

Literary analysis of "the daughters of the late colonel" by katherine mansfield e...

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Literary Analysis of “ The Daughters of the Late Colonel” by Katherine Mansfield Essay Sample

“ The Daughters of the Late Colonel” by Katherine Mansfield is a subtle short story about two daughters of the late colonel who are left with the task of preparing his funeral and getting on with their lives after the tragic event of their father’s death. For these two women living without their father might be harder than expected because they had come to rely on him for their every need. This story is unlike any other that has been discussed thus far. Unlike characters, like Jane Eyre, who possess a strong will and desire to break through the sexual barrier and prove that women are equal to men, these women lack power and conviction to drive them into a fulfilling life. This short story exemplifies the theme that individual thinking is a key factor to a rich life.

Constantia and Josephine, the Colonel’s daughters, lack the self-confidence to make sound judgments. When the story opens, the girls are discussing to whom to give their fathers top-hat. They discuss giving it to the porter, but unable to decide. That shows how indecisive they actually are. Without their father to make the decision, it cannot be made. The Late Colonel, himself, must have been a firm, controlling man. Even though he isn’t alive, the sense of who he was can be felt throughout the whole story. First, at the funeral the girls are preoccupied about what their father would have said. Josephine said, “ Father will never forgive us for this-never.” This shows the insecurity of these women. The colonel doesn’t even know anything about the funeral. He was dead! Again, when the girls went into their dead father’s

room, they felt watched by him and felt as if he were angry with them for being their without permission. Josephine and Constantia must have feared him. They had to ask his permission to enter the same room he was in. They had to rely on him for every detail of their lives.

Another interesting aspect of the story is their interactions with, Kate, their maid. Kate approached the girls as if they were inferior to her. She was even arrogant. This is not the usual quality of a maid during this time period. At one time when she asked the girls how they wanted their fish cooked – fried or boiled, they were so indecisive that Kate made the decision for them. At another time when the daughters were dining with Nurse Andrews, they asked Kate for jam. Kate knowingly paced an empty jam jar in front of them and stormed out. This maid was even referred to in the story as “ The enchanted princess,” making her as if she were of higher rank than the Colonel’s daughters. The Colonel’s daughters discussed firing her but, surprisingly, they couldn’t reach a decision. After all, neither daughter knew how to cook.

Throughout the short story their lives were shaped by small, insignificant events. These ladies reflect on seemingly unimportant events to the average person. To these ladies, however, the simple events were the entirety of their lives up to the colonel’s death. Toward the end of the story, a glimmer of a future shines through but quickly falls prey to doubt and fear. They forgot about those dreams that could take them as far as their imagination would permit. The story’s ending line about Josephine stated, “ She stared at a big cloud where the sun had been.” These ladies had the material wealth

to be somebody, but they lacked the burning fire of individuality and self-reliance to make it happen.

So far, we've discussed characters that possessed a drive to effect change. They've overcome obstacles and barriers to achieve their dreams. They were strong willed and brave. These are traits that to the poets who wrote those poems and stories thought were desirable. These traits are what we as readers admire as well. Katherine Mansfield, however, took a different approach. Instead of telling a story about what to be, Mansfield tells a story about what not to be. She shows how relying on someone else could take our individuality away from us. By writing a short story she doesn't just tell us about how boring life would be not thinking on our own; she shows us by using Constantia and Josephine as models. It is far more convincing to show the downside than the upside. If she wrote a story like this one, we would never want to be in a position of relying on others for our every need. We would strive to work harder and never forget what we were working toward because we couldn't live like that; therefore, this type of story makes a greater impact for change.

The story is a slow starting short story. It lacks depth and suspense, but so do the characters in the story. The author does convey her point very clearly, and the lack of excitement is purely intentional. Every one can agree that we must not rely on others for what we should be doing ourselves.