

# Her first ball – katherine mansfield essay sample

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Characters:

Protagonist: Leila

Her first ball is based primarily on Leila, who is the protagonist of the story. In this story, we do not particularly know her appearance, but can form an image of her through the description of her personality. Leila is youth and idealism personified. She is simple; she tries to act mature in the story because she feels indifferent amongst her cousins and it is uncomfortable for her. "She tried not to smile too much; she tried not care." While dancing, she is lost in the joy and anticipation - everything is streaming by her. Mansfield has also mentioned that Leila is only 18 years old: "'Thirty years!' cried Leila. Twelve years before she was born!" Leila is also holding a fan in her hand that she "gently" opened and shut.

The reader also knows that she is feminine - she is soft-spoken as shown by the quote "said Leila softly". Leila's motivation is the excitement of her first ball. Her exhilaration, zeal and zest is shown through the fact that she is noticing very minute details. For example "But every single thing was so new and exciting... Meg's tuberose, Jose's long loop of amber..." She is also very naïve and immature - it is shown through her inexperience. She is bursting with excitement over normal things - and her "fingers shook as she took one (program) out of the basket." She is worried over not knowing whether or not "she was meant to have one too."

Leila is also very moody. Her naïve and innocent personality is also shown through the event that took place before the ball - when things messed up and "she begged her mother to ring up her cousins to tell them that she

couldn't come after all." Mansfield further goes on to show that when everything worked out, she was so extremely joyful that "it was hard to bear it alone." Another reference to her innocence and naïve attitude is shown when she wants to cry over the fact that she is the only child and she doesn't have a brother that would say "Twig?" to her. The short story starts off with Leila not being able to keep track. She daydreams and everything feels "heavenly" to her. She starts to act very thrilled and euphoric.

So much so that "it even gave her a pang to see her cousin Laurie throw away the wisps of tissue paper... she would have liked to keep those wisps as a keepsake, as a remembrance. Later, Leila as a character shows emotional growth. Her belief of happiness and her excited behavior is impacted. The fat old man's obvious prophecies spoil her joy. She is struck by reality in her idealistic paradise. She realizes that all this is temporary and that one day she too will become old. But Leila chooses to ignore that. This shows that to some extent, the old man's words have actually influenced her personality. She is growing up. Her innocence is slowly leaving her. Now she does not even recognize the old man, and "smiles at him more radiantly than ever."

Antagonist: Fat Old Man. LOL.

This is the character that works against the protagonist, Leila. He represents reality and cynicism that juxtaposes Leila's idealistic and fantastical vision of life. The name itself is the description of the character. In my opinion no such label or name was given to this character because of how insignificant he is shown in Leila's eyes; she ignores him in the end. He is a symbol of the

cruelty of realism - he allows Leila to realize the fact and truth that one day we will all lose to nature and coming of age - it is inevitable.

He does not have any such major motivation - he just sees an excited girl and spoils her happiness by his "terribly true" words. In the end he says "you mustn't take me seriously, little lady." Although, now the deed is done - and Leila is forced to believe that "why didn't happiness last forever?" The speaking style and tone of the old man is somewhat pessimistic and shows how sad he is too because of the thing he says to Leila. He is also shown as a boring personality, as he has been dancing monotonously for thirty years. "You see I have been doing this kind of thing for thirty years."

Other Characters:

Other important characters include Leila's cousins: "the Sheridan girls and their brother." Namely: Laura, Laurie, Jose and Meg. They are to some extent important as they are the ones who provide Leila with this opportunity of her first ball. Leila thinks positively of them for they are fairly caring: "'Hold on to me Leila, you'll get lost.' said Laura." They are also the ones who make Leila very sad that she is on the verge of crying. These cousins signify a unique relationship of siblings and thus make Leila feel like she is lacking something very important by being an only child.

Literary Devices:

Personification: "... And the bolster on which her hand rested felt like the sleeve of an unknown young man's dress suit: and away they bowled, past waltzing lamp-posts and houses and fences and trees. [Lines 3-5, page 13]

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Juxtaposition: The Old man and Leila; characters with opposing ideals dancing together. [Pages 16-17]

In what ways does the story remind you of real life experiences or historical events? What does the story reveal to us about human condition? Support your answer with solid proof from the text. Answer:

Katherine Mansfield's short story "Her First Ball" is a passage about young Leila who feels excitement about experiencing her first dance. Later in the story, an old man ruins her joy by striking her with the harsh realities of life. I believe that this story is very relatable, especially for a teenage girl like me. It always does happen that the excitement is too much to bear when one is going to attain a new experience. As Leila starts day dreaming and cannot keep track of time; same happens with us when we are so close to the thing we have been longing for such a long time: "Exactly when the ball began Leila would have found it hard to say."

Mansfield has also greatly described the circumstances before the event. We are demoralized by very little things - and things do not go as planned. And when finally all is well, the bliss truly is overwhelming! When the author says "She quite forgot how to be shy" - one understands that all humans are like that. When things are happy and going perfectly well, we forget all our worries and enjoy our time. We forget the problems of life. But it is also true that when that event is over, we have to come back down to earth from paradise, back to real life. And it's depressing! The same happens with Leila, when the old man that represents reality talks to her about her youth that is only temporary.

And that is when, once in our life at least, all humans think like Leila did; “Why didn’t happiness last forever? Forever wasn’t a bit too long.” Even forever seems like a short time to us. (No, this is not twilight.) It is also true, at least for women, that life can be very miserable when our impressionable moods are influenced. As Leila thinks “At that time the music seemed to change; it sounded sad, sad; it rose upon a great sigh.

Oh, how quickly things changed!” Our thoughts and emotions really do influence our surroundings and actions. It is as if the world is alive and conspiring against us. When Leila was sad, even the tune she enjoyed so much before became sad. Katherine Mansfield has also talentedly described the human condition when we really want to cry and be left alone, but the situation forces us otherwise; we become sort of restless, go to a corner and our inner voice is awakened.

She states for Leila, “She leaned against the wall, tapping with her foot, pulling up her gloves and trying to smile. But deep inside her a little girl threw her pinafore over her head and sobbed.” Sometimes we even blame others for our ruining our day and feeling hopeless for not being able to do anything about it; “Why had he spoiled it all?” As the nature of humans; we also usually choose to ignore and deny the sour truth that goes against us or our beliefs. Mansfield has also touched upon human condition by the ending that she chose for the story.

She has given us all a hidden message: that we have the power to control ourselves, including our emotions. And that is exactly what Leila did; she chose to ignore the old man’s words. As it is shown, the truth is that

sometimes it is easier for us to control our feelings through distractions (the young man with curly hair) and after the degree of our grief (in Leila's case) has been lowered. Although "Her First Ball" may seem very simple at first sight, in reality it actually touches many important aspects of human conditions. \* Maria Rahman.