

## LITERARY ANALYSIS OF “A CUP OF TEA” BY K. MANSFIELD

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### Abstract

The story of “A Cup of Tea” by modernist writer Katherine Mansfield was written on 15th of March. It tells a story of Rosemary Fell- a beautiful charming young upper class woman in the 1920's. The story was first published in the famous magazine “Story-teller” and later appeared in the Mansfield's short story collection “The Dover's Nest”. “A cup of tea” is associated with the deplorable conditions of the author's birthplace-New Zealand at that time when it used to be a part of a British Empire. The trends of class distinctions were its peak, a family issue which needed to be brought forward influenced the author to pen down. In this story there exists class consciousness, social stratification and materialism as its top point. Stunningly well-characterized and magnificently portrayed against its plain title, “A cup of tea” remarkably presents a crystal clear image of class distinction and one's mad fondness towards material things.

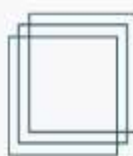
**Keywords:** modernist, social norms, symbolism, materialism, vulnerable, stratification, endearment.

### I. Introduction

In the introduction, there exists brief information about one of Katherine Mansfield's most-famous story which is widely-acknowledged to be the finest work of the author. The story reflects upon the same issue of class distinction and stratification. Mansfield also tried to reflect upon the noble act of philanthropy and how wealthy people fancy this act to be the cause of ascension for their moral values among their social circle. My primary aim of emphasizing modernism elements like symbolism, realism in this story is to make book-lovers think about a succession of inner thoughts and help realize the beauty in the writing style that is really hard to achieve realization of the core without pondering over the symbols. It is essential to admit that the importance of the story in world literature is undeniable. Because, the author's stories opened the door to exciting new literary realm, so it became the source of inspiration for next writers' generation.

### II. Literature review

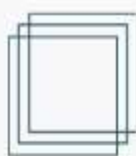
The story of “A cup of tea” is about a very rich and well-off woman, who has been married for two years to a wealthy and devoted man Mr. Philip Fell. She always spends much money lavishly. After she has shopped at an antique store she is met by a young poor girl named Miss Smith who begs her for some money for a cup of tea. Instead, Rosemary brings her back to her own home but its reason is not given and treats Miss



Smith to a taste of her luxurious lifestyle. Rosemary's husband Philip initially disapproves his wife's behavior and tells her so himself. When she refuses to dismiss Miss Smith, he tries the more successful tactic of playing on Rosemary's jealousy. It works well as it is expected. After retrieving some money, Rosemary sends Miss Smith away immediately, a great contrast to the beginning of the text. She soon informs her husband with endearment. Rosemary then asks about the jewelry she wanted to buy at an antique store, and then at her true concern- is she pretty? Throughout this short story, a reader can see particularly the theme of class consciousness of that century. Class consciousness is about what beliefs a person has about their rank in society and what their class especially consists of. Protagonist-Rosemary in the first paragraph is described as, though plain in looks, the ideal in regards of materialistic needs- Rosemary Fell was not described as a beauty. However, she was smart, young, extremely modern, amazingly well-read in the newest of new books, and her parties were the most delicious mixture of the really important people from high social status. The reader is given the idea that she is rather insecure about herself and that she has had to make up for her traits in her personality and character due to her lack of natural beauty. This tells us that Rosemary Fell is a rather shallow person, views her status as an upper class woman quite highly, and very content being shallow and living a life of materialism. The next paragraph leads onto the state of her wealthy lifestyle-which we can safely assume from the first paragraph that she was truly rolling in the money for someone in the 1920's.

### III. Analysis

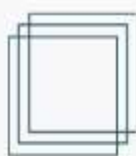
While a reader is reading the story, one can notice Rosemary's greediness to jewels, luxuriance. She can afford to get exactly anything she wants and as a result of her wealth, she justifies her actions of being very demanding of people below her status, and in turn others of a lower class were willing to please her due to her wealth- "I want those and those and those .No, no lilac. I hate lilac. It has got no shape. The attendant bowed and put the lilac out of sight, as though this was only too true; lilac was dreadfully shapeless."<sup>1</sup> Notably, there is no praise or admiration from the author here towards Rosemary. In this way, though it makes Rosemary all too vulnerable to others who might know her weakness, namely her unattractive appearance- in example, the shopkeeper of the antique store. It was a shop she liked .He beamed at her when she came in. He clasped his hands; he was so gratified he could hardly speak. Flattery, of course. All the same, there used to be something in the shop that Rosemary mainly likes to buy for the fact that the shopkeeper grants her his undivided attention. The shopkeeper is probably used to dealing with the rich like Rosemary and knows exactly what to tell them to make them feel special "He would explain in low, respectful tones, I love my things. I would rather not part with them than sell them to someone who does not appreciate them."<sup>2</sup> She understands that all he truly respects her for is her richness but she lets herself be sucked into that because of the flattery and compliments that she



receives openly owing to her insecurity over her beauty. Her wealth is undoubtedly her makeup and without it she would not possess the sense of higher authority she has over other people as well as the adoration she wants from people of a lower class.

### **Stratification**

In the work it can easily be seen the sharp contrast of social class people lifestyle. Rosemary is extremely rich while Miss Smith is too poor to buy a cup of tea in a cold weather. Rosemary has everything she wants like house, car, and jewelry even wealthy husband. However, Miss Smith has neither house or money nor rich spouse who can be boasted. One of the more powerful examples of class consciousness can be seen in the event which the two female characters meet in the street. At that time, Miss Smith- who is no older than Rosemary herself approaches Rosemary to ask for the price of a cup of tea. Rosemary has a general disregard for others in the lower rank people to the point that she does not even see them until spoken to - a young girl, thin, dark, shadowy- where had she come from?- was standing at Rosemary's elbow..."Madam, may I speak to you a moment? Speak to me?"<sup>3</sup> It can be conclude from this event Rosemary is surprised that she is even being addressed by her. This gives the reader evidence yet again that she sets herself clear social boundaries by class and if they are not on her level they are not worth even noticing or speaking. Mansfield now provides some sympathy for a character with the description of the young girl that approached Rosemary a little battered creature with enormous eyes who clutched at her coat-collar with reddened hands, and shivered- and it gives an idea of just how much lower in class when she is compared to Rosemary. In asking for the little amount of money the author again shows us her favor of this new character in the quote about Miss Smith's voice was so soft and mild; it was not in the least the voice of a beggar. Rosemary in the next couple of lines, by not only offering her a cup of tea but to bring the poor girl back to her house, her underlying first aim is to show how truly shallow and self-serving Miss Smith can get and second display high level lifestyle. She goes on to romanticize the act of helping this poor girl out- as she had read in a book or seen on stage- and she views it as an adventure where at the end of it she could tell all her friends of her great good deed. This is a great everyday example of how people in the upper class show generosity towards lower ones they consider being their inferior to prove their superiority. Clearly, Rosemary perhaps wants to do it so that she betters her image in front of her peers and raise her reputation among friends and because she loves the idea of doing something shed only truly read about or seen- not because she actually wants to help her out. This can be especially seen in the quote: "But I do, cried Rosemary. I want you to. To please me."<sup>4</sup> There are no thoughts from Rosemary about how much it would benefit the young girl or feelings of pity in particular-in fact she is rather surprised in the first place that some do not have money to buy something to drink, even a cup of tea! This shows how she always interacts with people of a lower class and her ignorance towards them. Besides, the



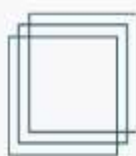
character of Miss Smith is exactly what anyone of her position and situation would be acting like. Driven to beg for money to purchase some food, she is generally surprised at the generosity that Rosemary is exhibiting. It is clear she would rather not go with Rosemary back to her house but in her state of hunger she really does not have much choice to deny and just ask for money. This can be observed in the quote about hungry people can be easily led. It is a direct contrast to Rosemary's demands and her ability to get what she wants because of the wealth that she has at the beginning of the text.

#### **IV. Discussion**

Feminism. In "A cup of tea" it is observed that when a female is not beautiful enough, she tries to hide her appearance with money. She tries to look beautiful to her husband by her mind and her heart. Her wish to be a good wife is not approved by her husband and then she gets disappointed. As a result she has Miss Smith to leave her house. It can be gathered that both female characters as victims. Rosemary is the victim of male- her husband's psyche and Miss Smith is the victim of female psyche. Symbolism is the most common feature in the book. From a huge name of the characters to the weather. The word "rosemary" represents widely grown herbs all over the world. It is evergreen and its colors range from white to blue. This means that Protagonist changes her opinion after Philip's attention to the girl like the flower's color. The flower grows all over the world. This shows that that kind of people live everywhere around the world and they can disguise others with their changing colors. Rosemary flower symbolize "love and remembrance". In this story her love is devoted to the wealth not people. The word 'Philip' means warlike and horse-loving. The male character does not want to approve his wife's choice and use a tricky way to get rid of the poor girl by paying compliment on her appearance. Hence, Rosemary Fell admits her failure and allows the girl leaving the house. As in her surname she becomes "fell". Her level in her house was decreased by Philip. Miss Smith is a poor girl at the same age with Rosemary was penniless like her name "smith"-someone who repairs things made of iron. "Social evils" is another element of modernist literature does not treat simple topics about social war and poverty. It frankly reflects a clear awareness of societal ills and shows how incomprehensibly cruel human can be, especially with regard to racial, sexual and class differences. In the story, Rosemary and her husbands' careless behavior to Miss Smith is selfish, disrespect.

#### **V. Conclusion**

That being said, this story truly relates to current day society, despite the fact that it was written almost one century ago, because the same sort of events are still happening for the time being. People in higher, upper class positions still go on to exercise power over those in the lower class positions due to wealth or power and this can be especially seen in major businesses and companies around the world. For example, more and more people are becoming slave or they agree to pay unfairly for the production of major clothing and footwear brands like Nike. It transcends into things as simple as non-



conformity - and as famous as that is, the ones who do not conform to non-conformity get the worst treatment and those who do conform to it feel a sense of superiority over those who do not. It might be about who has a leadership position or who's more popular but it all comes down to that false sense of superiority over having something those others may not necessarily have.

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