

Her First Ball



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Katherine Mansfield Murry grew up in Wellington, New Zealand as part of a distinguished family. When Mansfield was 19, she moved to England, where she attended Queen's College. After graduating, she temporarily returned to New Zealand and began to publish short stories under the pen name "K. Mansfield," but eventually she moved back to London, where she lived for most of her adult life. *In a German Pension*, Mansfield's first collection of short stories, was published in 1911; the stories satirize German sensibilities, and Mansfield would later renounce them, refusing a reprint. After the military death of her brother Leslie in 1915, Mansfield's work began to focus on her childhood memories of New Zealand. Her best-known collections emerged during this period, including *The Garden Party, and Other Stories* in 1922, and her novel *The Aloe*, published posthumously in 1930. While she lived in England, Mansfield was connected to Bloomsbury writers such as E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, had affairs with both men and women, and married editor John Middleton Murry in 1918. She died of tuberculosis in 1923 while she was living in France seeking treatment for the disease.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Her First Ball" takes place in early 20th century New Zealand. Balls were a common upper-class tradition and strict gender roles were enforced—young women like Katherine Mansfield's protagonist, Leila, were trained to encounter and attract men in chaperoned environments. Mansfield, who grew up in Wellington, intentionally drew on her childhood memories to build this setting. Mansfield's brother died during training while serving the British Expeditionary Force in World War I, and Mansfield wanted to write about her New Zealand childhood as a means of coping with that loss. But because of her postwar position, "Her First Ball," like much of the work of Mansfield's Modernist peers, critiques the frivolity of postwar society. Mansfield was deeply concerned with mortality and the passage of time, themes that emerged in 20th century literature as the result of mass violence.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Her First Ball," while a standalone story, can be thought of as a spin-off of Katherine Mansfield's 1922 short story "The Garden Party." Leila's cousins, the Sheridans, are minor characters in "Her First Ball" but central in "The Garden Party," which takes place in Wellington, New Zealand. The stories are also thematically linked, as "The Garden Party" revolves around

time and mortality. Based on style and time period, Mansfield's writing is part of the Modernist tradition, though it doesn't align with all characteristics of Modernism. For instance, Mansfield's prose and story structures were often deceptively simple, but on the whole, modernist work tended toward the experimental, often using a stream-of-consciousness style to critique a fast-moving postwar society. Modernist work, including Mansfield's, favored interiority over external events, and used layered imagery to reflect complex emotions. Virginia Woolf, one of Mansfield's peers and acquaintances, was a key practitioner of Modernism, along with figures such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and E.M. Forster. Though Woolf's work was often denser than Mansfield's, her novel *Orlando*, like "Her First Ball," dealt with questions of gender and the passage of time. Mansfield also helped to perfect the short story form, following in the footsteps of writers like Anton Chekhov, one of her literary influences. Chekhov's stories, including "Gooseberries" and "The Man in a Case," mirror the ambiguity of "Her First Ball"; like Mansfield, Chekhov preferred to reveal information slowly.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Her First Ball
- **When Published:** 1921
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** A New Zealand dance hall
- **Climax:** Leila dances with the old man
- **Antagonist:** The story has no traditional antagonist, but the old man Leila dances with alerts her to the passage of time and her own insignificance, which nearly ruins her night
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Mansfield and Murry. The characters of Gudrun and Gerald in D.H. Lawrence's 1920 novel *Women in Love* were based on Katherine Mansfield and her second husband John Middleton Murry.

Mutual Admiration. In 1923, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary that Katherine Mansfield was the only writer she had ever been jealous of, though the two were never close friends.



PLOT SUMMARY

A young girl named Leila is about to attend her first ball,

escorted by her cousins, Meg, Laurie, Laura and Jose Sheridan. Leila is from the New Zealand countryside, and she has never been to a ball before, to the surprise of her wealthier and more experienced cousins. The Sheridans speak with nonchalance about their attire and upcoming dances, while Leila is almost beside herself with excitement.

When Leila and the Sheridans arrive at the drill hall, Laura helps escort Leila to the ladies' room, where women are busy getting ready. Though Leila focuses only on the noise and excitement, the women are clearly stressed out, competing for mirror space and worrying about their appearances. Once the dance programs are passed out, Meg brings Leila to the drill hall. Leila is awed by the beauty of the room, and Meg tells the girls around them to help Leila find dance partners. But the girls are focused on the group of men nearby, who eventually walk over to fill out their dance cards.

After securing a few partners, Leila meets an old man, who fills out her card despite not having much space on his own. The old man at first believes he recognizes Leila from another ball, which of course is impossible, given that this is Leila's first one.

Leila waits for her first partner to approach her, reminiscing about her dance lessons at boarding school. They were often unpleasant—girls had to dance with each other, and they often stepped on each other's toes or bumped into each other. Her experience with her first partner is much better than these lessons; she notes that he "steered so beautifully." As they dance, he remarks on **the floor**, to which Leila replies that it's "beautifully slippery." This answer surprises him, and he asks whether she was at another ball last week. Leila is excited to tell him that this ball is her first, but he doesn't seem to care.

Leila's second partner also comments on the floor and a previous ball, which Leila notices is a pattern. Despite the repetition, she remains excited about the night until the old man approaches to claim his dance. She's struck by how old and shabby he looks; he's missing a button on his glove, and his coat is dusty. He immediately remarks that it must be Leila's first dance, which he's able to guess because he's been attending balls for thirty years. The two begin dancing, and the old man seems to grow sad, telling Leila that she will never be able to attend balls for as long as he has. After all, she's a woman and will soon be too old to dance. He points out the older women sitting onstage and says that Leila will soon be one of them, sitting up there gossiping about horrible men trying to kiss their daughters while secretly devastated that men no longer want to kiss them.

Leila is disturbed by her conversation with the old man, particularly because she hadn't previously thought about her age—now, she's worried that "this first ball [is] only the beginning of her last ball." She's angry at the old man, who she believes "spoiled everything" by cluing her in to her fate. The two stop dancing, and Leila chooses to lean against the wall rather than return to the floor. The old man tells her not to take

him seriously, and Leila scoffs but remains petulant, thinking that she'd like to go home. Soon, however, another partner approaches and the two begin dancing. Suddenly, the ball seems beautiful again. Leila's partner bumps into the old man, but she doesn't recognize him and simply smiles.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Leila – Leila, the story's protagonist, is an eighteen-year-old girl from the New Zealand countryside. As the story begins, she is on the way to her first ball with her cousins Laurie, Laura, Jose and Meg Sheridan. Initially, Leila's naiveté is her most significant characteristic. Since Leila has never been to a ball before, she savors every detail—even banal ones, like the tissue paper that her cousin discards from his new gloves. She relishes the lights, the decorations, and the music, and she's nearly overwhelmed by joy. But these initial impressions of the ball are overly positive: she believes every dance partner is excited to meet her, for instance, and that everyone is having fun, despite clear evidence to the contrary. Her inexperience means that she lacks the ability to see what's really going on. After she meets and dances with an old man, however, everything changes; the old man explains that Leila will soon grow old, which means she won't be able to dance at the balls anymore and she won't be desirable to men. After their conversation, Leila is devastated, feeling like this ball isn't the beginning of something marvelous, but rather the beginning of the end. Nonetheless, after she starts dancing again, she quickly forgets her despair, and when she bumps into the old man a moment later, she doesn't even recognize him. This represents her retreat into delusion—she knows the sinister aspects of the ball now, but she chooses instead to return to her naïve joy.

The Old Man – The old man is one of Leila's dance partners, who fills out her dance card at the start of the story. His appearance shocks Leila, because it doesn't fit with the beauty of the ball—the old man is fat, balding, and wears shabby clothing. He's the first person to ask Leila if he recognizes her from a previous ball, hinting that Leila isn't any different from the throngs of other young women who have attended these balls over the years. While dancing with Leila, the old man reveals that he's been going to balls for 30 years, and he tells her—cruelly—that she can't hope to attend for as long as he has. The old man can keep dancing (and even remain an in-demand partner) simply because he's male, whereas older women are ignored and discarded, relegated to sitting on the stage and watching their daughters dance. Though Leila chooses to forget his warnings at the end of the story, the old man makes a significant impression on her, shattering her initial innocence and forcing her to reconsider her future.

Meg Sheridan – Meg is Leila's older cousin, who brings her to

the ball. Having been to many balls before, Meg isn't nearly as excited about the ball as Leila is. Once they arrive at the drill hall, Meg gets Leila settled with a dance card and encourages the other girls to help her find dance partners. While Meg clearly cares about Leila and does try to help her find her way, her priority is finding partners for herself and spending time with men, not hanging out with her little cousin.

Laurie Sheridan – Laurie is Leila's cousin, who helps escort her to the ball. The Sheridans are of a higher social class than Leila, and Leila watches in horror as Laurie throws away the wrapping of his new gloves—Leila would have liked to have kept it as a memento. Like the other men at the ball, Laurie has the power to choose who he dances with, while the women must simply wait to be approached.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Laura Sheridan – Laura is Leila's cousin, who helps escort her to the ball. Laura seems to care about Leila, telling her to hold onto her as they enter so Leila doesn't get lost.

Jose Sheridan – Jose is Leila's cousin, who helps escort her to the ball.



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.



YOUTH, NOVELTY, AND AGING

In "Her First Ball," Leila—a young woman of 18—attends her first formal dance. Having grown up in the New Zealand countryside, Leila has never attended a ball before, and she is overcome with anticipation. Everything appears "new and exciting": the **floor**, the lights, the stage, and the dancing itself. But as the story progresses, it becomes clear that Leila's feverish sense of novelty cannot last. Even the most youthful dancers are accustomed to the ritual of attending balls, with some of them seeming already tired and bored. Furthermore, while the dancers may think they'll be young forever, their future is visible onstage where fathers and mothers sit in chairs, watching their children dance and lamenting their own lost youth. By contrasting Leila's breathless excitement with the jadedness of the young dancers and their aged parents, Katherine Mansfield shows that—despite the adolescent feeling that one is "at the beginning of everything"—youth quickly fades. While Leila may feel that everything is new, she's actually enacting an age-old pattern, and her innocent excitement will dissipate just as it did for generations of dancers before her.

Since this is Leila's very first ball, everything about it excites her—even things that others find ordinary. Leila's delight in small, ordinary things is clearest in contrast to her cousins, the Sheridans, who have been to many balls before. While they are "indifferent" to the beauty and indulgence around them, Leila notices everything: the flowers, the outfits, the lights. She even wishes she could keep as a memento the discarded tissue paper from her cousin Laurie's gloves. Mansfield takes pains to connect Leila's excitement to her age; one Sheridan refers to Leila as "my child," another as "my little country cousin." But the anticipation Leila feels comes more from novelty than from youth; after all, the Sheridans are around Leila's age, but since they've already been to many balls, they don't feel the same sense of overwhelmed excitement. Leila's fevered state, then, is a reflection of this being her first ball—an experience she will never have again.

Once the dancing starts, Mansfield makes clear that Leila's sense of novelty will not last. The ball opens with men approaching the women to fill out their dance programs, and Leila meets "quite an old man" who believes he might recognize her from a previous ball. Though Leila thinks nothing of it at the time, the man's mistaken reference to having seen her before suggests that, while everything at the ball is new to her, she herself is not a novelty—she's indistinguishable from countless other young women who have attended these balls over the years. Furthermore, as Leila dances with several young men, she notices them behaving the same way: they all comment on the quality of the floor and then ask if they've seen her at previous balls. Her first partner's voice even sounds "tired" as he speaks. Not only does this reinforce that most of the dancers (despite their youth) are already used to (and even bored with) these balls—but it also shows Leila in the process of losing her own sense of newness. Within her first few dances, Leila is already having conversations that are familiar to her, growing used to the patterns of the ball.

When the old man finally dances with Leila, he is explicit that her youth and excitement are already fading. Referencing the mothers sitting onstage, he tells Leila that she'll be one of them before long, watching her daughter dance and pining for her own bygone youth. Leila is horrified to realize that "this first ball [is] only the beginning of her last ball"—that time marches along for everyone, and novelty and youth cannot last. While this revelation seems for a moment like it will ruin Leila's night, it doesn't; even knowing what awaits her, she's able to return temporarily to her youthful feelings. After leaving the old man, the music swells and another young man asks her to dance. Despite her reluctance, she quickly forgets the sobering conversation she's just had. As she dances, the room is once again a whirling blur of flowers, lights, and faces, and she's swept back up in her joy.

While this ending might seem to signify youth and innocence triumphing over cynicism and age, it's not so simple; Mansfield

makes clear that while Leila may feel that this night is completely new, she's actually part of a generations-old pattern. Every person in the ballroom once had their first ball, and afterwards the excitement faded; soon she will be one of the youthful dancers following a conversational script, bored with repeating this social ritual over and over. Then, inevitably, she will be the parent of someone having his or her first ball, remembering her own excitement while knowing that her child, too, will grow old. Mansfield emphasizes this generational cycle in one of her closing images; as Leila swirls around the ball, the amazing sights around her become a "beautiful flying wheel." The image of a wheel evokes the passage of hands around a clock and the notion of the life cycle. Adolescence is a time of new, exciting experiences—but this very experience of adolescent newness is itself a well-worn pattern, one that every generation feels. As Leila dances, she temporarily forgets what the man told her, but it's clear to readers that her innocence won't last.



GENDER AND SOCIETY

While attending her first ball, Leila learns that her society values men over women. This is apparent in how much power the men have at the dance; they select their partners, for instance, while women simply wait to be chosen. But the power of men becomes clearest when an old man tells Leila that, when she is his age, she will not be desirable to men and will no longer be able to dance at balls. In other words, while he can still dance with beautiful young women and feel accepted and valued, she can anticipate no such future; at a certain age—one that is coming soon—she will be discarded and scorned. In exposing this dynamic, Katherine Mansfield depicts how male power frays female friendships, leaves young women vulnerable to predatory men, and flippantly casts older women aside. The message that women receive is that nothing matters besides attracting a man and they have no intrinsic worth.

While Leila values her relationships with women, men are always shaping those relationships—even when they're absent. At first, Leila seems to have a genuine friendship with her female cousins who look after her at the ball. But the cousins don't choose to spend time with Leila, and they instead show their friendship by helping her attract men. Before the dance begins, Meg tells the other girls at the ball to help Leila find partners, and the girls respond vaguely while looking "towards the men" in anticipation. This suggests that female friendship is only valuable when convenient and can be cast aside in favor of men. Leila's previous experiences affirm this sense that female friendship is less important than attracting men. At her boarding school, for instance, girls learned to dance with each other to prepare for dancing with men. Leila describes this experience not as a fun bonding activity with her friends, but as unpleasant, with girls stepping on each other's toes. During her

first dance with a man at the ball, however, Leila notes that "he steered so beautifully." Leila's female friendships seem to have no value on their own, and exist only to train girls for more pleasant experiences with men. The women preparing for the ball also disregard female friendship. Inside the "Ladies" room at the dance hall, young women compete for mirror space and fuss over their dresses. As with Leila's dance lessons, these women are gathered together not to bond with one another, but to prepare to encounter men. This reality—in which women compete for male attention rather than befriending and helping one another—leaves women at the mercy of men.

Once the ball begins, it's clear that the men are fully in charge. The ball itself begins at the men's discretion, for instance. Once everyone is in the drill hall, the women and men stand separately at first. Not once does Leila think that she could approach a man herself—instead, she knows intuitively that she must wait until the men decide to come to her. Throughout the ball, the women remain passive participants, while the men seem active in comparison. They're free to choose partners and move around the dance floor, while Leila must continue waiting for them to approach her. Men have the power to appear and disappear, seemingly at random—Leila notes that one partner appeared to "spring from the ceiling"—but Leila herself remains stationary, believing "she would die" if her partner didn't arrive.

Leila's powerlessness seems somewhat trivial at first—until she realizes the future that awaits her. The old man who dances with Leila reveals this insidious reality. He has been attending balls for thirty years and can continue dancing at his age only because he's male; during their dance, he tells Leila that she "can't hope" to dance at balls for as long as he has, since she will soon be an old woman who must watch the dance from the stage. It's clear that a woman his age would not dream of being on the dance floor, since she would not be considered a viable romantic partner. Meanwhile, this man is distinctly old and disheveled—Leila notices his "creased" waistcoat, missing button, and bald head—but he nonetheless appears to be popular, holding a dance card "black with names." Leila's conversation with this man reveals a pervasive disdain for women, especially older ones. He points out the "poor old dears" watching the dancing from onstage and suggests that, once Leila is one of them, she'll have idle conversations about how a "dreadful man" tried to kiss her daughter at the ball while secretly feeling jealous, since it's devastating that nobody wants to kiss her anymore. His implication is that it's better to be young and pursued by horrible men than to be old and ignored by them. Not only is this condescending and self-serving (since he himself might be the "dreadful man" he imagines), but it frames male attention as determining a woman's self-worth.

Unfortunately, Leila seems to believe him. She herself observes the older women with unkindness, noticing that the female chaperones in the room "smil[ed] rather foolishly," and the old

women in the dressing room served only to aid the young. There seems to be no purpose for older women at the ball—or in society. Leila’s experience of the ball, then, is teaching her a horrific lesson: that her social value depends on men desiring her, and men will only desire her for a little while longer. After that, she can expect to be cast aside.



ILLUSION, DELUSION, AND REALITY

When Leila arrives at the ball, she finds it joyful and thrilling. But her naïve view doesn’t match reality—the ball is repetitive, even boring. No one is interested in Leila’s experience, and none of her partners are having fun. Despite this, Leila remains inside her glamorous illusion until she dances with an old man who reveals the true nature of the ball, showing her that youth and excitement inevitably fade, particularly for women. While this conversation initially rattles Leila, she quickly returns to her illusion of a thrilling, perfect ball—which is now an active delusion, a choice to ignore ugly reality. While the story ends with Leila living in fantasy, the clear implication is that her youthful illusions cannot last. Inevitably, she’ll have to confront reality, which will destroy her fragile joy.

Throughout the story, Leila perceives her circumstances to be grander than they are. For instance, Leila is jealous of her cousins, as she imagines them to be much closer than they are. In truth, their interactions are relatively shallow: Laurie and Laura discuss their upcoming dance, and Meg comments on Jose’s hair. But Leila wishes she had siblings of her own, and she therefore views the Sheridans’ small talk as the epitome of familial love. This demonstrates Leila’s tendency to see things as she wishes they were. Later, in the ladies’ dressing room, Leila ignores the reality of the scene in front of her. The room is pure chaos, and the women seem stressed and aggressive, but Leila dismisses this. “Because they were all laughing it seemed [...] that they were all lovely,” she thinks, misinterpreting nervous laughter as evidence of happiness and beauty. Then, once the dance begins, Leila mistakes her partners’ small talk as interest in her experiences and opinions, though it’s clear they ask the same questions of everyone. Her first partner won’t engage with her observations about the **dance floor**, and her second is completely uninterested in the fact that this is her first dance, even though Leila herself is clearly excited about it. Despite that these men are essentially ignoring her, Leila’s joy and self-importance persist, as she remains enchanted with the ball and continues to try to converse with her partners.

But Leila must finally acknowledge reality during her conversation with the old man. As soon as he appears, it’s clear that he will pull Leila out of her fantasy. He’s incompatible with her illusion of a glamorous, joyful ball, since he’s conspicuously old, fat, and shabby. She tries to ignore this and be polite to him, but he doesn’t return the favor—intuiting that this is her first ball, he immediately reminds her that her joy is fleeting and she

will someday grow old. This conversation forces Leila to notice something she had previously ignored: the older women in the room. They aren’t dancing; instead, they’re forced to sit on the sidelines and watch their daughters dance. Now that Leila has been told that she will one day join these women, she sees them sitting there and feels frightened. While her belief in her own significance had previously blinded her to the ball’s unhappier elements, she’s now forced to confront the bleak reality that awaits her.

While Leila does briefly acknowledge this horrible truth, she quickly returns to her illusions. Almost immediately after she and the old man stop dancing, Leila imagines herself as a “little girl” throwing a tantrum. She’s deeply upset by what she’s just heard, and imagining herself as a child again is an attempt to return to innocence and see the ball as she did before this conversation. It works; after a moment of dancing, Leila looks again at all the lights and flowers and feels her old joy return. The magnitude of her repression is evident in the story’s last line, when she bumps into the old man while dancing and doesn’t even recognize him—she’s so unable to grapple with what he’s told her that she refuses to acknowledge (even to herself) that she knows him at all. However, it’s clear that the man is right and Leila’s joy will be fleeting. While her initial impressions of the ball were mere misperception (since she didn’t have the context to understand what was really going on), now she is deliberately deluding herself by ignoring the harsh truths that the man revealed. Leila’s delusion of a thrilling and perfect ball cannot last; once the newness of the experience wears off, she will not be able to lose herself in the lights and flowers anymore. At that point, she’ll be forced to confront reality, and she’ll find the balls as boring and depressing as everyone else.



SYMBOLS

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



THE DANCE FLOOR

Most of “Her First Ball” takes place on the dance floor, which comes to reflect Leila’s attitude towards her future. Leila, who has never attended a ball before, becomes immediately entranced by the “gleaming, golden floor” in the dance hall. Her descriptions of the floor reflect her excitement over her own future; she feels that she’s “at the beginning of everything” and that this dazzling ball inaugurates a gleaming new chapter of her life.

However, Leila’s excitement over the dance floor soon begins to seem naïve. Her first two dance partners also comment on the floor, the first saying that it’s “quite a good floor” and the second that it’s “not bad,” but it’s clear that they’re not actually

impressed with the dance floor—they're merely following a boring conversational script, making small talk because they have nothing else to say. So while Leila finds the floor delightful and “beautifully slippery,” these young men find it unremarkable because they've danced on such floors many times before. Their attitude towards the floor reflects how quickly adolescent excitement grows stale, the implication being that Leila will soon be just as unexcited about the floor—and, implicitly, about the future that these balls represent for her.

Finally, during Leila's dance with the old man, the floor comes to represent how Leila will one day dread her future. The old man tells Leila that when she's an old woman, she'll be unhappy at balls and will “say how unpleasant these polished floors are to walk on, how dangerous they are.” The implication here is that older women have nothing to look forward to—their best years are behind them. They have no reason to enjoy a slippery, gleaming floor, as it doesn't represent the possibilities of the future, but rather reminds them, bitterly, of happier, more innocent days past. These three separate views of the floor—Leila's, her partners', and the old women's—demonstrate the eventual progression of Leila's future. Because Leila is inexperienced, she currently views the floor as one thrilling element of a thrilling ball. After a few balls, she'll grow familiar with the floor, and her hope for the future will grow similarly stale and dull. As an old woman, the floor will seem actively unpleasant, the same way her life will be unpleasant (at least according to the old man).



BABY OWLS

Whenever Leila reflects on her country upbringing, she thinks of baby owls, which stand in for her own innocence. This first occurs as the ball is about to begin. Leila is so overcome by excitement that she can barely remember just a few hours earlier when she thought she might skip the ball altogether and stay at her home in the country where the owls are “crying ‘More pork’ in the moonlight.” In this moment, Leila is feeling like the person she was just a few hours ago—a person who, in her innocence, considered skipping the ball—is barely recognizable anymore. However, Mansfield subtly suggests that, regardless of how distant Leila now feels from those baby owls, she's not actually so different from them. The owls are innocents whose cry of “more pork” evokes Leila's own hunger for new experiences. Leila wants to believe that she is unrecognizably older than she was earlier in the evening, but her naïve hunger for novelty at the ball makes her more like the owls than she'll admit.

Later in the story, however, Leila's attitude shifts. After the old man informs her that soon she will be old and discarded, she becomes distraught and disillusioned and thinks that she “wanted to be home [...] listening to those baby owls.” Now that Leila has learned a difficult truth about her future, she longs not

to acknowledge it and to instead return to the innocence she had just moments before. This is why she's now longing for the owls—they represent, to her, the innocent time before she knew her bleak fate. But it's clear that Leila's desire to listen to the baby owls and ignore the real world is unsustainable. After all, the owls are eventually going to grow old, the same way Leila will.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves* published in 2018.

Her First Ball Quotes

☝ Oh dear, how hard it was to be indifferent like the others! She tried not to smile too much; she tried not to care. But every single thing was so new and exciting...Meg's tuberose, Jose's long loop of amber, Laura's little dark head, pushing above her white fur like a flower through snow. She would remember for ever.

Related Characters: Leila (speaker), Laurie Sheridan, Laura Sheridan, Jose Sheridan, Meg Sheridan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Leila is on her way to her first ball with her cousins Meg, Jose, Laura, and Laurie Sheridan, and she finds everything about the experience—even the carriage ride there—entrancing. Leila's excitement about the ball is apparent in her descriptions of what's going on around her. For instance, she likens Laura's head atop her fur coat to a flower pushing through the snow, which is a gorgeous and striking image to associate with the simple act of wearing a coat. Leila romanticizes small details like this because attending the ball is an important milestone for her. She is a young woman on the cusp of adulthood, and the ball represents the sophisticated, mature life she imagines for herself. In this way, her excitement about her surroundings reflects her excitement about her future, as though attending this ball will usher in a new life full of similarly glamorous events.

However, Leila understands that this enthusiasm puts her at odds with her cousins. The Sheridans have attended many balls before, so they're “indifferent” to the ritual. From Leila's narration, it's clear that she wants to fit in; though

she's had a sheltered life in the countryside, she's trying to model her cousins' indifference toward all of these things. But Leila's overwhelming excitement about the glamor and novelty around her hints that she's perhaps a bit naïve about what to expect from the ball, and that she may end up disappointed by the experience.

Indeed, given that the Sheridans have become "indifferent" to balls over time, the reader can infer that Leila's excitement won't last either—and that perhaps Leila's future isn't as rosy as she imagines it will be. And while Leila acknowledges that this precious moment is fleeting (she feels that she'll "remember [it] for ever," so she knows that this will all be memory one day), her belief that this memory will always be so precious to her is naïve. The Sheridans seem rather perplexed by her excitement, even though their own first balls weren't so long ago, which suggests that the power of this memory will fade when the initial excitement of the evening has worn off.

Here the crowd was so great there was hardly space to take off their things; the noise was deafening. Two benches on either side were stacked high with wraps. Two old women in white aprons ran up and down tossing fresh armfuls. And everybody was pressing forward trying to get at the little dressing-table and mirror at the far end.

A great quivering jet of gas lighted the ladies' room. It couldn't wait; it was dancing already. When the door opened again and there came a burst of tuning from the drill hall, it leaped almost to the ceiling.

Dark girls, fair girls were patting their hair, tying ribbons again, tucking hand-kerchiefs down the fronts of their bodies, smoothing marble-white gloves. And because they were all laughing it seemed to Leila that they were all lovely.

Related Characters: Leila (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leila has just entered the ladies' dressing room at the drill hall, and she's observing the chaotic scene around her. There isn't enough room for all the women, the ambient noise (which is probably the sound of everyone shouting) is "deafening," and everyone is competing for mirror space while desperately trying to make themselves look beautiful. All of these women seem immensely nervous

and stressed out—it's an unpleasant situation, and the reader can see that it contrasts with Leila's romanticized idea of what the ball would be like.

Nevertheless, Leila's description of the scene does not reflect this reality. Instead, Leila only sees a room that's full of excitement and beauty. For example, she doesn't consider the flickering light to be an inconvenience; instead, the light seems to be "quivering" with excitement and "dancing already"—the light, like Leila herself, seems unable to contain its desire for the ball to begin. Furthermore, Leila sees the primping women's laughter not as evidence of how nervous and stressed out they are, but as reassurance that the women are confidently enjoying themselves. In the carriage on the way to the ball, Leila also saw everything around her as more glamorous than it actually was. She isn't seeing reality clearly because her own excitement is warping her perception, making her romanticize even the unpleasant things around her.

In addition to Leila's illusions about the ball, the women in the dressing room are also creating illusions: they're putting on makeup and stuffing their dresses in order to appear more attractive than they are. Ironically, Leila watches the women blatantly creating these illusions, yet she doesn't recognize her own delusional thinking about what's going on around her.

Finally, this scene introduces the dynamic among women in the story. One might think that female acquaintances preparing for a party together might be fun environment, an opportunity to bond with friends and help one another. But this isn't the case: the women fight over mirror space and focus on themselves, trying to look pretty for the men, who seem to be the main event. This passage suggests that female friendship isn't particularly important to the women in the story; instead, they're only focused on themselves, believing that it's more important to attract men than it is to bond with one another.

She quite forgot to be shy; she forgot how in the middle of dressing she had sat down on the bed with one shoe off and one shoe on and begged her mother to ring up her cousins and say she couldn't go after all. And the rush of longing she had had to be sitting on the veranda of their forsaken up-country home, listening to the baby owls crying 'More pork' in the moonlight, was changed to a rush of joy so sweet that it was hard to bear alone. She clutched her fan, and, gazing at the gleaming, golden floor, the azaleas, the lanterns, the stage at one end with its red carpet and gilt chairs and the band in a corner, she thought breathlessly, 'How heavenly; how simply heavenly!'

Related Characters: Leila (speaker), The Old Man

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leila has just walked onto the dance floor, and she's so carried away with excitement that she no longer feels shy. In fact, she's so excited that she's almost able to forget a moment from earlier in the evening when she almost skipped the ball in order to stay home in the countryside. But although Leila claims to have forgotten this moment, she clearly hasn't: the story is narrating her thoughts, so this passage actually involves Leila remembering how she almost asked her mother to cancel her plans so that she could stay home. Moreover, Leila's memory triggers a "rush of longing" to be at home listening to the owls, which indicates that this memory has possessed her mind for a moment, even as she claims to have forgotten it entirely.

This is evidence of Leila's unreliability as a narrator and her warped perception of reality. Since feeling unsure about attending the ball doesn't fit her narrative that this evening is purely exciting, she can't acknowledge that the whole situation makes her a little nervous, and she therefore claims to have forgotten the recent past. This passage echoes something that happens later in the story, when Leila claims not to remember the rude old man she spoke to just moments before. Together, these incidents show that Leila is skilled at repressing details that don't fit the narrative that she wants to believe—that is, that the ball is entirely wonderful.

Beyond driving home Leila's unreliability, this passage also emphasizes her innocence through the symbolism of the baby owls. Throughout the story, the owls stand in for Leila's innocence: they're babies themselves, and she associates them with her childhood. It's significant, then, that Leila claims not to remember them and brushes aside her brief longing to listen to their calls. Clearly, she wants to see herself as distant from the owls—and, by extension, from her youth. She believes that she's grown and changed so much since coming to the ball that she can't even recognize her (barely) younger self.

But Leila's perception of her own maturity isn't necessarily accurate, and Mansfield hints that Leila is more similar to the owls than she wants to admit. While the owls aren't literally saying "More pork" (it's just how their natural call

sounds to human ears), associating these words with the owls suggests that they're full of hunger and desire. And, like these birds, Leila is a naïve adolescent who is hungry for experience as she tries to drink in all the sights and sounds at the ball. In this way, Leila resembles the owls quite closely, which implies that she's much more innocent in this moment than she would like to believe.

Finally, after dwelling on the owls (an emblem of her past), Leila looks to her future when she surveys the ballroom's details. This is particularly evident in her description of the "gleaming, golden floor." Throughout the story, Leila's attitude toward the dance floor reflects her attitude toward her future, as the floor is the centerpiece of a ball that Leila believes will usher her into a new, exciting life. Seeing the floor here as "gleaming" and "golden" reflects her belief that her future is similarly bright and expansive, full of exciting and beautiful events like the ball. However, as the story goes on, Mansfield implies that there are other ways to see the floor: some characters find it boring, while others find it downright dangerous. This implies that, as Leila matures, her outlook on her future will no longer be so idyllic. Rather, like the older attendees at the ball, Leila will become disillusioned with events like this—and with life itself.

☞ Strange faces smiled at Leila—sweetly, vaguely. Strange voices answered, 'Of course, my dear.' But Leila felt the girls didn't really see her. They were looking towards the men. Why didn't the men begin? What were they waiting for? There they stood, smoothing their gloves, patting their glossy hair and smiling among themselves.

Related Characters: Leila (speaker), Meg Sheridan

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

In the drill hall before the ball begins, the female attendees all cluster together, and Meg asks them to help find Leila dance partners. The women's collective reaction helps clarify the gender dynamic of this society: men are socially important, while women are negligible. This is obvious in the way that the women treat Leila. They're superficially kind to her, but they're so focused on the men at the ball that they don't "really see" Leila, even though she's standing next to them. Instead, they smile "vaguely" and treat helping her as a distraction from the main event: finding a male partner. Furthermore, Leila doesn't view the women as individuals;

she lumps them together as “strange faces” and “strange voices” and devotes much more attention to trying to understand what the men are up to than to observing the women around her. This dynamic of women vaguely ignoring one another in favor of men suggests that women in this society lack value in their own right (it seems they’re only valuable if they’re desirable to men), while men are always considered socially important and worthy of attention.

Mansfield doesn’t provide an explanation for the men’s behavior—it’s not clear why they’re just standing around when they could choose to approach the women and start the ball at any time. One possible explanation is that they’re enjoying one another’s company in a way that the women can’t; the men are able to “[smile] among themselves” because their good time doesn’t depend on the women in the same way that the women’s good time depends on the men. Another possibility is that the men stall on purpose to increase the women’s excitement—they have the power to initiate the first dance (unlike the women, who never even consider approaching the men). Perhaps they’re lording this power over the women a bit, making them wait in order to whet their anticipation and remind them who’s in charge—both at the ball and in society at large.

●● [...] instead of replying the fat man wrote something, glanced at her again. ‘Do I remember this bright little face?’ he said softly. ‘Is it known to me of yore?’ At that moment the band began playing; the fat man disappeared. He was tossed away on a great wave of music that came flying over the gleaming floor, breaking the groups up into couples, scattering them, sending them spinning...

Related Characters: The Old Man (speaker), Leila

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

This passage marks the first interaction between Leila and the old man: the old man fills out her dance card and disappears, but not before remarking that he may know Leila “of yore” (in other words, he thinks he’s met her before). This is impossible, since it’s Leila’s first ball, and she’s lived in the countryside her whole life. But the old man’s mistake implies that Leila’s romanticized perception

of the ball isn’t totally accurate. She thinks that her experience at the ball is special, but the old man has apparently met so many girls like Leila that they all blend together. Meanwhile, although Leila is focused on the future, the old man’s comment connects her to the past; just as these balls were happening long before Leila attended, they’ll continue long after she’s aged out of them. Though Leila feels special now, she’ll eventually be forgotten.

As the old man leaves, Leila again refers to the dance floor as “gleaming.” The dance floor symbolizes her attitude toward her future—at the beginning of the story, she thinks that the ball marks the start of an exciting new life for her, so she’s thrilled by even her most mundane surroundings. The fact that Leila still finds the floor beautiful suggests that her view of the ball—and thus, of her future—is still rosy despite her encounter with the old man.

However, the old man’s movement hints that this rosy view will change. His departure coincides with a “great wave of music,” which breaks up couples, “sending them spinning” in different directions on the floor. The old man doesn’t directly cause this scattering movement, since it’s a choreographed part of the dance. But to Leila’s eyes, his presence appears to disrupt the “gleaming floor” by causing unexpected motion. The old man stands out against the glamorous young couples at the ball, which shakes Leila out of her enchantment with everything that’s going on around her. And since Leila sees the ball as an important milestone ushering her into a bright future, the man’s presence also seems to put a damper on Leila’s rosy view of her life going forward.

Later, the old man will similarly disrupt Leila’s belief in a happy future by telling her that when she’s older, she’ll find the floor slippery and dangerous; mundane elements of the ball will no longer seem beautiful. This symbolizes the idea that, like all of the other young girls the old man has met at balls, Leila will eventually become an old woman who’s no longer attractive to men and no longer carefree and idealistic.

“Quite a good floor, isn’t it?” drawled a faint voice close to her ear.

‘I think it’s most beautifully slippery,’ said Leila.

‘Pardon!’ The faint voice sounded surprised, Leila said it again. And there was a tiny pause before the voice echoed, ‘Oh, quite!’ and she was swung round again.

He steered so beautifully. That was the great difference between dancing with girls and men, Leila decided. Girls banged into each other, and stamped on each other’s feet; the girl who was gentleman always clutched you so.

Related Characters: Leila

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which depicts Leila’s first dance once the ball begins, illustrates the gulf between her rosy illusion of the ball and the other attendees’ lackluster experiences. Leila’s dance partner makes small talk about the dance floor, “drawl[ing]” his comment without serious investment in the conversation. Leila, however, finds the floor genuinely beautiful. It’s glittery and golden, and it’s a central part of the ball—an event that Leila thinks of as an important milestone in her transition to adulthood. Leila’s opinion of the floor thus represents her sunny view of the future, as she thinks that attending this ball will usher her into an adult world full of beautiful events like this. She gives her honest opinion about the dance floor, which surprises her dance partner; he obviously doesn’t think the floor is important and was only making polite conversation. Unlike Leila, his outlook on the future is dull: balls are repetitive, and no single element is thrilling.

Leila’s dance partner chooses to politely agree with her (“Oh, quite!”), but Leila doesn’t notice his dull, mechanical response. Instead, she focuses on how different this experience is from her dance lessons at boarding school, which were unpleasant. Control comes naturally to her partner, while girls always overcompensated—at boarding school, the girls who were standing in for men “clutched” their partners. In contrast, Leila’s current dance partner steers “beautifully” and swings her around with practiced ease.

By complimenting her partner’s dancing, Leila reverts back to her pattern of repressing unpleasant realities. The conversation between Leila and her partner was awkward,

and although her partner may steer well, their dance doesn’t seem particularly fun. Her partner’s skill might actually be further evidence of how repetitive and dull the balls are, since he’s apparently had ample time to practice the same dance moves. But Leila wants to believe that her partner (and all “gentlemen,” by extension) are fun to dance with—after all, men are socially important in this society, and the ball seems to revolve around women trying to impress them. As a result, Leila fixates on the more enjoyable elements of their dance and ignores their stilted conversation.

“Floor’s not bad,” said the new voice. Did one always begin with the floor? And then, ‘Were you at the Neaves’ on Tuesday?’ And again Leila explained. Perhaps it was a little strange that her partners were not more interested. For it was thrilling. Her first ball! She was only at the beginning of everything. It seemed to her that she had never known what the night was like before. Up till now it had been dark, silent, beautiful very often—oh yes—but mournful somehow. Solemn. And now it would never be like that again—it had opened dazzling bright.

Related Characters: Leila

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

After Leila’s first dance, her second partner approaches. His small talk is exactly the same as Leila’s first partner: he compliments the dance floor and mentions a previous ball. Leila picks up on this tedious pattern but ignores it instead of questioning what it means—for instance, she doesn’t infer that balls are dull, or that everyone else is bored. When she explains that this is her first ball, her second partner doesn’t seem to care. Clearly, Leila’s rosy view of the ball doesn’t match up with reality—no one but Leila seems to be having fun, and no one remembers their own first ball fondly. But while Leila finds her partner’s lack of interest “strange,” she again refuses to analyze it. Instead, she focuses on her excitement and ignores the potentially unpleasant reality.

In this passage, Leila explains exactly why she’s so excited about the ball: she believes her first ball is “the beginning of everything” and will kick off her happy future. In this light,

she continues to find simple things thrilling: the night sky, which was previously “mournful,” now appears “dazzling bright” as the result of her happiness. Leila believes that this is the most authentic version of the night, or “what the night was like,” meaning that in her mind, she finally understands the world around her. By this interpretation, her future is clear: the night sky will “never be [mournful] again,” which suggests that she believes that the future will be as happy as the present. Though Leila acknowledges the passage of time, she obviously believes that aging can only benefit her, and that she’ll always be as happy as she is now.

☞ ...‘you can’t hope to last anything like as long as that. No-o,’ said the fat man, ‘long before that you’ll be sitting up there on the stage, looking on, in your nice black velvet. And these pretty arms will have turned into little short fat ones, and you’ll beat time with such a different kind of fan—a black ebony one.’ The fat man seemed to shudder. ‘And you’ll smile away like the poor old dears up there, and point to your daughter, and tell the elderly lady next to you how some dreadful man tried to kiss her at the club ball. And your heart will ache, ache’—the fat man squeezed her closer still, as if he really was sorry for that poor heart—‘because no one wants to kiss you now. And you’ll say how unpleasant these polished floors are to walk on, how dangerous they, are.’

Related Characters: The Old Man (speaker), Leila

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

The old man and Leila are dancing together, and the old man has just explained that he’s been attending balls for 30 years. But here, he tells Leila that, as a woman, she could never do the same—the older women at the ball watch the dancing from a distance.

What follows is a glimpse into the old man’s apparently sexist worldview: although Leila is young, the old man imagines her as she’ll be when she’s older, which visibly disgusts him (he “seemed to shudder”). Even as he references the “elderly” women in the room, he chooses to ignore them, instead describing Leila as she’ll hypothetically look and act as an old woman—her “pretty arms” will become “short fat ones,” for instance. And although Leila will act concerned that “some dreadful man” tried to kiss her

daughter, she’ll secretly want men to kiss her too, and she’ll be upset that she’s no longer desirable. The dance floor that Leila likes so much now, which symbolizes her happy attitude toward the future, will seem dangerous once she’s older, reflecting an unhappy outlook on life. Most importantly, Leila will be aware of the passage of time, marking it rhythmically with a “black ebony” fan, which is visually reminiscent of a funeral rather than a fun event like a ball.

While Leila previously accepted the dynamic between men and women at the ball, in which men have control over women, this passage demonstrates that it won’t always benefit her—once Leila is no longer desirable to men, they’ll cast her off. For example, the old man dislikes women his own age, and although he’s sympathetic to Leila (“sorry for [her] poor heart”), this sympathy is mean-spirited. He doesn’t view Leila as an individual, but as representative of youthful femininity, as evidenced by his fixation on her body parts (“arms,” “heart”). In the old man’s estimation, once Leila is elderly, she’ll no longer be valuable. Meanwhile, the old man is still able to move freely around the dance floor and socialize, unlike the women his age.

The old man’s words shouldn’t be taken at face value. He might actually be one of the “dreadful” men he speaks of, following young women around and disturbing them. At the very least, his perceptions of old women don’t seem to come from experience—he’s probably unmarried, and he seems to spend a lot of his time at balls with young girls like Leila. But because the older women in the room are certainly separate from the action on the dance floor, Leila believes the old man. His speech breaks her rosy illusion of the ball, and she realizes that she isn’t as special as she believed she was: her youth will fade, and once-exciting experiences like this ball will eventually become repetitive and distasteful.

☞ Was this first ball only the beginning of her last ball, after all? At that the music seemed to change; it sounded sad, sad; it rose upon a great sigh. Oh, how quickly things changed! Why didn’t happiness last for ever? For ever wasn’t a bit too long.

Related Characters: The Old Man, Leila

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

The old man has just told Leila that her youth won't last forever. While Leila previously believed that this ball was "the beginning" of a happy future, she now realizes her mistake. Previously, she took the superficial elements of the ball—the floor, the lanterns, the music—as reassurances that this event was beautiful and thrilling, and that her life had permanently changed as a result of attending it.

Now, Leila sees that this beauty is fleeting, and that her life *has* changed—but not for the better. The music, which previously excited her, sounds "sad, sad" and like a "sigh" (perhaps her own). Leila's tendency to view elements of the ball, such as the music, as better than they are has shifted: now, she sees these elements as worse than they are. This suggests that she can never truly accept reality, for better or worse.

Regardless, the novelty that Leila has enjoyed all night is already slipping away: as she puts it, her "first ball [is] only the beginning of her last ball." There's no such thing as an untainted new experience, because all new experiences are inevitably fleeting. Leila's reaction to this revelation is childish, as she petulantly notes that "for ever [isn't] a bit too long" for happiness and youth to last. This declaration is illogical, and it reflects Leila's unwillingness to accept adulthood for what it is, rather than her romanticized view of what it *should* be.

Again the couples paraded. The swing doors opened and shut. Now new music was given out by the bandmaster. But Leila didn't want to dance any more. She wanted to be home, or sitting on the veranda listening to those baby owls.

Related Characters: The Old Man, Leila

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier in the night, Leila chose to forget her nostalgia for the "veranda" and "baby owls" of her country life. In doing so, she embraced the excitement of the ball and tried to put her childhood behind her. But because the baby owls reflect Leila's innocence, her desire to listen to them in this passage suggests a change of heart: she now wants to forget the old man's warning and be an innocent child again.

When Leila distanced herself from the owls at the start of

the ball, she believed that adulthood was exactly like the ball, constantly exciting and glamorous. But the old man made her realize that adult life won't be exciting forever, and that eventually, Leila will grow old and jaded. Already, she's noticing the ball's repetition: the couples are dancing "again," the doors are opening and closing, as they've done all night, and even "new music" doesn't provide the thrill it did earlier.

This desire to return to childhood is obviously impossible. Aging is inevitable: even the baby owls will grow old, just like Leila will. Meanwhile, Leila's desire for innocence ironically proves that she can no longer be innocent, since she clearly understands what she's lost. At the start of the ball, Leila thought that just being there meant she was an adult; now, she understands that being an adult means acknowledging and accepting unpleasant truths.

But in one minute, in one turn, her feet glided, glided. The lights, the azaleas, the dresses, the pink faces, the velvet chairs, all became one beautiful flying wheel. And when her next partner bumped her into the fat man and he said, 'Pardon,' she smiled at him more radiantly than ever. She didn't even recognise him again.

Related Characters: The Old Man, Leila

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Here, in the story's final passage, Leila has just talked with the old man and had an epiphany that youth won't last forever. This profoundly upset Leila, and she decided to leave the ball and return home as soon as possible. But once she begins dancing with another partner, this desire fades away. Instead, Leila actively chooses to forget about everything that just happened and everything that she now knows is to come. While her view of the ball was initially an innocent illusion (she didn't know any better than to think everything was marvelous), she is now actively deluding herself (choosing, in other words, not to acknowledge what she now knows is true).

Mansfield's imagery underscores this shift from unconscious illusion to deliberate delusion. Leila again notes the ball's decorations, including "lights," "azaleas," and "velvet chairs," which she previously found enchanting. This time, however, those decorations swirl together to become "one beautiful flying wheel." Though Leila returns to her

initial, surface-level impressions of the ball, the overarching image of the wheel evokes the theme of time passing, as it resembles a ticking clock or a life cycle. Leila likely doesn't notice this association, but subconsciously, she can no longer view her beautiful surroundings without acknowledging her bleak future.

This imagery hints that Leila's encounter with the old man,

in which she doesn't "recognise him," is a falsehood. It's highly unlikely that Leila could forget her world-shattering conversation with the old man, which happened only moments before. Instead, the image of a "flying wheel" suggests that Leila remains dimly aware of her fleeting youth but chooses to ignore it in order to prolong her own happiness.



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.

HER FIRST BALL

In the cab on the way to the ball, Leila imagines that the armrest is her dance partner and watches the scenery “waltzing” by. Her cousins, the Sheridans, exclaim how strange it is that Leila has never been to a ball before, and Leila replies that she grew up in the country. While the Sheridans are nonchalant about the ball, Leila is thrilled by every little detail—she even mourns when her cousin Laurie throws away the tissue paper from his new gloves, wishing she could keep it as a memento. As Laurie and Laura plan their dances and Meg compliments Jose’s hair, Leila is almost moved to tears; she is an only child, so she’s never had a conversation like this before.

At the drill hall, Laura tells Leila to hold onto her so she doesn’t get lost, while Leila is busy admiring everything: the beauty of the lights and the clothes and the happy couples. They enter the ladies’ dressing room, which is crowded and noisy. All the girls inside are prepping for the ball while competing for the only mirror and dressing-table. They’re tying ribbons, checking their hair, stuffing their dresses with handkerchiefs, and yelling out for “invisible hairpins” and needles. Leila doesn’t seem to mind the chaos and thinks that the women are “all lovely” because they’re laughing.

Even before arriving, Leila develops a romanticized idea of what the ball will be like, imagining the carriage as her dance partner and viewing the passing scenery as if it’s waltzing. This shows how imaginative Leila is, and it also sets the stage for her to consistently view things as being more exciting than they actually are. Quickly, this tendency appears; she wants to keep the tissue paper from Laurie’s gloves as an exciting memento of her evening, for instance, but not only is this tissue paper utterly ordinary—it’s also literally trash. When Leila interprets the small talk between her cousins as evidence of their closeness, it’s obvious that her fanciful misreadings of reality come from her profound desire for a different, more exciting life. Leila wishes she had siblings, so she imagines that all sibling interactions are evidence of a deep bond (no matter the clear reality), and she wants to be a glamorous society woman, so she imagines that every aspect of the ball must be wonderful and worth cherishing—even the tissue paper from Laurie’s gloves.



Despite knowing nothing about what balls are like, Leila has already decided that every aspect of the ball must be glamorous. This means that she sees the ladies’ room not as a scene of nervous chaos (which it is), but rather as a lovely choreography of beautiful women dressing together for the dance. For example, she sees the women’s nervous laughter not as evidence that they’re stressed out, but as a marker of their beauty. This scene also establishes the dynamic between women in the story; here, women are not helping one another or enjoying each other’s company—instead, they’re competing for mirror space, complaining about their looks, and trying to make themselves as attractive as possible to men. In other words, this is not a moment of female bonding, since all the women seem to care about here is themselves and the men they’ll soon meet. In this moment, the women are obviously creating an illusion—stuffing their dresses and using “invisible hairpins” to make themselves look more attractive than they are—which parallels Leila’s consistent mistaking of everything around her as being more exciting and beautiful than it actually is. Leila is completely caught up in illusion and imagination—she cannot see her situation for what it is: a somewhat banal dance that is stressing everyone out.



The girls receive dance programs, which tell them when specific dances will take place. Meg then ushers Leila to the drill hall. Surrounded by noise and colorful decorations, Leila presses close to Meg and remembers that earlier in the night she almost didn't want to attend the ball, preferring to stay home and listen to the cries of **baby owls** calling "more pork" outside. But now she feels overcome by joy, drinking in the flowers, lights, and the "gleaming, golden **floor**."

Leila is overwhelmed by the ball's beautiful decorations, which she sees as evidence of the delirious joy and glamor around her. But this passage makes an important revelation: she wasn't always as carried away by excitement about the ball as she is now. Earlier that very evening, in fact, Leila almost skipped the dance altogether, preferring to stay in her childhood home in the country. When she thinks about staying home, she focuses on the sounds of baby owls—these baby owls symbolize Leila's innocence, and her initial desire to skip the dance was a desire to remain innocent rather than entering adulthood through the ball. However, now that she's at the ball, her attitude has changed entirely; she finds her barely-younger self almost incomprehensible, and she wouldn't trade being at the ball for anything. The fact that the owls cry "more pork" is noteworthy—while this is just how the owl's natural cry strikes human ears, it seems to be an expression of hunger and desire. Even though Leila feels quite far from these owls now, Mansfield is subtly suggesting that Leila and the owls are not so different: like the owls, Leila is naïve and hungry—in her case, hungry for new experiences. But her inability to see the true, banal nature of the ball marks her continued innocence, even as she feels grown up. Leila's love of the "golden floor" is another example of her being overly impressed by something totally common, and her attitude towards the floor comes to reflect her attitude towards her own future. In this moment, her future seems bright and exciting, just like the dance floor—but soon that will change.



The men are already inside, and the girls stand in a group on the opposite side of the room while the chaperones, "smiling rather foolishly," head towards the stage. Meg asks the other girls to help Leila find partners, and though they agree, they seem not to see her; instead, they're focused on the men across the room. Leila wonders why the men are just standing around instead of approaching the women. But eventually, all at once, the men walk over to them.

There are three distinct groups in the ballroom: the young men, the young women, and the older chaperones. These groups remain separate, establishing a clear social order. When Leila immediately dismisses the chaperones as "foolish," it shows that she has internalized the notion that older women are unimportant. When Meg asks the other girls to help Leila find partners, they're too focused on the men to pay much attention to Leila or to each other. They're obviously eager for the ball to begin, and the men are the ones who decide when that happens: the men have to fill out the girls' dance cards, and the girls need partners to dance, which puts the men in a position of power. The men, meanwhile, are stalling—maybe to increase the women's suspense. Their gender gives them the power to toy with the women, while the women have to wait.



Leila meets a few young men, and then an older man, fat and balding, approaches her to claim a dance. His program is already very full, so Leila tells him not to bother finding a spot for her, but he does anyway. After he finishes writing his name on her program, he remarks that he may know Leila “of yore” before disappearing into the crowded dance **floor**.

The old man is an affront to Leila’s vision of a glamorous and exciting ball: he’s much older than anyone else, and he’s uglier than the young men Leila meets. She can’t incorporate his odd and unpleasant presence into her idea of a perfect ball, which is perhaps why she tries politely to get him to leave without signing her dance card. When the man asks if he’s seen her before, he’s obviously mistaken since this is her first ball, but his comment has significance. He has clearly attended enough balls that the young women he’s met have all blended together in his memory, with Leila indistinguishable from any of them. This passage shows a flaw in Leila’s romanticized image of the ball: she believes her time at the ball is special and unique, but she’s the only one who thinks that. To everyone else, she’s just like all the other young women.



As the dance begins, Leila remembers her dance lessons at boarding school. These lessons were often miserable—the girls were tormented by a strict dance teacher, and the dance hall was dusty. The ball is a sharp contrast to the lessons, and Leila listens to the beautiful music and watches dancers glide across the floor in growing anticipation—eventually, she comes to feel that if her first dance partner doesn’t arrive, “she would die at least, or faint.”

Like the preparation in the ladies’ room, Leila’s dance lessons were just a means to an end: attracting men in the future. Taking dance lessons with her friends wasn’t a fun bonding activity in itself—it was actually somewhat unpleasant, and its value for Leila lay solely in preparing her to impress future men. In this moment, the dancing has already begun and Leila is waiting on the sidelines for her first partner to claim her. She’s entranced by the dancing and the music and she wants badly to be dancing herself, but as a woman she’s somewhat powerless: she can’t dance alone, she can’t find her partner herself, and she can’t select a different partner from the one on her dance card. Instead, her only option is to wait helplessly for her partner to arrive, feeling like she might die if he doesn’t, which is a tremendous amount of power for him to have over her.



Leila's dance partner does arrive, and he immediately compliments the **floor**. She responds that it's "beautifully slippery," which surprises him. He politely agrees, but he seems confused. He steers skillfully—it's so different from dancing with other girls at boarding school, who always collided and stepped on each other. Though Leila notes that the man "sounded tired," he tries to make small talk again, asking Leila if she was at another ball last week. Leila replies that this is her first ball, and though she elaborates, he hardly responds. The two stop dancing and sit down; Laura passes Leila and winks, which makes Leila notice that Laura's partner isn't speaking to her, instead picking a thread off his sleeve.

Ever since she arrived at the drill hall, Leila has felt enchanted by the glistening, slippery floor. Because of this, when her partner compliments the floor, Leila thinks that he feels the same way she does: that everything about this evening is amazing. However, the awkward interaction that follows makes plain the reality of the situation: this man doesn't care about the floor at all, and he's just making small talk. He's not particularly interested in Leila, even as she thinks her own experience is fascinating. The young man's lack of interest in the floor (and in Leila) reflects his fatigue with attending balls and his weary outlook on the future: unlike Leila, he does not see a future full of glamorous and exciting events, but rather a future full of repetitive small talk and interchangeable dance partners. This is another indication that Leila's own excitement will soon fade. And her excitement at their elegant dancing seems to be another misinterpretation of what's going on: their awkward, tired conversation can't be much better than dancing with female friends at boarding school, even if he's not stepping on her feet, but Leila still insists that what's happening is new and perfect.



Leila begins to dance with a new partner, who also asks her about the **floor** and about whether she was at another ball. Leila again explains that this is her first ball, but this partner is as uninterested as the last. This is strange to Leila, who finds the ball thrilling: the night sky, which at home was "mournful," is now "dazzling bright." Leila can picture herself at "the beginning of everything," her life full of possibilities.

Clearly, making small talk about previous balls and the quality of the dance floor is routine; Leila's second partner asks the same questions as the first, and Leila responds the same way. While Leila does notice this, she refuses to try to make sense of it. Instead of seeing this as evidence that this dance isn't actually that exciting or novel, she focuses on how "thrilling" everything else seems and pushes the conversation from her mind. Leila directly connects her excitement in the current moment to her future, believing that her life has just begun and that her future will be much like the present: full of excitement and glamor. However, there's mounting evidence that the excitement of her first ball—when everything is new—can never be re-created. After all, everyone she has met so far seems somewhat bored and unimpressed by the whole scene, which suggests a different future: one in which she is quickly jaded and discontented, just like everyone else.



Leila and her partner go to get ices, and when they return, the old man approaches Leila and ushers her to the dance floor. His appearance shocks her. He's old enough to be onstage with the chaperones, and he's shabby—there's a button missing from his glove, and his coat is wrinkled and dusty. The man immediately guesses that it's Leila's first ball; he knows because he's been attending them for 30 years. To be nice, Leila says it's great that he's still attending.

Earlier, Leila observed the “foolish” chaperones, who were separate from the action on the dance floor. Based on his age and appearance, Leila notices that the old man should be with them—the dance floor is a place for young people. Even worse, the old man doesn't fit with the ball's glamorous decorations: his clothes are shabby and dusty. It's clear already that Leila's experience with this out-of-place man is going to unpleasantly disrupt her illusion of a perfect ball. Ironically, this man is the first person who seems to pay attention to who she is; while he initially thought he recognized her from before, he now correctly guesses that it's Leila's first ball. However, this isn't because they have a unique connection—it's because he's been attending these events for so long that he can tell by a woman's behavior when she is new. In this way, he's merely confirming that Leila is just like everyone else, no matter how special she feels. For her part, Leila seems to pity him for attending balls for so long, which suggests that she feels superior as a result of her youth.



The old man holds Leila closer and says that she obviously won't be able to attend balls for as long as he has. He points to the older women sitting onstage and says that Leila will soon be one of them, “smil[ing] away like the poor old dears up there” and watching her own daughter dance. Just like those women, Leila will complain that a “dreadful man” tried to kiss her daughter at the last ball, but inside she will feel devastated that men no longer want to kiss her anymore and she'll complain about how dangerous the slippery **floors** are.

In explaining why he's able to be on the dance floor despite his age, the old man reveals a central truth of the story: he's male, which grants him freedom and social value that older women don't have. As a woman, Leila won't be able to dance at balls 30 years from now—she'll have to observe the dancing from a distance, since she wouldn't be a plausible romantic partner for a man. The old man doesn't seem to find this unfair, and instead, his comments reveal his negative view of women his own age. He tells Leila that as an old woman she'll be miserable, simply because she'll no longer be desirable to men. She'll value men so much, in fact, that she'll be secretly jealous of her daughters when they're assaulted by “dreadful” men. Even the dance floor, which currently represents Leila's hope for the future, will become a bitter reminder of her youth—instead of being “beautifully slippery,” as Leila now perceives it, the floor will seem dangerous. Since this speech comes from the old man (who may himself be one of the “dreadful” men he mentions), it's unclear how much of his speculation is self-serving or true. He's likely unmarried, and he might only be guessing at the feelings of older women—but nonetheless, it's true that the older women seem cast aside at the drill hall and that none of them are present on the floor.



Leila laughs at the old man's comments, but she's inwardly upset. What he said rings true to her—this ball might be “only the beginning of her last ball.” Suddenly, the music sounds sad, and she mourns that happiness can't last forever. She stops dancing and goes to lean against the wall; inside, she's a small child throwing a tantrum because the man ruined everything. The old man tells Leila not to “take [him] seriously,” and she scoffs.

The ball continues around Leila, but she no longer wants to be part of it, instead reminiscing about being at home listening to the **baby owls**. Soon, however, a new song begins and a new partner finds her. Leila decides to dance until she can find Meg and escape, but she is soon swept up in the music and the beautiful decorations, which resemble a “flying wheel.” Leila's partner bumps into the old man as they dance. The old man apologizes, but Leila simply beams at him—she doesn't even recognize him now.

The old man's words shatter Leila's illusion that the ball is her entrance into a glamorous and exciting future. While she was previously able to ignore anything that didn't fit her perfect narrative, this man has ruined everything by telling her something unpleasant that nonetheless rings true to her: that her future is actually bleak. After he says this, she can no longer ignore the evidence around her, and even the music—which previously excited her—makes her sad. Knowing that her youthful bliss can't last, Leila can no longer enjoy the ball. She stops dancing and reflects on how her first ball, which once felt so special, actually marks the start of her inevitable aging—her “last ball” will come sooner than she thinks, and then she will be a sad and foolish chaperone watching enviously from the stage. Her inner tantrum hints that she wants to return to childhood, when she wasn't aware that she would grow old or unhappy. Though Leila tries to hide her distress from the old man, it's visible, and he attempts to comfort her in vain.



Earlier in the story, Leila dismissed her desire to stay at home listening to baby owls, which was really a desire to remain innocent. Now that the old man has made her aware of her future, she wants that innocence back. But instead of leaving the ball and returning home, she continues dancing, and once she's dancing again, she fixates on the beautiful decorations and regains some of her old joy. However, Leila has not returned to the same state she was in at the beginning of the ball; when Leila and her partner spin, the decorations resemble a “flying wheel.” Leila probably isn't conscious of the association, but it's clear that the wheel imagery is significant—the decorations are a reminder now of time passing, as hands would wheel around the clock, or as life cycles spin onward. So even as Leila recaptures her youthful joy, she is subtly remembering that time passes. At the very end, when she bumps into the old man, Leila claims to have forgotten who he is, suggesting that she has returned to her innocence and is once again a girl enjoying her first ball. But it's not credible that she has forgotten a man whose words shook her to her core just moments ago—instead, this seems more like the moment when she insisted that she had forgotten her desire to stay home with the owls, even as she was remembering that desire and feeling longing for home. Leila wants to forget this man and the unpleasant truths that he told her, so she's repressing the experience and trying to delude herself into believing that her happiness will last.





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