The Daughters of the Late Colonel

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Katherine Mansfield (born Katherine Beauchamp) was born into a wealthy, socially-connected New Zealand family that included her grandfather Arthur Beauchamp, a Member of New Zealand Parliament, her father Harold Beauchamp, a prominent New Zealand banker, and the novelist Elizabeth von Armin, her cousin and an acclaimed modernist writer in her own right. However, life in the Beauchamp family was often unstable: Katherine and her four siblings moved around New Zealand in childhood, interacting frequently with the native Maori people (Mansfield is known for her sympathetic depictions of Maori characters in her fiction). Eventually, Beauchamp moved to London to attend Queen's College, later returning to New Zealand in the first few years of the twentieth century, when she began to write the short stories that would make her famous. She took the pseudonym "K. Mansfield," then returned to London, where she became embedded in the avant-garde literary scene. Mansfield began a relationship with John Middleton Murry, the editor of *Rhythm*, a "little magazine" highlighting literature and the arts. Among the many tragedies in Mansfield's life—she miscarried a child in 1909 and struggled with her attraction to and affairs with women—none was as influential as the death of her younger brother Leslie Beauchamp, a soldier in France during World War I. Mansfield wrote voraciously after Leslie's death, compelled by this trauma to reflect on her childhood in New Zealand with her siblings. In 1916, the Hogarth Press, led by Leonard and Virginia Woolf, published one of her most well-known stories, a semi-autobiographical narrative entitled "Prelude" about a New Zealand family. Mansfield died of causes related to tuberculosis in 1923, though her diagnosis did not prevent her from producing a number of acclaimed works in her last years, including two collections of short stories (*Bliss* and *The Garden Party*). Mansfield is remembered as a stalwart of avant-garde modernism and a keen observer of modern strife and fragmentation. Her stories variously approach issues of sexuality, familial relationships, and class and gender hierarchies with shrewd insight.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though World War I is not mentioned in "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," its effects are felt in the story. As Europe grappled with the aftershocks of loss and trauma, families—not unlike the Pinner clan—disintegrated, and traditional values came under severe pressure. Though Constantia and Josephine are unable to find a place in the world without their male relatives, their tentative desire for freedom and independence reflects the burgeoning women's rights and women's suffrage movements in the United Kingdom, which sought to implement equal rights for British women. Although Mansfield did not personally support these movements, "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" expresses a uniquely female longing for power and individuality—one shared by the suffragettes. Additionally, Mansfield's story briefly reflects on British colonialism, offering a sustained critique of the colonial mentality: the Pinner patriarchs work in Ceylon, a British colony, and slave labor is mentioned, suggesting that patriarchy, colonialism, and oppression are intimately related (and perhaps mutually reinforcing).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Mansfield's stories "The Woman at the Store" (1912), "The Little Governess" (1915), "Prelude" (1918), and "Miss Brill" (1920) depict female characters who suffer under patriarchy, like Constantia and Josephine Pinner, the main characters in "The Daughters of the Late Colonel." For all of these women, their identities are questioned and their liberty is restricted by male figures in their lives; Mansfield's stories frequently elucidate questions of gender, patriarchal tyranny, and female suffering. Furthermore, Jean Rhys's novels, published in roughly the same era—including *Quartet* (1929), *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)—have often been compared to Mansfield's for their perspective on dominance, despair, and rootlessness in women's lives. In terms of form and content, Mansfield's stories resonate significantly with those of the Russian author Anton Chekhov; indeed, Mansfield often cited Chekhov as a major influence on her work. Like Chekhov, also an innovator of the short story, Mansfield frequently explored class relations and societal divisions in her work, including "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," in which the wealthy, upper-class Pinner sisters struggle to assert authority over their servants. In both Chekhov and Mansfield's work, profound insight is gleaned from concise, self-contained narratives that cast a discerning gaze on the contemporary world.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Daughters of the Late Colonel
- **When Written:** 1920
- **Where Written:** Menton, France
- **When Published:** 1921
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story

- **Setting:** An apartment in an unidentified English town
- **Climax:** Constantia and Josephine fail to open their father's wardrobe and go through his belongings.
- **Antagonist:** The late colonel, Constantia and Josephine's father
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Writing from life. Mansfield's friend and occasional lover, Ida Baker, is said to have served as inspiration for Constantia Pinner—likely reflecting Mansfield's own fraught relationship with Baker, whom she idolized and criticized in equal measure in her letters to friends. Mansfield based the colonel on Baker's father, a doctor in the Indian army and a source of conflict and tyranny in Baker's life.

Famous praise. The acclaimed British novelist Thomas Hardy sent Mansfield praise for "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," entreating her to write more about the Pinner sisters in the future. Mansfield was flattered but thought that Hardy had misinterpreted the story: "as if there was any more to say!" she wrote to her friend, the British painter Dorothy Brett.

PLOT SUMMARY

Constantia and Josephine Pinner have spent a week making arrangements after their father's death. Lying in their beds in the same room, Constantia asks Josephine if they should donate their father's top-hat to the porter. Josephine disagrees, imagining their father's hat on the porter's head. The sisters discuss dying their dressing-gowns black and sending letters with the death notice to Ceylon, where their father worked. Constantia frets over a mouse that has entered their bedroom.

Earlier, the sisters discussed allowing Nurse Andrews, who took care of their father, to stay with them for the rest of the week, though they worry that she might expect to be paid for staying on. Constantia and Josephine are anxious about mealtimes with Nurse Andrews, who is "fearful about butter" and lacks table manners. Their maid, Kate, is ill-tempered and difficult, and they dislike ordering her around.

Constantia and Josephine reflect on their father's last moments alive. He had opened **one eye** and "glared at them" disapprovingly, which disturbed them. When Mr. Farolles, a clergyman, arrived and asked if "the end was quite peaceful," the sisters agreed—though they were certain it wasn't peaceful. Further, the sisters were "terrified" by the idea that Mr. Farolles proposed: "a little Communion," which they felt they couldn't undertake in their apartment (which lacks an altar and space for such a ritual).

Constantia and Josephine also feel anxious about their father's burial, which they believe they have done "without asking his permission." Josephine weeps, exclaiming that "Father will never forgive us for this—never!"

Finally, the sisters decide to try and organize their father's things, but they are put off by their father's room, which is cold and white, its furniture covered. Josephine begins to feel that her father is hiding in the chest of the drawers, "hidden away [...] ready to spring," and she becomes panicked and anxious. In the end, Constantia insists that they "be weak" for once and leave his belongings behind without going through them.

Later on, the sisters discuss sending their father's **broken timepiece** to their brother Benny, who works in Ceylon, though this would involve sending it through a "runner"—a native who delivers parcels. They remember Benny on a "verandah," dressed in colonial garb and positioned next to his wife Hilda, "the unknown sister-in-law." Josephine decides that it might be "more usual" for their nephew Cyril, Benny's son, to take the watch. The two remember one of Cyril's visits before their father's death. Cyril was impatient to leave, but Constantia and Josephine insisted that he visit with his grandfather, who—clearly senile at that point—harassed his grandson.

Back in the present, Constantia and Josephine wonder whether they should fire Kate or not, speculating that they will no longer need her assistance now that their father is not around to cook for. The sisters know little about cooking, but they are uncertain about trusting Kate: Constantia suspects that Kate looks through their things while they are gone.

The sisters hear a barrel-organ on the street outside, a regular fixture in the neighborhood that used to irritate their father (who would "thump" his walking stick incessantly, to make them rush to ask the organ-grinder to leave). Josephine reflects on their mother, who died when they were young, leaving them with their Aunt Florence, and wonders whether she and Constantia would have married had their mother lived. Yet there had been no suitors, except for a mysterious man at Eastbourne—where they stayed in a boarding-house—who left a note outside of their bedroom that neither sister could decipher.

Constantia thinks back on the life that she and Josephine have spent serving their father, but it feels unreal to her—as it had "happened in a kind of tunnel." She cannot decide what she wants from the future, and as she begins to express this sentiment to Josephine, her sister interrupts her. Ultimately, however, neither can remember what they wanted to say.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Josephine Pinner – Also known as "Jug," Josephine is the older sister in the Pinner family. Though initially tempestuous and

disagreeable with Constantia, with whom she frequently quarrels, Josephine begins to feel nervous about their father's memory after his death—exclaiming to Constantia that "Father will never forgive us" for burying him—and is too anxious to clear out his belongings from his room, prompting Constantia to lead her away from the room, leaving it unorganized. She is pale, blonde, and shorter than Constantia (a quirk that she usually "wouldn't have owned to for the world"). She is also somewhat harsher and more mercurial than her sister, since she often speaks "sharply" to Constantia despite her own sensitivity about their father's death (Josephine cried "twenty-three times" while writing her father's death notice). Though short-tempered with her sister, she is polite with Nurse Andrews, their houseguest, and their maid Kate, since she seems to take a more active role in household administration than Constantia. At the end of the story, Josephine wistfully recollects on their life without a mother or prospects for marriage, but ultimately seems incapable of translating her desire for a fuller life into action.

Constantia Pinner – Constantia or "Con" is Josephine Pinner's younger sister. She is softer and less turbulent than her sister—she sympathizes with a mouse in their room who is searching for crumbs—but ultimately helps Josephine leave their father's room when her sister is overcome with emotion, demonstrating a kind of authority that she seems initially to lack. Though she is often dreamy and out of touch with reality—frequently drifting off into vague and wondering tangents, often about exotic destinations with "camels" in the desert—Constantia is also deeply suspicious, both of the native "runners" who deliver parcels in Ceylon and of Kate, who she believes rummages through her and Josephine's belongings when they are gone. It is also mentioned that Constantia once pushed her brother Benny into "the round pond," suggesting that she has a cruel streak (one disguised, perhaps, by her daydreaming). Constantia feels that the life she led while her father was alive was unreal, a kind of nightmare, but she cannot figure out what she wants from life now that she and Josephine have been freed from his command.

The Colonel – The Colonel is the patriarch of the Pinner family and father to Constantia, Josephine, and Benny. Tyrannical, imposing, and cruel, the colonel retired from work as a colonial administrator in Ceylon and lived out his final years with his adult daughters. Since his wife died when his children were young, it is suggested that the colonel raised his children mostly on his own and that he treated them with varying degrees of severity—especially Josephine and Constantia, who were often subject to his demands (for errands and for silence in the apartment) and objects of his criticism (about their spending habits especially). In his old age, the colonel became senile and cranky around his daughters and his grandson, Cyril, and he does not seek forgiveness for his actions during his last moments alive—instead glaring at his daughters with **one eye** open. Though respected in the community (by Mr. Farolles and Nurse Andrews especially), the colonel's behavior has torn his family apart, since his son and grandson have virtually abandoned their female relatives.

Cyril Pinner – Cyril is the colonel's grandson and Constantia and Josephine's nephew. Polite but somewhat awkward, Cyril works in London and rarely visits his aunts: it is implied that he declined to attend his grandfather's funeral ("What a blow his sweet, sympathetic little note had been!"). During one visit to Constantia and Josephine, depicted in a flashback, Cyril feels uncomfortable around his relatives and attempts to make a quick exit (likely lying about his business plans in order to leave his aunts). It is revealed that he knows very little about his father, Benny, and that they have not seen each other in a long time. He also has a prickly encounter with his senile, nearly deaf grandfather—which seems to be the reason that he did not attend the funeral. Cyril is the product of his family's dysfunction, and he appears eager to avoid his family members at all costs. He is also the recipient of his grandfather's **timepiece**.

Kate – Kate is Constantia and Josephine's difficult, flighty maid, a fixture of the Pinner household who has been with the women and their father for many years. Though she is often rude and unhelpful—refusing to fetch food or take orders from her employers—Josephine and Constantia treat her with respect and cautious politeness, afraid to offend or trouble her (likely because they do not wish to terrorize her in the same way that their father terrorized them). Constantia realizes that Kate may "spy" in their belongings when they are away, and the two sisters discuss firing her, since they believe that her service is no longer needed after their father's death. Yet they cannot make up their minds about Kate's trustworthiness, suggesting that they are utterly dependent on her, though she is hardly maternal or supportive: unlike Kate, they cannot cook or run a household themselves.

Nurse Andrews – Nurse Andrews helped to take care of the colonel as he neared death, and Constantia and Josephine agree to let her stay on in the apartment after his funeral, though only reluctantly: she is a poor houseguest, since she is fond of overeating and complaining about "butter." It is suggested that she works for upper-class families (she notes that she was with a "Lady Tukes") and that she puts on a sophisticated affect (her accent is pointed and exaggerated). Yet the sisters cannot fault her entirely, since she was kind to the colonel—a difficult feat, given his challenging behavior.

Mr. Farolles – Mr. Farolles is a clergyman at the local church (St. John's) and an old friend of the colonel who visits Constantia and Josephine to offer help for the funeral, including a "little Communion"—an offer the sisters seem reluctant to accept, since they feel that their apartment is ill-suited for the Communion ritual. Mr. Farolles clearly respected Grandfather Pinner, since he begins to sit in the colonel's chair

when he arrives at the apartment before quickly correcting his mistake, as if mindful of the colonel's status even after his death.

Benny Pinner – Benny is Constantia and Josephine's brother and Cyril's father. He works in Ceylon, like his father, the colonel, and has the habit of shaking his right hand "up and down, as father's did when he was impatient." His sisters debate sending their father's **old timepiece** to him, but ultimately decide to send it to Cyril. Benny has not seen his son recently and is not close with him—nor is he close with his sisters.

Constantia, Josephine, and Benny's Mother/The Colonel's wife – The colonel's wife died when Constantia and Josephine were very young, likely when the family lived in Ceylon for the colonel's work. As a child, Josephine told Constantia that their mother was killed by a snake (prompted by an image of their mother in a snake-like "feather boa" and "earrings shaped like tiny pagodas" that hung over the piano in their apartment). It is unclear whether this is true, but their mother's absence has clearly left a gap in Josephine and Constantia's life, since they lack maternal support; Josephine wonders whether she and Constantia would have married if their mother had lived.

The Porter – Constantia and Josephine debate gifting their father's "top-hat" to the porter, a servant in their apartment, but ultimately decide not to, ostensibly because the image of a servant in a luxurious hat seems ridiculous to them (Josephine "nearly" giggles to think of her father's hat on the porter's head). The sisters note that the porter was kind to the colonel, but this does not seem to justify the gift.

Aunt Florence – After their mother died, Constantia and Josephine lived with their Aunt Florence until they left school. It is unknown whether this aunt was related to their mother or father, but she does not seem to have been a particularly nurturing or positive presence in their lives, since Josephine does not reflect at all on her influence.

The Man at the Boarding-House – Although Constantia and Josephine have never had suitors, they were once pursued by a mysterious man at a boarding-house in Eastbourne who left a note outside of their bedroom door. They were unable to read the note and never reunited with the man; thus, this enigmatic figure represents their faded prospects for marriage and independent lives outside of their family home.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hilda – Hilda is Benny's wife, who appears in a flashback seated behind Benny in a colonial setting—a "cane rocker" on a "verandah"—reading the *Tatler* and seeming "not in the least interested." She appears to have little relation to Constantia and Josephine, who describe her as the "unknown sister-in-law."

Mr. Knight – Mr. Knight is the funeral director who, it is implied, will oversee the colonel's funeral. He is also a friend of Mr. Farolles.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PATRIARCHY AND OPPRESSION

In "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," Constantia and Josephine, the adult daughters of a recently deceased colonel, must fend for themselves in a world without their father—their only beneficiary as well as the individual for whom they have provided for many years. After the colonel's death, Constantia and Josephine's lives are exposed as stunted and meaningless, since their sole purpose was to care for their elderly father: they have been forced to sacrifice their own futures for his wellbeing, and as women, they have not been chosen to carry on his business work. Even after his death, the colonel—an imposing, tyrannical man—continues to forcefully influence his daughters, since Constantia and Josephine imagine his continued presence in their home. As a symbol of patriarchy, the colonel both oppresses his daughters and provokes their fear, uncertainty, and passivity.

After the colonel's death Constantia and Josephine imagine that their father still holds power over them, suggesting the profound impact the colonel, and more broadly, the patriarchy, have on the sisters and their lives. Constantia and Josephine worry that their father will disapprove of their funeral arrangements, since "neither of them could possibly believe that father was never coming back"—imagining instead that he "will never forgive" them for burying, and thus disempowering, him. Indeed, much of the narrative is consumed by the daughters' fretting over the administration of their father's death. Constantia and Josephine nervously discuss donating and organizing their father's possessions, for instance, fearful that donating his **timepiece** and top-hat to family and staff members would displease him.

Though nonsensical—since he is dead, the colonel cannot be displeased by his daughters' actions—this apprehension reveals Constantia and Josephine's feelings of confinement and powerlessness in their own household, where their father's memory continues to reign supreme. The daughters are even unable to clear out their father's chest of drawers, since Josephine imagines that he is trapped in the wardrobe, "hidden away [...] ready to spring." Instead, Constantia and Josephine decide to "be weak" and abstain from settling the colonel's belongings, thereby maintaining his spiritual presence in their

apartment. The sisters are unable to take charge of the future and revert back to passivity, allowing their father to continue to manipulate them. As the male leader of the Pinner family, the colonel determines his daughter's lives, influencing their behavior and emotions long after his own death. Mansfield thus suggests the far-reaching authority and impact of patriarchy.

In general, Constantia and Josephine are unable to discover a better standard of living after their father's death, since as his female heirs—and as subjects in a patriarchal world—they have been overlooked and marginalized. While the colonel was living, his daughters cared obsessively for him, preparing the household and suffering through his violent fits of complaints: "there had been this other life, running out, bringing things home in bags, getting things on approval, discussing them with Jug [...] arranging father's trays and trying not to annoy father." Yet without the colonel, his daughters feel empty and purposeless, grasping for a better life that they are ill-equipped to obtain. Neither daughter has ever married, though they imagine that they might have had their mother lived; ostensibly, they have remained single to their father's advantage, since they helped him in his old age. In this patriarchal world, where women are both expected to provide for men and assume secondary roles, their prospects for richer, more independent lives without husbands are slim.

Nor have the sisters pursued employment, while their brother Benny has carried on the family business in Ceylon, and his son Cyril works in London. As women who lack practical experience with the outside world—they are unable to cook for themselves or keep up the house without the help of waitstaff—Constantia and Josephine have not been offered such opportunities.

While Constantia and Josephine wonder vaguely about a future without the colonel, they can't imagine a world outside of their apartment and continue to concern themselves with the same domestic frivolities in which they participated while their father was alive. The daughters lack guidance: their only possible maternal stand-ins, the absent-minded, neurotic Nurse Andrews and their resentful maid Kate, are hardly nurturing. Instead, Constantia and Josephine are forced to submit to their father's influence even after his death, fixating on the way that his "**one eye**" "glared at them a moment" before he died—as if to guarantee their perpetual submission to his will. Despite a moment of near-revelation at the end of the story, where the daughters seemed poised to begin a new life, they cannot move forward. Misguided, ignorant of the outside world, and crippled by anxiety—a direct result of their father's patriarchal influence—Constantia and Josephine decide to remain in their apartment, unable to understand what it is they want in life or what sorts of futures they might be able to create.

"The Daughters of the Late Colonel" can therefore be read as a cautionary tale about the lasting, toxic influence of the patriarchy. Though no patriarchal figures directly interfere with the sisters' day-to-day lives after the colonel's death, their entire identities have been constructed and crystalized around male demands and male superiority. In this narrative, Mansfield seems to suggest that even when patriarchal figures fall away—when they die or depart, as Constantia and Josephine's male relatives have—the result is confused, ineffectual, and feeble women who cannot understand their own roles in society or envision a future without men.

Though they recognize that a vibrant world exists outside of their own chaotic, disorganized home, Constantia and Josephine are unable to access this world and the fulfillment it might bring, forced instead to wallow in passivity and fear. Mansfield's story responds to an era in which women—though faced with prospects of independence and fading male authority—continued to face difficulty in constructing identities and lifestyles free of patriarchal influence.

AMBIVALENCE AND DEPENDENCY

Constantia and Josephine are in charge of their household and must assume positions of leadership after the colonel's death, yet they are utterly dependent on each other and the assistance of their cook, Kate. Even though Kate is both rude and potentially spying on her bosses, Constantia and Josephine feel unable to fire her and cannot decide whether she is valuable to them or not. Indeed, the sisters seem unable to make sound judgments about other people in their lives and their own actions toward these people in general. They regard their surroundings with ambivalence, as if incapable of independently forming their own opinions. Constantia and Josephine are crippled by overthinking, contributing to the story's anticlimactic mood and circular structure: by the end of the story, the sisters seem as paralyzed and helpless as they were at the beginning.

Mansfield begins the narrative by describing Constantia and Josephine's indecisiveness after their father's funeral: "even when they went to bed it was only their bodies that lay down and rested; their minds went on, thinking things out, talking things over, wondering, deciding, trying to remember where..." By trailing off mid-sentence, Mansfield mirrors the sisters' own confused thoughts and habits. From the outset, Constantia and Josephine seem more capable of overthinking and ruminating about situations than acting on them. The sisters choose to wait until the next day to decide the recipient of their father's top-hat ("'We can decide to-morrow,' [Josephine] sighed'"), and they cannot bring themselves to ask Nurse Andrews—the nurse who helped their father before his death—to leave, though her presence becomes a "bother."

Josephine and Constantine also debate about firing Kate, insisting that they are not as dependent on her as they were before their father's death. Yet Constantia admits that she has "never been able to quite make up [her] mind" about Kate's trustworthiness. She has laid traps for their maid before in

order to catch her stealing, yet Constantia has been unable to decide whether any displaced items she ever found were actually Kate's fault. Josephine, too, feels ambivalent about Kate's culpability, and Constantia's own suspicions feed into Josephine's: "Now you've put the doubt into my mind, Con, I'm sure I can't tell myself." Kate continues to prove instrumental to the household, since neither woman can fend for herself; thus, their judgments about her are tempered by their reliance on the skills she provides.

In general, the sisters are conflicted and equivocal about their decisions regarding the household and family affairs. They constantly postpone necessary actions instead of confronting them directly, and their dependency on Kate and each other—they make no choices without involving the other and constantly share opinions—contribute to their shared stasis in the household. At the story's pivotal moment, in which Constantia and Josephine decide to "settle" their father's things in his room, both sisters are unable to face the challenge, creating an anticlimax. Here, tension builds and goes unresolved. In spite of their timidity about their father's belongings, Constantia and Josephine enter his room and attempt to clear it. Yet the sisters cannot open their father's wardrobe, and Constantia decides instead to lock the closet, preventing either of them from opening it and organizing his possessions.

Though this action is "one of the amazingly bold things that she'd done about twice before in their lives"—since Constantia locks in their father's ghost, which Josephine imagines residing in the closet—it also prevents the sisters from coming to any resolution about their father's death or gaining any closure by settling his possessions. In the end, Constantia and Josephine decide to be "weak": "Let's be weak—be weak, Jug. It's much nicer to be weak than to be strong." The sisters allow themselves to be given over to paralysis, unable to act with conviction in a situation that demands boldness and concerted effort. Though Josephine initially seems determined to work through their father's possessions, Constantia convinces her otherwise; they continue to depend on each other's mindsets, inhibiting their own propensity for decision-making.

By the end of the story, however, both women seem to be close to overcoming ambivalence, since they begin to reflect on their own desires and feelings, suggesting a potential for independent action. "What was it she was always wanting? What did it all lead to? Now? Now?" Constantia asks herself, lost in thought about her life before their father's death and considering a more independent future. She begins to address her feelings with Josephine—"Don't you think perhaps—"—but is cut off by Josephine's own address: "'I was wondering if now—' she murmured." The sisters seem to have discovered an ability to think independently, free of each other's influence. By vocalizing their thoughts, they appear to be one step closer to acting decisively—leaving their home behind, perhaps, or altering their own lives in some other way. Yet both sisters forget what it is they were going to say, ending the story on another anticlimactic note and implying that neither woman has changed since the beginning of the narrative: they are trapped helplessly in states of doubt, irresolution, and inactivity.

Mansfield's characters often face challenges that they cannot confront directly, failing to undergo profound changes they seem primed for. Constantia and Josephine are no exception, since they cannot break free from anxiety to perform actions that will improve their household—and their future lives. Hesitant and unfailingly ambivalent, they continue to interpret their surroundings without confidence, creating a narrative that depicts indecision as a never-ending cycle.

FAMILY, INSTABILITY, AND FRAGMENTATION

Flashbacks in the narrative suggest that Constantia and Josephine's relationship to their brother, nephew, and deceased mother are as complicated as their relationship to the colonel: Mansfield depicts a fractured family, torn apart by death, money, and conflicting desires. Written in the recent wake of the Victorian era, "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" explores family structures that no longer adhere to the traditional model of stable Victorian living. Instead, the Pinners are dysfunctional, detached, and fragmented—qualities Mansfield mimics in the structure of the story, which features abrupt shifts in time and space. The Pinners' own lack of stability also mirrors the overall instability of the burgeoning modernist era, a period characterized by war, economic disruption, and severe sociocultural shifts.

Though Constantia and Josephine are clearly grief-stricken by their father's death (Josephine insists that she "couldn't have put" on her grief while writing replies to condolence letters), they are also reminded of his tyranny, cruelty, and weakness as a father. In this post-Victorian family, paternalistic love is neither a given nor a stabilizing force. Constantia, Josephine, and Cyril, their nephew, receive no support or kindness from the colonel during his lifetime, who treats all of them with disdain—especially Cyril, whom he harangues in a flashback to a scene before his death. It is strongly implied that Cyril finds his family disruptive and overly complicated, since he attempts to leave his aunts and grandfather early, prioritizing business over family ties: "I say, Auntie Con, isn't your clock a bit slow? I've got to meet a man at—at Paddington just after five. I'm afraid I shan't be able to stay very long with grandfather."

Neither does Cyril have a positive relationship with his own father, Benny. When Constantia asks him if his father enjoys meringues, Cyril is unable to answer. "Don't know a thing like that about your own father, Cyril?" asks Josephine, and Cyril is

forced to pretend that he knows his father's preferences—though Benny works overseas and is clearly absent from his son's life. Furthermore, neither Benny nor Cyril attend the colonel's funeral, emphasizing that their connections to fatherhood are tenuous at best.

With no stable matriarchal figures—for Constantia and Josephine are hardly forceful—and no nurturing patriarchs, the Pinner family is devoid of leadership and characterized by stiff, uncomfortable relationships. Benny's wife, Hilda, "the unknown sister-in-law," is remembered as "not in the least interested," and Benny is barely mentioned in the narrative. Like Cyril, he is ostensibly more concerned with his work in the colonies than with his immediate family, and it is suggested that Constantia and Josephine are the only relatives who have maintained a close connection—since they live together in the same apartment. Whereas Benny, Cyril, and the colonel have pursued profit and business, Constantia and Josephine have pursued nothing: they have little in common with their other relatives, and their family is neither supportive nor loving. The Pinners are as unstable as they are separated, defying the model of the Victorian-era family as a structured unit focused on child-rearing and domestic unity.

The story's private family tensions reflect sociopolitical ones; "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" is a wholly modernist story whose unconventional structure and techniques reflect the changing sociopolitical landscape of the modernist era. As tradition and hierarchy became subject to revision and revolution—provoked by war and other extreme disruptions to the social fabric of Europe—modernist writers sought to address the deterioration of commonly held social values in their work. By moving fluidly between past and present, interior memory and dialogue, and different focalizing presences, Mansfield creates a narrative as disjointed as the family at its heart. The Pinners might function as a microcosm of the broader social fragmentation seen in this era. Mansfield's story itself performs this fragmentation, emphasizing the sense of instability and turmoil central to modernist writing.

Though tradition is ever-present in "The Daughters of the Late Colonel"—traditions of mourning, of female domesticity, and of male dominance—the family depicted in this narrative is far from traditional, reflecting the shifting social landscape of early twentieth-century Europe. Mansfield's own modernist style simultaneously highlights the Pinners' unconventionality and fractured qualities, speaks to literary modernist aesthetics, and demonstrates the overall atmosphere of chaos and abrupt social transformations she witnessed as a modernist writer.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE COLONEL'S WATCH

Constantia and Josephine argue about the best course of action for the colonel's gold watch, which Josephine suggests they give to their brother Benny as a gift. Constantia is surprised, noting that the only way to get packages to Ceylon, where Benny works, is through "runners"—native men who deliver parcels to the colonial administrators. Constantia distrusts the natives, but Josephine insists that she will disguise the gift in a "curious shape" so "that no one could possibly guess what it was." Yet much of this discussion and prevarication seems futile, since the watch no longer works and is not valuable: "And of course, it isn't as though it would be going—ticking, I mean." The sisters' fixation with the broken timepiece mirrors the story's fixation with disjointed time. Time is out of sync for Constantia and Josephine; though the sisters are approaching middle age (perhaps thirty-five or older), their demeanors are childlike and their names somewhat archaic. Moreover, the colonel is said to have died a week before the story begins, but the sisters seem both distanced from the death (more obsessed with funeral administration than with their recent loss) and yet unable to move on from it, since the colonel continues to assert a powerful presence in their lives. In "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," past and present seem uneasily intertwined.

Constantia and Josephine ultimately decide to give the watch to Cyril, Benny's son, since "Cyril in London wore [watches] from year's end to year's end." Ironically, Cyril is the only character in the story who seems capable of tracking time and recognizing its disjointedness, since he notes that his aunts' clock is a "a bit slow." Yet Constantia, "gazing at the clock," "couldn't make up her mind if it was fast or slow." Thus, the broken timepiece represents the unsettling of time in the narrative: Constantia and Josephine fail to recognize this temporal incongruity, even as it contributes to their emotionally stunted mental states.

THE COLONEL'S EYE

Before the colonel dies, he "suddenly" opens **one eye** while his daughters are gathered around his deathbed: instead of imparting last words, the colonel's eye "glares" at the sisters, and his gaze is then extinguished in death. The colonel's steely glare seems to have been one of his most well-known characteristics—one indicative of his authority and severity, and omnipresent even as he begins to become senile and approaches death. When his grandson Cyril comes to visit Constantia and Josephine, "Grandfather Pinner shot his eyes at Cyril in the way he was famous for." In a story that concerns itself with both power and perception—since the sisters are unable to see a way out of their hopeless, purposeless lives—the colonel's singular eye seems to signify both patriarchal tyranny and the sisters' own blindness to their

situation. The name "Pinner" sounds similar to "pin her"; indeed, both Constantia and Josephine are trapped and isolated by their father's gaze, which, as a final gesture, seems to threaten the sisters, insisting that they acquiesce to his cruelty even after his death. Yet because it is only one eye, this partial gaze seems also to represent the sisters' inability to fully comprehend their limited position in the world—one enforced by their father, whose dominating presence in their lives has made them anxious and passive, yet unable to break free from timidity and discover richer, more fulfilling lives (for fear of offending their father, who they feel continues to criticize them even after his death). The colonel's cyclopean glare unsettles Constantia and Josephine: "Oh, what a difference it would have made, what a difference to their memory of him, how much easier to tell people about it, if he had only opened both!" By encountering their father's one unopened eye, Constantia and Josephine seem to encounter their own cut-off perception about the world around them—a deeply uncomfortable confrontation that speaks to both patriarchy's influence and its effects in the story.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Stories* published in 1991.

The Daughters of the Late Colonel Quotes

❝ Supposing father had wanted to say something—something private to them. Not that he had. Oh, far from it! He lay there, purple, a dark, angry purple in the face, and never even looked at them when they came in. Then, as they were standing there, wondering what to do, he had suddenly opened one eye. Oh, what a difference it would have made, what a difference to their memory of him, how much easier to tell people about it, if he had only opened both! But no—one eye only. It glared at them a moment and then… went out.

Related Characters: The Colonel , Josephine Pinner, Constantia Pinner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

When Constantia and Josephine enter their father's room to say good-bye to him before he dies, they are horrified to see their father respond by glaring at them with "one eye only" open, as if accusing them for a wrong they have committed against him. Even in his most vulnerable moment—his last few minutes of life—the Pinner patriarch terrifies his daughters, suggesting the profound and lasting influence of patriarchal authority on women. Indeed, Constantia and Josephine consistently recall the image of this "one eye," which seems to serve as an omen or warning: though their father no longer directly impacts their lives, they continue to make decisions that they think would suit him and his memory. The colonel's single eye could also be seen to represent the sisters' blindness toward their own subjugated positions and their hopeless dependency on each other and household waitstaff.

❝ "But—but it seems so weak," said Josephine, breaking down.

"But why not be weak for once, Jug?" argued Constantia, whispering quite fiercely. "If it is weak." And her pale stare flew from the locked writing-table—so safe—to the huge glittering wardrobe, and she began to breathe in a queer, panting way.

"Why shouldn't we be weak for once in our lives, Jug? It's quite excusable. Let's be weak—be weak, Jug. It's much nicer to be weak than to be strong."

Related Characters: Josephine Pinner, Constantia Pinner (speaker), The Colonel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

Though Constantia is the younger sister of the two, she is often more headstrong than her older sister (it is mentioned that she once pushed their brother Benny into a pool during childhood). Ironically, though, she insists that they be "weak" when faced with the prospect of organizing their father's belongings. Josephine imagines that their father is trapped inside his wardrobe, waiting to burst free and confront them. Constantia accepts this notion and decides to lock the wardrobe, effectively repressing any kind of psychological confrontation with their father, whose tyranny has severely affected them. At the climax of the narrative, Constantia and Josephine are unable to move forward from the memory of their father's cruelty and power. Instead, by locking the wardrobe and resolving to be "weak" instead of "strong," the sisters refuse to acknowledge their past

trauma and the fear they associate with their father's influence.

"Is your dear father still so fond of meringues?" asked Auntie Con gently. She winced faintly as she broke through the shell of hers.

"Well, I don't quite know, Auntie Con," said Cyril breezily.

At that they both looked up.

"Don't know?" almost snapped Josephine. "Don't know a thing like that about your own father, Cyril?"

"Surely," said Auntie Con softly.

Cyril tried to laugh it off. "Oh, well," he said, "it's such a long time since—" He faltered. He stopped. Their faces were too much for him.

Related Characters: Cyril Pinner , Josephine Pinner, Constantia Pinner (speaker), Benny Pinner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

Though Cyril takes his family's dysfunction for granted—answering his aunts' questions about his father's preferences "breezily"—Constantia and Josephine seem unaware that their brother and nephew are not close. Confined to the domestic sphere, where they have been attending to their father for many years, Constantia and Josephine do not recognize how deeply divided their family has become. Mansfield depicts the Pinner family as an archetypal modern family, cut off from traditional principles (especially Victorian values of propriety and family ritual) and torn apart by forces of modernity, including imperialism—since Benny is a colonial administrator who lives away from his son—and militarism (the colonel's status in the military reinforces his tyrannical, militaristic stance toward his family).

"I say, Auntie Con, isn't your clock a bit slow? I've got to meet a man at—at Paddington just after five. I'm afraid I shan't be able to stay very long with grandfather."

"Oh, he won't expect you to stay *very* long!" said Aunt Josephine.

Constantia was still gazing at the clock. She couldn't make up her mind if it was fast or slow. It was one or the other, she felt almost certain of that. At any rate, it had been.

Related Characters: Cyril Pinner , Josephine Pinner (speaker), The Colonel , Constantia Pinner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

Cyril notices that his aunts' clock runs a "bit slow," though this may be a fabricated excuse to leave their home early, since he anticipates an uncomfortable visit with his grandfather. Nonetheless, though, time is clearly out of joint in Constantia and Josephine's household, since the sisters seem both childlike—wholly dependent on others and ignorant about the world around them—and mature (they are nearing middle age and no longer participate in the girlish rituals they used to practice). However, Constantia cannot decide whether time is unstable in their apartment; indeed, the only thing she *can* decide on is that it is either "fast or slow." Since the sisters are oblivious to their own strange relationship to time, progress, and aging, they are unable to break free from their stunted lives and join the normal world (one that Cyril, who works and lives in fast-paced, modernized London, clearly inhabits).

How did one prove things, how could one? Suppose Kate had stood in front of her and deliberately made a face. Mightn't she very well have been in pain? Wasn't it impossible, at any rate, to ask Kate if she was making a face at her? If Kate answered "No"—and of course she would say "No"—what a position! How undignified! Then again Constantia suspected, she was almost certain that Kate went to her chest of drawers when she and Josephine were out, not to take things but to spy.

Related Characters: Kate , Josephine Pinner, Constantia Pinner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

Constantia thinks about the fact that she can never "make up her mind" as to whether or not she trusts Kate, the sisters' maid. Constantia's inability to decide whether Kate is a trustworthy member of the household or not suggests her own ambivalent position about gaining independence after her father's death. While she and Josephine decide that they might be able to fend for themselves without Kate (whom they kept on while their father was living as a means of support), and that Kate might indeed be untrustworthy, they ultimately cannot be "certain" that firing Kate would be appropriate, since they are able to think of multiple reasons to excuse her. For instance, her "making a face" at them might be a result of "pain" instead of purposeful rudeness.

It seems that Constantia and Josephine cannot admit that they rely on Kate (despite her severity and unhelpfulness) to accomplish tasks they have never learned to complete themselves, such as cooking and cleaning. Moreover, Kate's alleged surveillance of Constantia's belongings demonstrates the extent to which the sisters are confined in their household and constrained by domesticity. Even their maid—a valued member of their home and the closest thing they have to a family member after their father's death—participates in practices that limit the sisters' freedom and privacy.

❝ If mother had lived, might they have married? But there had been nobody for them to marry. There had been father's Anglo-Indian friends before he quarreled with them. But after that she and Constantia never met a single man except clergymen. How did one meet men? Or even if they'd met them, how could they have got to know men well enough to be more than strangers? One read of people having adventures, being followed, and so on. But nobody had ever followed Constantia and her.

Related Characters: Josephine Pinner, Constantia Pinner (speaker), Constantia, Josephine, and Benny's Mother/The Colonel's wife , The Colonel , Josephine Pinner, Constantia Pinner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis

Josephine reflects on her life as a "spinster": an unmarried woman nearing middle age. Since she and Constantia have not received opportunities to engage with the surrounding world, free of their father's influence (and it is implied that they have had minimal education and spent minimal time away from family), Josephine has never had the chance to meet men and potentially find a husband. Marriage would be less restrictive than the life she has led taking care of her father, and yet all of her options in life—those she has realized and those she has not—involve men and patriarchal influence. Trapped in a world in which men can assume positions of power and leadership, while women can only be domestic helpers (indeed, the only other women in the story are maids and nurses), Josephine's life has been limited since birth.

❝ Until the barrel-organ stopped playing Constantia stayed before the Buddha, wondering, but not as usual, not vaguely. This time her wonder was like longing. [...] There had been this other life, running out, bringing things home in bags, getting things on approval, discussing them with Jug, and taking them back to get more things on approval, and arranging father's trays and trying not to annoy father. But it all seemed to have happened in a kind of tunnel. It wasn't real. [...] What did it mean? What was it she was always wanting? What did it all lead to? Now? Now?

Related Characters: The Colonel , Josephine Pinner, Constantia Pinner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

Constantia contemplates a Buddha statue on her mantelpiece as a barrel-organ player goes by the house, having realized that she and Josephine no longer need to rush outside to silence the player on behalf of their father. Constantia's interest in the figurine of the Buddha in her apartment suggests her fascination with transcendental concepts and worlds outside of her own, such as Eastern cultures (she also daydreams often about camels in the desert). Yet she has never been allowed to access these other worlds, since her life has been bound up in errands for her father. Though she sees this past life as "unreal," as having happened "in a kind of tunnel," her fragmented, exhausting, and hallucinatory existence has profoundly impacted her, prohibiting her from moving beyond "wondering" and daydreams to experience the world firsthand. Ultimately, though, Constantia—like her sister—cannot decide what she wants from her future, now

that she has gained freedom from her father's tyranny. Instead, all she can do is ask herself questions that she cannot answer, unable to understand herself or her own identity with much clarity.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE DAUGHTERS OF THE LATE COLONEL

Constantia and Josephine have had one of the busiest weeks of their lives, and when they lie down in bed, their minds keep running, thinking things over. Constantia, lying like a statue and looking at the ceiling, wonders if they should give their father's top-hat to the porter. Josephine sharply disagrees and asks why Constantia thinks this would be a good idea. Constantia notes that porters often have to go to funerals, and that their porter only has a bowler (and thus would appreciate a top-hat as a gift for being kind to their father).

From the beginning of the story, Constantia and Josephine prove to be highly indecisive, ambivalent characters who cannot act in difficult situations, choosing instead to ruminate over possible choices and bicker among themselves. Though they are now in charge of their own household after their father's death, they seem hesitant to begin making important decisions about his estate.

Josephine almost laughs thinking of the top-hat on the porter's head. The last time she laughed in bed with Constantia was years ago, when they would stay awake at night talking. She fights back her laughter and tells herself to "remember," then informs Constantia that they can decide about the top-hat tomorrow.

Josephine quickly quells her own impulse to laugh about the top hat by reminding herself to "remember" the gravity of the situation at hand: her father's death. Though the colonel no longer has a physical presence in his daughters' lives, his influence is strongly felt. Josephine and Constantia have led somber, quiet lives—sacrificing nights of laughter and enjoyment—in his household.

Constantia wonders if they should have their dressing-gowns dyed black to display their mourning. Josephine finds this idea ridiculous, but Constantia thinks it wouldn't seem right to wear black outside of the house but not inside. Josephine notes that no one sees them in the house, and Constantia replies that Kate and the postman do. Josephine thinks that they will look like black cats in their black gowns and woolly, colorful slippers. She tells Constantia that it won't be necessary to dye the gowns.

Josephine and Constantia are again unable to decide on the outcome of a simple task—one that also demonstrates their confinement within their own household. Without their father, the sisters have been left to their own devices, though this is hardly liberating. Their lives are now bound up in the business of mourning their father and maintaining his memory. By proposing that she and Josephine dye their dressing-gowns black, Constantia seems to suggest that even their personal, domestic activities have been overshadowed by their father's death.

Constantia says that they will have to mail the papers with the notices tomorrow to get them delivered to Ceylon. They had had twenty-three letters, and Josephine has replied to all of them, crying each time after writing "We miss our dear father *so* much." She could not have faked this grief even if she wanted to. Constantia asks her if she has enough stamps, and Josephine asks her why she would ask about that now, after the letters have been sent.

Constantia and Josephine continue to quibble about inconsequential details related to organizing their father's funeral. Tellingly, though, Josephine seems to feel profound grief about the loss, though it is unclear whether this grief is related directly to her father's absence or to her exhaustion from the tasks she has been forced to handle after his death (such as writing twenty-three repetitive letters). Moreover, it is clear that the sisters' extended family and community is fragmented and geographically removed: all of the letters they are sending (about the colonel's death) are directed to Ceylon, a British colony.

Constantia hears what she thinks is a mouse, but Josephine disagrees, declaring that it can't be a mouse since there aren't any crumbs in their room. Constantia insists that the mouse might be searching for crumbs, and she feels pity for the creature, thinking about how terrible it would be for it to find nothing. Constantia wonders how mice can live at all while constantly foraging, and Josephine criticizes her for talking about nonsense. The sisters go to sleep.

The mouse seems to represent Constantia's own feelings of helplessness after her father's death. She, too, is passive, searching for meaning (like "crumbs") amidst the ruins of her life, in which she has never been allowed to experience true freedom—having always been subservient to her father's demands.

Nurse Andrews is staying with the sisters, since they asked her to after the doctor had gone. Josephine suggested that Nurse Andrews stay, though she worries that she might expect to be paid. The sisters feel that Nurse Andrews's presence is burdensome, since they have to have meals at proper times (if they were alone, they could have Kate bring them food at any time). Moreover, Nurse Andrews overeats, though she is also anxious about butter consumption. When she takes extra helpings at mealtimes, Josephine gets very red, and Constantia gazes away dreamily.

Again, the sisters find it difficult to make a decision about Nurse Andrews, whom they regard as both a nuisance and a source of support (citing her kindness to their cantankerous father). Neither Constantia nor Josephine is able to interpret Nurse Andrews's actions, and they cannot decide how these actions might be detrimental to their own highly isolated, irregular lives.

At the dinner table with Nurse Andrews one evening, the nurse discusses her time with Lady Tukes, who owned a silver butter dispenser. Josephine says that she thinks things like that are extravagant and distracts herself from Nurse Andrews by asking her sister to ring Kate. Kate, haughty and supercilious—"the enchanted princess"—enters and quickly takes away the sisters' meals, replacing them with dessert. Josephine asks for jam, but Kate doesn't find any in the jam-pot in the sideboard. She places the empty jar on the table and storms off. Nurse Andrew notes that there isn't any jam, and Josephine and Constantia wonder what to do, since they don't want to bother Kate again. Constantia goes back to daydreaming, and Josephine frowns, realizing that if Nurse Andrews wasn't present, they could make do without jam for their dessert. She asks Constantia to fetch marmalade instead, and Nurse Andrews says she hopes it isn't bitter.

Though Kate is severe and often unhelpful with her employers, Constantia and Josephine are unable to confront her. They are dependent on her services, however inadequate, and they have learned to accept her behavior (whereas Nurse Andrews, a visitor to the household, seems confused by Kate's actions). The sisters rely on Kate to manage aspects of domesticity they have never learned to handle—cooking, cleaning, and organizing.

The sisters know that Nurse Andrews will be gone soon, and they realize that she had been kind to their father during his final days—though she had been reluctant to leave his bedside, which they feel wasn't necessary (and seemed more tactless than anything). However, their father didn't want to say anything to them privately before he passed. Instead, he lay there without noticing them, and then suddenly "opened **one eye**" and glared at them before dying.

It is revealed that the colonel acted with hostility toward his daughters during his final moments of life, suggesting both his tyrannical status as a controlling patriarch and the Pinner family's profound instability. The colonel is unable to demonstrate paternal love, even at his most vulnerable.

Mr. Farolles, a clergyman and a friend of the family, arrives the day their father dies and asks if the end had been peaceful. Josephine says it had been, but both she and Constantia know that his "**eye**" hadn't been peaceful at all. Josephine asks Mr. Farolles to sit, and he begins to sit in their father's armchair before quickly moving away from it.

Though Josephine and Constantia know that their father was hostile to them until the very end, they do not reveal this fact to Mr. Farolles perhaps because they are fearful of challenging his authority, even after his death. Indeed, Mr. Farolles is embarrassed to have sat in the colonel's chair, suggesting that the Pinner patriarch greatly influenced those around him (to the point of fear and intimidation).

Mr. Farolles insists that he wants to be helpful to the sisters and offers Communion to them as a comfort. Constantia and Josephine are terrified by this idea, since they feel that their drawing-room isn't suited to hosting Communion. Kate might interrupt the ritual, or some other guest, and they wouldn't know whether to greet the visitor or to wait. Josephine asks Mr. Farolles to arrange a simple funeral, and Constantia thinks that their father's funeral should be appropriate for his position. Mr. Farolles promises to enlist the help of Mr. Knight, a funeral director.

Constantia and Josephine are more worried about preparing a funeral that would suit their father than about their own comfort during this period of mourning and grief, and as a result, they are reluctant to accept Mr. Farolles's offer of Communion—concerning themselves instead with arranging a funeral befitting the colonel's "position."

Neither Josephine nor Constantia can believe that their father is never coming back. Josephine felt terrified when his coffin was lowered at the cemetery, since she feels that she and Constantia have buried him without his permission. She thinks that the colonel will find out "sooner or later" what they've done—and that the burial was a cruel thing to do, since the colonel is helpless in death. Josephine further speculates that he would disapprove of the expenses they have spared on his funeral, and she exclaims to Constantia that they shouldn't have buried him. Constantia notes that they couldn't have kept him unburied in their small flat. Josephine declares that their father will never forgive them for what they have done to him.

Once again, Constantia and Josephine begin to worry that their father would disapprove of the way that they have been handling his death, even though he is no longer physically present to voice his disapproval. The colonel continues to hold power over his ever-subservient daughters, especially Josephine, who frets about the way that they have chosen to manage his death. Burial, in Josephine's view, effectively renders the colonel helpless, forcing him to relinquish some of the authority he had in life. Mansfield seems to be suggesting that the influence of patriarchy is severe enough to be felt powerfully even when male figures of authority fall away—even when they die, in the colonel's case.


Josephine and Constantia decide to try to organize their father's belongings in his room. While their father was alive, they never disturbed him in the morning, but now they have no reason not to open his door—though they continue to feel nervous about doing so. Josephine tries to get Constantia to go first, but Constantia tells Josephine to open the door, since she is older. Meanwhile, Kate watches the sisters from the kitchen. When the sisters finally work up the nerve to enter the room, they note that it seems different: it is cold, and everything is covered with white cloth, sheets, and paper. They pull up a blind, and Constantia begins to wonder if they should put off the errand for another day.

The sisters cannot decide whether to clear up their father's belongings or not, since they are highly anxious about entering his room—a space they have never before been allowed to enter freely. Even though the room without their father is profoundly changed (now cold and bare, as if sapped of their father's authority), the sisters continue to feel uneasy about disrupting their father's space and thus implicitly challenging his power.


Josephine insists that they have to get it done today and asks Constantia why she keeps staring at the bed. Josephine moves over to open the chest of drawers but retreats quickly, feeling suddenly as if she has seen her father in the top drawer, hidden away as if preparing to attack. Josephine tells Constantia that she can't open the chest, and Constantia consoles her, telling her that it's better not to open anything—and that they should be "weak," since it is "much nicer to be weak than to be strong." Constantia walks over to the wardrobe and locks it, though she knows that their father might be inside. Josephine feels that she would not be surprised if the wardrobe toppled over on Constantia, but nothing happens. Constantia and Josephine leave their father's room, and Josephine allows herself to be led by Constantia, who smiles as she did when she pushed Benny into the round pond.

Josephine begins to believe that their father is hiding in his room, waiting to "spring" on his daughters—an imagined scenario that powerfully suggests Josephine's own internalized fear about her father's cruelty and influence. Though Constantia puts an end to Josephine's fear by locking the wardrobe (thereby locking in her imagined version of the colonel), she also insists that they leave the room altogether. Thus, the sisters are ultimately unable to move forward from their father's death by confronting (and potentially getting rid of) his possessions. Moreover, Constantia's cruelty in childhood toward her brother Benny is briefly mentioned. The Pinner family, it seems, is deeply dysfunctional, and Constantia seems in some way to share the same tyrannical streak that her father demonstrated.

Once out of their father's room, the sisters sit down and look at each other. They decide to ask Kate for two cups of hot water, but they decide that they don't need a jug; Kate can pour the water straight out of the kettle. Josephine wonders what they should send of their father's to Benny, but she notes that it's difficult to know what to send to Ceylon, since there is no post there, only "runners." The sisters imagine a black man running through the fields with a parcel. Josephine imagines a tiny black man, while Constantia imagines a tall, thin man, whom she envisions as "unpleasant."

The sisters hold racist views about the natives in Ceylon, the British colony where their father and brother have worked. Patriarchy is reinforced by imperialism, since the colonial system in which Benny and the colonel are implicated also relies on masculine authority to subjugate others (in this case the black male "runners," Ceylonese natives who are virtually enslaved to white colonial administrators like the Pinner men).

The sisters remember their brother Benny on a verandah, dressed in the costume of a colonial administrator. His right hand would shake up and down, like their father's did when he was impatient. Benny's wife Hilda, unknown to the sisters, sat behind him in a cane rocker, reading the *Tatler*.

Benny is described as sharing mannerisms related to "impatience" with the colonel, suggesting that he, too, carries patriarchal force and authority; the sisters remember him as an authoritative figure (implied by his colonial garb). But since the sisters do not imagine him or his wife in much detail—recalling Hilda as merely "uninterested"—it is clear that the members of the Pinner family are not very close with each other.

Josephine decides that their father's **watch** would be the most apposite gift, though Constantia is surprised that she would give it to a native to deliver. Josephine ensures her sister that she would disguise the gift, perhaps in the corset-box that she has kept for a while—though it has never come in handy for anything. Yet it would be strange for Benny to open a corset-box and find the watch inside. Constantia remarks that the watch no longer works, or that it would be unusual if for some reason it did after all this time.

The sisters' preoccupation with their father's timepiece demonstrates their unstable relationship with time. Though they are nearly middle-aged, they are still childlike in many ways (helpless, passive, and confused). This is evidenced by Josephine's admission that she has never needed her corset-box—perhaps because she has never needed a corset for formal events, since these events would require her to become more independent.

Josephine thinks of Cyril and wonders whether it wouldn't be more appropriate for the only grandson to have **the watch**. Cyril would appreciate the gift, and Benny likely no longer wears watches, since men don't wear waistcoats in hot climates. Cyril, though, wears watches frequently. The sisters would appreciate seeing the timepiece when Cyril comes to tea with them. His sympathetic note had been disheartening, but they understood.

It is clear that the sisters have not seen their male relatives, Cyril and Benny, in some time, since they are not sure if Benny even wears watches, and it is implied that Cyril declined an invitation to their father's funeral. The Pinner family is utterly disconnected and detached from one another.

The sisters recall Cyril's last visit. Josephine tells Cyril not to be frightened of eating their cakes, since she and Constantia bought them at Buszard's in the morning. Josephine cuts the cake—a great luxury, not unlike her winter gloves or Constantia's shoes, which she has resoled frequently—but Cyril refuses to eat, explaining that he has just had lunch. Though it is after four, Cyril notes that he had to meet a man at Victoria and was so delayed that he wasn't able to eat lunch until later in the day. Constantia and Josephine feel disappointed, but they would not expect Cyril to know.

Again, it is clear that the Pinner family is highly dysfunctional and lacks intimacy, since Cyril's visit to his aunts' home is highly uncomfortable: Cyril does not seem to want to stay, although Constantia and Josephine—still blissfully oblivious to their family's fracturing—attempt to cajole him with desserts. Additionally, Cyril's references to a busy work life in London contrast significantly with the Pinner sisters' lives, occupied mainly by frivolous domestic tasks (like buying cakes or resoling shoes). Trapped in a male-centric world, Constantia and Josephine are not able to access opportunities for work outside of their household.


Josephine offers Cyril a meringue, noting that Cyril's father was fond of them. Constantia asks if Benny is still fond of meringues, and Cyril replies that he doesn't know. Josephine wonders why Cyril doesn't know a thing like that about his own father, and Cyril acts sheepish, noting that it has been a "long time since—" before catching himself at the sight of his aunts' faces. Cyril then declares that he must have forgotten that his father *was* fond of meringues. Josephine and Constantia are pleased.

Cyril does not want to admit to his aunts that he is no longer close with his father, as he realizes that they will be disappointed. They cannot see what he does, which is that their family is completely disconnected, and that paternal love (from either the colonel or Benny, Cyril's father) is lacking.

Josephine asks Cyril to come and see his grandfather. Cyril remarks that he thinks their clock is a bit slow and that he needs to get to Paddington just after five. Josephine insists that Cyril see their father before he leaves. Meanwhile, Constantia stares at the clock, wondering whether it is fast or slow.

Once again, time proves to be unstable for both Josephine and Constantia. Cyril notices that time moves more slowly in their household, while Constantia cannot figure out whether it does or not. Confused, ambivalent, and still somewhat immature, the sisters have not developed as adults; even their younger nephew seems more stable and mature.


Cyril and his aunts enter Grandfather Pinner's room, where he sits in front of a fire with his walking stick and a rug and handkerchief over his knees. The colonel glares at Cyril in the way that he is famous for. Constantia stares at her father, and he asks Cyril what he has to say. Cyril feels like an "imbecile" as he smiles at his grandfather. Josephine remarks that Cyril has said that Benny is still fond of meringues. The colonel doesn't seem to hear her, even after she repeats the statement. He asks Cyril to repeat his aunt, and Cyril asks Constantia if he has to, blushing furiously. She encourages him to speak. Cyril loudly tells his grandfather that his father is still fond of meringues, and his grandfather yells back a reprimand, ordering him not to shout. Josephine notes that the colonel is going deaf. The colonel declares that it was an "esstrodinary thing" for Cyril to come all the way to the apartment to tell him about his father's love for meringues.

Cyril's uncomfortable interaction with his grandfather demonstrates both the colonel's tyrannical, patriarchal influence and the deeply fragmented nature of their family relationships. The colonel's senility seems to have only increased his rancor, and the rigid, formal awkwardness of the encounter suggests that he has never been particularly close with his grandson.

Josephine decides to send Cyril **the watch**. She and Constantia are interrupted by Kate, who asks them, "Fried or boiled?" They ask her what she means, and she clarifies: "fish." Josephine notes that there are many things that might be fried or boiled and asks what Constantia would prefer. Constantia hesitantly asks for fried fish, but then realizes that she can't seem to make up her mind between "fried" or "boiled." Kate says that she will fry the fish and slams the door of the kitchen shut.

Josephine and Constantia continue to quibble over minor details of everyday life—having fish "fried or boiled"—while depending on Kate to interpret their own desires.

Josephine and Constantia retreat into the drawing-room to discuss Kate. Josephine asks Constantia whether they should keep her on or not, since they are no longer as dependent on her as they used to be; they no longer need a cook for their father. Josephine suggests that she and Constantia could manage their own food, either by making eggs or pre-prepared food. Constantia notes that cooked food is expensive.

Constantia and Josephine cannot decide whether to fire Kate or not. While they are no longer dependent on her services for their father, they are dependent on her cooking, though they seem unwilling to admit this fact. Yet they are also reluctant to become fully independent (Constantia notes that food is expensive to prepare, though surely keeping a maid is just as expensive). Their indecision now extends to nearly all areas of their banal lives, from funeral arrangements to domestic chores to personal care.

Josephine remarks that she isn't sure whether to trust Kate or not, and Constantia agrees. It's difficult to prove things, and she wouldn't automatically assume that Kate was malicious. But Constantia also suspects that when she and Josephine are out, Kate goes to her chest of drawers to look through her things, since she often finds her accessories misplaced. Constantia once laid a trap for Kate by setting things in a specific order, but when she went back to check, she could not decide whether it was Kate or a movement of her own that rearranged the items. Josephine cannot decide either.

The sisters are not assured of Kate's untrustworthiness, though it seems clear that Kate has betrayed their trust by going through their items. Again, Constantia and Josephine feel indebted to and reliant on Kate, though they are not able to vocalize their feelings on this matter—or recognize how to end their arrangement of dependency on her.

Josephine remarks that they can't postpone deciding to fire Kate or not, but at that moment, a barrel-organ begins to play outside of their apartment. Josephine tells Constantia to run and fetch a six-pence, but they then remember that they no longer have to stop the organ-grinder, whose music used to bother their father (who would "bellow" at them to get their attention). Their father's walking stick will never thump again. The barrel organ begins to play this tune: *It will never thump again, it will never thump again*. Josephine wonders what Constantia is thinking, since she looks different, smiling strangely. Constantia notes that it has been a whole week since father died, a sentence echoed by the organ: *A week since father died, a week since father died*. Josephine smiles, too, and notes that the sun has come out and is shining on the Indian carpet.

The Pinner sisters realize suddenly that their father's death indicates newfound freedom for them: freedom from his demands (like those related to the barrel organ noise). As if all at once, they begin to feel somewhat happy—evidenced by their smiles—since they seem to have seen a glimmer of hope for their lives in the future.

Constantia looks at her favorite Buddha statue on the mantlepiece, one whose smile always gave her a strange feeling—as if he was keeping a secret. She cannot figure out what this secret might be. Josephine looks at the sunlight reflected on the photograph of her mother above the piano, dressed in earrings "shaped like tiny pagodas" and a "black feather boa." Josephine wonders why photographs of dead people always fade, but she realizes that this photograph is thirty-five years old. Josephine remembers pointing at the boa in the picture and telling Constantia that a snake killed their mother in Ceylon. She begins to wonder whether her life would have been different if her mother hadn't died, but she doesn't think it would have been. Their Aunt Florence lived with them until they finished school. They then moved three times, had a yearly holiday, and their servants changed occasionally.

Part of the Pinner family's dysfunction might be attributable to the death of the colonel's wife. Josephine seems to think that their lives may have been better—perhaps more independent—if their mother had lived, since they would not have had to uproot themselves so frequently. Mansfield seems to be suggesting that while mothers are nurturing, patriarchy is limiting, since Josephine and Constantia have never experienced real maternal love (or, if so, cannot remember it).


Josephine hears sparrows on the window-ledge, but their crying sounds seem to be within her instead of outside. She wonders whether she and Constantia would have married had their mother lived, but then recalls that there had been nobody to marry. Her father fell out with his Anglo-Indian friends, and she and Constantia never met a single man except clergymen after that. Josephine doesn't know how to meet men or get to know them. Once, a man at their boarding-house in Eastbourne placed a note on a jug of water outside of the bedroom door, but they were unable to decipher the note later. They spent the rest of their lives taking care of their father and staying out of his way.

Josephine reflects on how limited her and Constantia's options in life have been, since they have not been exposed to the world of courtship of marriage. Josephine and Constantia have had to sacrifice all hope for independent futures (perhaps with husbands and children) because of their father and his demands.

Constantia remembers the times she came into the drawing-room to lie on the floor with her arms outstretched under the light of the moon. When they went to the seaside, she would try to get as close to the ocean as possible, singing songs she made up. Constantia reflects on the life she has spent running errands for her father and seeking his approval, but this life seems unreal—as if it occurred in a "kind of tunnel." Only when she is able to emerge from the tunnel, encountering the ocean, moonlight, or even a thunderstorm, is she able to feel like herself. She wonders what it is she has always wanted and what her life has led to now.

Constantia realizes that her life has been bound up in her father's wishes and limitations, and she remembers the brief moments of true freedom and transcendence she has experienced in the past. Yet she does not know how to capture freedom in the future, nor can she take stock of her life appropriately. Instead, her past seems like a hallucination or a dream, as if she is still unwilling to confront her own identity, memories, and aspirations.

Constantia approaches Josephine and tries to say something about the future, but Josephine interrupts her. They both stop speaking and look at each other, then try to prompt the other to speak. Finally, Constantia says that she has forgotten what she was going to say. Josephine agrees, remarking that she, too, has forgotten.

In the end, neither Constantia nor Josephine can vocalize their dreams for the future, reverting back to ambivalence and indecision. Though they seem poised on the threshold of revelation and self-improvement, they are ultimately unable to alter their lives, choosing irresolution and passivity instead.

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