered the voice. "Would you let me have the price of a cup of tea?"

"A cup of tea?" There was something simple, sincere in that voice; it wasn't in the least the voice of a beggar. "Then have you no money at all?" asked Rosemary.

"None, madam," came the answer.

"How extraordinary!" Rosemary peered through the dusk, and the girl gazed back at her. How more than extraordinary! And suddenly it seemed to Rosemary
80 such an adventure. It was like something out of a novel by Dostoyevsky,⁷ this meeting in the dusk. Supposing she took the girl home? Supposing she did do one of those things she was always reading about or seeing on the stage, what would happen? It would be thrilling. And she heard herself saying afterwards to the amazement of her friends: "I simply took her home with me," as she stepped forward and said to that dim person beside her: "Come home to tea with me."

The girl drew back startled. She even stopped shivering for a moment. Rosemary put out a hand and touched her arm. "I mean it," she said, smiling. And she felt how simple and kind her smile was. "Why won't you? Do. Come home with me now in my car and have tea."

90 "You—you don't mean it, madam," said the girl, and there was pain in her voice. "But I do," cried Rosemary. "I want you to. To please me. Come along."

The girl put her fingers to her lips and her eyes devoured Rosemary. "You're—you're not taking me to the police station?" she stammered.

"The police station!" Rosemary laughed out. "Why should I be so cruel? No, I only want to make you warm and to hear—anything you care to tell me." **D**

Language Coach

Homophones Words that sound alike but have different spellings are **homophones**. *Discreet* (line 55) means "keeping silent, preserving secrets." *Discrete* means "separate; made of distinct parts; discontinuous." How can a door be *discreet*? Could it also be *discrete*?

C POINT OF VIEW

In lines 55–65, Mansfield provides an intimate glimpse of the **point-of-view character's** thoughts and feelings as she pauses outside the shop. What impression of Rosemary do you get from this passage?

D MAKE INFERENCES

Think about how Rosemary feels as she leaves the shop, and consider her thoughts in lines 78–85. What is her **motivation** for inviting the girl to accompany her?

6. **pang** (pǎng): a sudden sharp pain or feeling.

7. **Dostoyevsky** (dōs'tə-yěf'skē): Feodor Dostoyevsky, a 19th-century Russian author who wrote a number of novels and stories dealing with the lives of the poor.

Hungry people are easily led. The footman⁸ held the door of the car open, and a moment later they were skimming through the dusk.

“There!” said Rosemary. She had a feeling of triumph as she slipped her hand through the velvet strap. She could have said, “Now I’ve got you,” as she gazed at
100 the little captive she had netted. But of course she meant it kindly. Oh, more than kindly. She was going to prove to this girl that—wonderful things did happen in life, that—fairy godmothers were real, that—rich people had hearts, and that women *were* sisters. She turned impulsively, saying: “Don’t be frightened. After all, why shouldn’t you come back with me? We’re both women. If I’m the more fortunate, you ought to expect . . .”

But happily at that moment, for she didn’t know how the sentence was going to end, the car stopped. The bell was rung, the door opened, and with a charming, protecting, almost embracing movement, Rosemary drew the other into the hall. Warmth, softness, light, a sweet scent, all those things so familiar to her she never
110 even thought about them, she watched that other receive. It was fascinating. She was like the little rich girl in her nursery with all the cupboards to open, all the boxes to unpack.

“Come, come upstairs,” said Rosemary, longing to begin to be generous. “Come up to my room.” And, besides, she wanted to spare this poor little thing from being stared at by the servants; she decided as they mounted the stairs she would not even ring for Jeanne, but take off her things by herself. The great thing was to be natural! **E**

And “There!” cried Rosemary again, as they reached her beautiful big bedroom with the curtains drawn, the fire leaping on her wonderful lacquer furniture, her
120 gold cushions and the primrose and blue rugs.

The girl stood just inside the door; she seemed dazed. But Rosemary didn’t mind that.

“Come and sit down,” she cried, dragging her big chair up to the fire, “in this comfy chair. Come and get warm. You look so dreadfully cold.”

“I daren’t, madam,” said the girl, and she edged backwards.

“Oh, please,”—Rosemary ran forward—“you mustn’t be frightened, you mustn’t, really. Sit down, and when I’ve taken off my things we shall go into the next room and have tea and be cozy. Why are you afraid?” And gently she half pushed the thin figure into its deep cradle.

130 But there was no answer. The girl stayed just as she had been put, with her hands by her sides and her mouth slightly open. To be quite sincere, she looked rather stupid. But Rosemary wouldn’t acknowledge it. She leaned over her, saying: “Won’t you take off your hat? Your pretty hair is all wet. And one is so much more comfortable without a hat, isn’t one?”

There was a whisper that sounded like “Very good, madam,” and the crushed hat was taken off.

“Let me help you off with your coat, too,” said Rosemary.

E MAKE INFERENCES

Consider what you learn about Rosemary’s **motivation** in line 113. Does she feel invested in the girl purely out of charity, or are there other reasons driving her to act as she does? Explain your answer.

8. **footman**: a household servant, here functioning as Rosemary’s chauffeur.

The girl stood up. But she held on to the chair with one hand and let Rosemary pull. It was quite an effort. The other scarcely helped her at all. She seemed to
140 stagger like a child, and the thought came and went through Rosemary's mind, that if people wanted helping they must respond a little, just a little, otherwise it became very difficult indeed. And what was she to do with the coat now? She left it on the floor, and the hat too. She was just going to take a cigarette off the mantelpiece when the girl said quickly, but so lightly and strangely: "I'm very sorry, madam, but I'm going to faint. I shall go off, madam, if I don't have something." **F**

"Good heavens, how thoughtless I am!" Rosemary rushed to the bell.

"Tea! Tea at once! And some brandy immediately!"

The maid was gone again, but the girl almost cried out. "No, I don't want
150 no brandy. I never drink brandy. It's a cup of tea I want, madam." And she burst into tears.

It was a terrible and fascinating moment. Rosemary knelt beside her chair.

"Don't cry, poor little thing," she said. "Don't cry." And she gave the other her lace handkerchief. She really was touched beyond words. She put her arm round those thin, birdlike shoulders.

Now at last the other forgot to be shy, forgot everything except that they were both women, and gasped out: "I can't go on no longer like this. I can't bear it. I shall do away with myself. I can't bear no more."

F POINT OF VIEW

Notice that in lines 138–146, the narrator reveals only Rosemary's thoughts. How does Mansfield use the **third-person-limited point of view** to create irony?



“You shan’t have to. I’ll look after you. Don’t cry anymore. Don’t you see what a
160 good thing it was that you met me? We’ll have tea and you’ll tell me everything. And
I shall arrange something. I promise. *Do* stop crying. It’s so exhausting. Please!”

The other did stop just in time for Rosemary to get up before the tea came. She had the table placed between them. She plied the poor little creature with everything, all the sandwiches, all the bread and butter, and every time her cup was empty she filled it with tea, cream and sugar. People always said sugar was so nourishing. As for herself she didn’t eat; she smoked and looked away tactfully so that the other should not be shy.

And really the effect of that slight meal was marvelous. When the tea table was carried away a new being, a light, frail creature with tangled hair, dark lips, deep,
170 lighted eyes, lay back in the big chair in a kind of sweet languor,⁹ looking at the blaze. Rosemary lit a fresh cigarette; it was time to begin.

“And when did you have your last meal?” she asked softly.

But at that moment the door-handle turned.

“Rosemary, may I come in?” It was Philip.

“Of course.”

He came in. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” he said, and stopped and stared.

“It’s quite all right,” said Rosemary smiling. “This is my friend, Miss—”

“Smith, madam,” said the languid figure, who was strangely still and unafraid.

“Smith,” said Rosemary. “We are going to have a little talk.”

180 “Oh, yes,” said Philip. “Quite,” and his eye caught sight of the coat and hat on the floor. He came over to the fire and turned his back to it. “It’s a beastly¹⁰ afternoon,” he said curiously, still looking at that listless figure, looking at its hands and boots, and then at Rosemary again.

“Yes, isn’t it?” said Rosemary enthusiastically. “Vile.”

Philip smiled his charming smile. “As a matter of fact,” said he, “I wanted you to come into the library for a moment. Would you? Will Miss Smith excuse us?”

The big eyes were raised to him, but Rosemary answered for her. “Of course she will.” And they went out of the room together.

“I say,” said Philip, when they were alone. “Explain. Who is she? What does
190 it all mean?”

Rosemary, laughing, leaned against the door and said: “I picked her up in Curzon Street. Really. She’s a real pick-up. She asked me for the price of a cup of tea, and I brought her home with me.”

“But what on earth are you going to do with her?” cried Philip.

“Be nice to her,” said Rosemary quickly. “Be frightfully nice to her. Look after her. I don’t know how. We haven’t talked yet. But show her—treat her—make her feel—”

“My darling girl,” said Philip, “you’re quite mad, you know. It simply can’t be done.”

200 “I knew you’d say that,” retorted Rosemary. “Why not? I want to. Isn’t that a reason? And besides, one’s always reading about these things. I decided—”

Language Coach

Commonly Confused

Words Traditionally, the words *shall* and *shan’t*, used after *I*, expressed the future; after *you*, *he*, or *she*, they expressed a promise or determination. The reverse was true of *will*/*won’t*. Today *shall* is generally used only in questions (*Shall we go?*). Modernize lines 159–161.

Analyze Visuals ►

The background of this painting has been left relatively plain. Why do you think the artist chose this approach?

9. **languor** (läng’ger): a dreamy, lazy state.

10. **beastly**: awful; unpleasant.



The Convalescent, Gwen John. Oil on canvas, 40.9 cm × 33 cm. PD.24-1951. © Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom/Bridgeman Art Library. © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London.

“But,” said Philip slowly, and he cut the end of a cigar, “she’s so astonishingly pretty.”

“Pretty?” Rosemary was so surprised that she blushed. “Do you think so? I—I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Good Lord!” Philip struck a match. “She’s absolutely lovely. Look again, my child. I was bowled over when I came into your room just now. However . . . I think you’re making a ghastly mistake. Sorry, darling, if I’m crude and all that. But let me know if Miss Smith is going to dine with us in time for me to look
210 up *The Milliner’s Gazette*.”¹¹ **G**

“You absurd creature!” said Rosemary, and she went out of the library, but not back to her bedroom. She went to her writing-room and sat down at her desk. Pretty! Absolutely lovely! Bowled over! Her heart beat like a heavy bell. Pretty! Lovely! She drew her checkbook towards her. But no, checks would be no use, of course. She opened a drawer and took out five pound notes, looked at them, put two back, and holding the three squeezed in her hand, she went back to her bedroom.

Half an hour later Philip was still in the library, when Rosemary came in.

“I only wanted to tell you,” said she, and she leaned against the door again
220 and looked at him with her dazzled exotic gaze, “Miss Smith won’t dine with us tonight.”

Philip put down the paper. “Oh, what’s happened? Previous engagement?”

Rosemary came over and sat down on his knee. “She insisted on going,” said she, “so I gave the poor little thing a present of money. I couldn’t keep her against her will, could I?” she added softly.

Rosemary had just done her hair, darkened her eyes a little, and put on her pearls. She put up her hands and touched Philip’s cheeks.

“Do you like me?” said she, and her tone, sweet, husky, troubled him.


“I like you awfully,” he said, and he held her tighter. “Kiss me.”

230 There was a pause.

Then Rosemary said dreamily, “I saw a fascinating little box today. It cost twenty-eight guineas. May I have it?”

Philip jumped her on his knee. “You may, little wasteful one,” said he.

But that was not really what Rosemary wanted to say.

“Philip,” she whispered, and she pressed his head against her bosom, “am I *pretty*?” 

G POINT OF VIEW

Reread lines 202–207. In what way does the story’s **limited point of view** enhance the impact of Philip’s remark about the girl’s appearance?

11. *The Milliner’s Gazette*: an imaginary newsletter for working-class women. A milliner is a maker of women’s hats.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** Where does Rosemary meet Miss Smith?
2. **Summarize** How does Philip react to Rosemary's guest?
3. **Clarify** How does Rosemary's gift to Miss Smith differ from her initial plan?

Literary Analysis

4. **Identify Irony** In literature, **situational irony** is a contrast between what is expected to happen and what actually does happen. Consider how Rosemary feels when she first meets Miss Smith. How has Rosemary's perception of herself changed by the story's end? What is ironic about this change?
5. **Analyze Point of View** Employing the **third-person limited point of view** allows Mansfield to focus on the thoughts and feelings of just one character. How does this point of view affect your experience of the story and your judgment of Rosemary? How might the story have been different if the author had used the **omniscient point of view**, an all-seeing narrator who would relate the thoughts of all the characters, including Miss Smith?
6. **Make Inferences About Character Motivation** Examine the chart you filled in as you read. For each of the actions listed, explain what you inferred Rosemary's motivation to be. Be sure to discuss the textual evidence and any experiences from your own life that you used to make these inferences.
 - Rosemary decides to help Miss Smith and promises to "arrange something."
 - Rosemary sends Miss Smith away with just a few pounds.
7. **Draw Conclusions About Social Context** Review the background information on page 1128. Through her depiction of Rosemary and Philip's marriage and of the status their upper-class lifestyle affords, what comments might Mansfield be making on the social conditions of her time? Support your answer with detailed examples from the text.

Literary Criticism

8. **Critical Interpretations** In fiction, **realism** is a truthful, realistic presentation of life. John Middleton Murray, the critic who became Mansfield's husband, praised her work for its realism, recalling a printer who remarked after reading a manuscript of hers, "But these kids are real!" Based on this story, do you agree with this view of the realism in Mansfield's work? Find two or three passages from "A Cup of Tea" to support your answer.



READING 5B Analyze the moral dilemmas and quandaries presented in works of fiction as revealed by the underlying motivations and behaviors of the characters. **5C** Compare and contrast the effects of different forms of narration across various genres of fiction. **RC-12(B)** Make complex inferences about text and use textual evidence to support understanding.

What makes someone feel **SUPERIOR?**

Is status only determined by money? If everyone had the same amount of money, what other factors might society use to determine someone's status?