The Singing Lesson

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Katherine Mansfield was born in New Zealand to a wealthy and prominent family. She moved to London to attend Queens College at the age of 19, and afterward lived briefly in New Zealand again, but primarily spent her adult life in England with extensive travels through continental Europe. She was friends with other modernist writers of her time, such as D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. She had romantic relationships with both men and women—while she married men twice, she also had long-term relationships with three women. Her most prolific period as a writer began soon after her brother's death in 1915 and continued through her diagnosis with tuberculosis in 1917. She refused to go to a sanitarium for her health, feeling that it would interrupt her writing. She moved to Cornwall near the sea for her lungs and then to France as her health deteriorated, but she continued to write. In 1923, when she was 34 years old, she died of a pulmonary hemorrhage, a complication of tuberculosis.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Mansfield came of age as a writer in England, among friends such as D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. She shared the modernist techniques and moral concerns of these artists, questioning the repressive virtues of the Victorian era and seeking new ways to structure stories. She is most famous for her short stories, particularly "The Garden Party" and "Bliss" but she also published poetry. After her death, her journals and collections of her letters have also been published. Like the work of T.S. Eliot and Lytton Strachey, Mansfield's work expresses doubts about the validity of Europe's brutal racism and empire-building, the class system, and the moral ugliness of World War One. She was inspired by 19th century writers such as Edgar Allen Poe and Charles Baudelaire who favored feeling and imagination over simple meanings or realism. She was also influenced by Anton Chekhov, whose work is realistic rather than symbolic like Poe or Baudelaire. Mansfield's work, like Woolf's, can often be read as simultaneously realistic and symbolic or allegorical.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Singing Lesson
- **When Written:** Likely between 1916 and 1920
- **Where Written:** Cornwall, England or Bandol, France
- **When Published:** 1920
- **Literary Period:** Modernist
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** A girls' school, likely in England
- **Climax:** Miss Meadows is called into the headmistress's office to read a telegram from Basil
- **Antagonist:** Basil, the Science Mistress, Miss Meadows's advancing age in an intolerant society
- **Point of View:** Third person limited, focused on Miss Meadows's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

A connection to the Maori. Mansfield's first female romantic partner was a Maori woman called Maata Mahupuku. She frequently wrote about the Maori in her fiction long after she left New Zealand for Europe.

Operatic Adaptation. Composer Matthew Davidson wrote an opera called *The Singing Lesson* based on three stories by Katherine Mansfield—"The Garden Party," "The Singing Lesson," and "The Doll's House."

PLOT SUMMARY

Miss Meadows, a singing teacher, comes to school feeling great despair because she has received a letter from her fiancé Basil breaking off their engagement. When the Science Mistress asks if Miss Meadows is cold in the chilly autumn weather, Miss Meadows tries to hide her unhappiness and feels hatred toward the Science Mistress. At the start of the singing lesson, her student Mary Beazley offers Miss Meadows a **yellow chrysanthemum** and Miss Meadows ignores her gesture, deeply wounding the girl's feelings.

As Miss Meadows begins to teach, she instructs the girls to sing a sad, autumnal song. She asks them to add sorrowful emotion to their voices, and the weather outdoors appears bleak to Miss Meadows as she recalls the cruel letter Basil sent her. Their engagement seemed like a miracle to her, specifically because she is a woman of thirty, which she feels is nearly too old to have romantic prospects. Miss Meadows despairs of the humiliation and judgement she will face within the school when it is known that Basil has broken their engagement off. She thinks that she will have to leave her job and disappear from the school community altogether rather than face the Science Mistress and the students once they learn what happened. She asks the girls to sing so sorrowfully, and many of the girls begin crying.

Miss Meadows is called out of the class and Miss Wyatt, the headmistress, gives Miss Meadows a telegram from Basil. He

says she should ignore his previous letter, saying he "must have been mad" to end their engagement, and he says he has bought a hat-stand. Despite the coldness of this telegram, Miss Meadows is overcome with joy—even while Miss Wyatt scolds her for receiving a telegram that isn't urgent bad news during the school day. When she is back in her classroom Miss Meadows assigns the students a triumphant summer song, and Miss Meadows herself sings the song louder than any of the students.

CHARACTERS

Miss Meadows – Miss Meadows is a thirty-year-old singing teacher at a girls' school who is engaged to marry Basil. She arrives at school on the day of the story feeling despair because Basil has left a note breaking their engagement. Miss Meadows seems to be a sensitive person who can feel a great connection to both the weather and music, but she also responds to her unhappiness by becoming cruel to others, spreading her despair to the students. For instance, her sadness causes her to ignore her favorite student, Mary Beazley, and even dictates her choice of songs for her students to sing. As Miss Meadows becomes increasingly emotional about the end of her relationship with Basil, though, her memories of the actual relationship makes it clear that she is sadder about being single at thirty than she is about losing Basil himself. When Miss Meadows later gets a casual, chatty telegram from Basil saying that she should ignore the break-up letter and that he has bought a hat-stand for their future home, Miss Meadows is not angry at him for thinking so little of her emotions. Instead, she is overwhelmed with joy—a joy that, as with her sadness, seems more motivated by the prospect of avoiding becoming an unmarried spinster than it is about actually being married to Basil.

Basil – Basil is Miss Meadows's fiancé. At the start of the story, he has sent Miss Meadows a letter breaking off their engagement because, while he "loves her as much as he could love any woman" the idea of marriage "fills him with—" and he has written the word "disgust," crossed it out, and written in "regret." Miss Meadows believes that his failure to fully remove the word "disgust" shows how little he cares about her, underscoring his general disregard for her feelings. A reader from Mansfield's time would see many hints in the story that Basil is gay and is marrying Miss Meadows to cover this up. He is vain about his appearance and overly concerned with furniture, which were stereotypes for gay men in the early 20th century. Furthermore, when he proposes to Miss Meadows (rather dispassionately), he touches the end of her **ostrich feather boa** rather than touching Miss Meadows herself. Their engagement surprises Miss Meadows herself and the people at her school, because he is twenty-five and handsome, where she is thirty, which would have been considered old for a single woman. While both he and Miss Meadows seem to be marrying one another primarily to live up to the expectations of their communities rather than out of love, Basil is quite cruel to Miss Meadows, seeming not to consider her feelings at all when he leaves her a cold note ending their engagement, and then sending a casual, lighthearted telegram renewing their engagement without ever apologizing for—or even acknowledging—the pain he has caused. That he takes Miss Meadows for granted and doesn't seem all that committed to their engagement suggests rough times ahead.

The Science Mistress – The Science Mistress is another teacher at the school where Miss Meadows works. She is pale with honey-colored hair and has a sweet manner that Miss Meadows believes is insincere. She and Miss Meadows have a conversation about the chilly autumn weather at the beginning of the story that Miss Meadows interprets as a hostile and smug inquisition about Miss Meadows's emotional state. When Miss Meadows remembers getting engaged to Basil, she particularly recalls the Science Mistress being surprised that a handsome young man like Basil would want to marry Miss Meadows. When Miss Meadows imagines it becoming known at the school that Basil has broken off their engagement, she particularly dreads having the Science Mistress know what has happened. She believes it would be better to quit her job and disappear entirely rather than face whatever judgment the Science Mistress and the girls would have for her once it is known that her engagement is broken. While Miss Meadows paints the Science Mistress as being cruel, judgmental, and insincere, Mansfield never confirms that Miss Meadows's impression of the woman is accurate—it's possible that the science teacher is perfectly nice and Miss Meadows is projecting her fears.

Mary Beazley – Mary Beazley is Miss Meadows's star student, who gives Miss Meadows a **yellow chrysanthemum** each day at the start of class. Mary's long, curling hair is a signal of a well-groomed young girl, and Since Miss Meadows is conscious of her own age, these small signals of Mary's youth are significant in the story. On the day of the story, Miss Meadows refuses Mary's flower for the first time, humiliating and wounding Mary in front of the class. Later, when Miss Meadows directs the girls to sing sadly, Mary is very much affected by the mood of the music and the tone of Miss Meadows's voice. As Miss Meadows herself is very sensitive to the mood of music and grew up to be a singing teacher, it seems possible that Mary is similar to how Miss Meadows herself was as a girl. When Miss Meadows returns to the class after receiving her telegram from Basil resuming their engagement, Miss Meadows picks up the flower Mary gave her and uses it to hide her smile when she assigns the girls a new, cheerful summer song.

Miss Wyatt – Miss Wyatt is the headmistress at the school where Miss Meadows teaches. She is likely an older woman, as she wears glasses and often has difficulty getting them

untangled from the lace of her clothing. When Basil sends Miss Meadows a telegram at work to renew their engagement, Miss Meadows goes to Miss Wyatt to collect the telegram. Mansfield describes Miss Wyatt as being very kind with Miss Meadows at first, seeming to expect that the telegram will contain bad news. Once she discovers that the telegram contains good news, Miss Wyatt is annoyed and tells Miss Meadows that she can only receive telegrams at work in an emergency. Mansfield subtly suggests that Miss Wyatt might have relished Miss Meadows receiving bad news, and her reprimand of Miss Meadows might come from a place of bitterness, since Miss Meadows emphasized the note was from her fiancé. In this era, it was rare for women to keep a teaching job after marriage, so the fact that Miss Wyatt has been promoted to headmistress of the school and still goes by "Miss" suggests that she is likely older than Miss Meadows, and still unmarried, the very condition that Miss Meadows fears. As Mary Beazley echoes a younger version of Miss Meadows, Miss Wyatt appears to show a possible future for Miss Meadows if she stays in her job and does not marry. Miss Wyatt may have a higher-ranking job within the school, but she is a bitter person that is only shown taking joy in the possibility of other people's pain.

Monica – Monica is a student at the girls' school. When Miss Meadows is teaching the singing class, Monica interrupts and enters the classroom to say that Miss Wyatt has a telegram for Miss Meadows. While she walks up the aisle of the classroom, she is "hanging her head, biting her lips and twisting the silver bangle on her red little wrist" which appear to be anxious gestures, but Miss Meadows describes her walking "fussily," which suggests a lack of sympathy from Miss Meadows in her despair.

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.

DESPAIR AND CRUELTY

After her fiancé Basil leaves a cruel note ending their engagement, Miss Meadows despairs. She feels wounded and hopeless about the future, but mostly she dreads the judgment of others—people who will scorn her for being thirty and single once more. In her despair, she is cruel with her music students, who then begin to despair themselves, weeping openly in class. In this way, "The Singing Lesson" shows cruelty and despair to be interlinked—despair leads to cruelty which leads to more despair. And even though the story ends with Miss Meadows' engagement restored, Mansfield's implication is that Miss Meadows' happiness is built on a lie and is therefore unsustainable: despair and cruelty will return. By depicting despair as the story's predominant emotion, and by showing how it spreads via cruelty, Mansfield paints life as a chain reaction of suffering in which despair is inevitable.

From the very first line—in which Miss Meadows has "cold, sharp despair" "buried deep in her heart like a wicked knife"—despair is the story's defining emotion. The severity of Miss Meadows's despair is noteworthy: she is described as "bleeding to death" because her heart has been "pierced" by Basil's letter. While recalling snippets of this letter, she asks her students to rehearse a sad song about youth and happiness disappearing, which emphasizes the magnitude of her grief. The story's setting also contributes to Miss Meadows's sense of despair. The story is set in late autumn, when the weather is so cold that it "might be winter." As the students "wail" while rehearsing their sad song, Mansfield describes the willow trees outside with their leaves mostly gone and the wind and rain blowing against the windows. Between Miss Meadows' own expressions of grief, the mournful song her students sing, and the stormy autumnal setting, Mansfield depicts a world that is saturated in despair, in which despair seems to be the natural state of everyone and everything.

The story implies that the source of this pervasive despair is cruelty. This is clearest when Miss Meadows is cruel to her students and they quickly descend into a despair that matches Miss Meadows's own. Mansfield initially describes the students as "rosy" and "bubbling over" with "gleeful excitement," but then Miss Meadows is cruel: she ignores one student's gesture of kindness (Mary Beazley handing her a **yellow chrysanthemum**), is brusque in her rehearsal instructions, and encourages them to put their saddest emotions into the song. This leaves many of the students in tears, which is a startling example of how cruelty makes others feel profound despair—even young students who were, moments ago, joyful.

But Miss Meadows is not arbitrarily cruel: her own despair is rooted in the cruelty of others, both her fellow teachers and Basil. While a broken engagement should be grounds for sympathy and compassion, Miss Meadows expects only judgment and scorn from her colleagues at school. This leads her to such despair that she feels she will have to abandon her job entirely rather than face her cruel colleagues. Her despair is also due to Basil's cruelty, as the way he breaks their engagement is particularly cruel: he leaves her a note instead of speaking to her in person, and the note itself is inconsiderate, especially because he initially wrote that marrying her would fill him with disgust. While he crossed out "disgust" and replaced it with "regret," he didn't bother to cross it out well enough that she couldn't read it. This hurts Miss Meadows profoundly and makes her know that Basil doesn't love her.

Even Basil's cruelty, however, seems rooted in despair.

Mansfield implies several times that Basil is gay (most strongly through the portion of the letter where he essentially says that it would be impossible for him to love a woman), and this was a time in which a gay man would not, in general, have been accepted socially. While his letter to Miss Meadows is unacceptable, Basil is in a difficult position and it seems as though his waffling over their engagement reflects an internal conflict over whether to follow his heart or submit to a marriage that isn't what he wants. It's easy to imagine this causing despair, which leads him to be cruel to Miss Meadows, setting off a chain reaction of cruelty and despair that ends in her music students crying.

The ending of the story, at first glance, offers an interruption to the cycle of cruelty and despair: Basil restores their engagement, and Miss Meadows is joyful. However, Mansfield implies that this joy is baseless and that despair and cruelty will return. After all, Basil's telegram reversing their breakup is brief and feeble. He does not explain himself or acknowledge the distress he has caused, which shows his lack of compassion and suggests that their marriage will not be a kind or happy one. Also, the casual way he changes his mind suggests that he might not be totally committed to getting back together—he could reverse himself again at any time, once again causing Miss Meadows to despair. The joyful fervor, then, with which Miss Meadows resumes her music class seems almost dangerously disconnected from reality, making the story's ending ominous. Despair, it seems, would be a more natural emotion for the situation, and Mansfield implies that soon reality will come home to roost.

While Miss Meadows's despair is rooted in real, serious issues—loneliness, disappointment, fear of judgment, heartbreak—it's noteworthy that, throughout the story, Mansfield depicts both despair and joy in exaggerated ways that are almost comical. Miss Meadows's despair (coupled with the sad song and the dreary setting) seems somewhat over-the-top for the situation: she has been dumped by someone who never loved her, which is certainly sad, but perhaps doesn't merit her assertion that she feels like she is "bleeding to death" after being "pierced to the heart." The melodrama of Miss Meadows' despair, and the frightening intensity of her misplaced joy in the end, seems to mock both of these emotions. Perhaps if Miss Meadows were slightly less sensitive to what other people think and slightly more pragmatic or realistic about her circumstances, then she could avoid this ridiculous emotional rollercoaster altogether.

GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND SOCIAL PRESSURE

In "The Singing Lesson," Miss Meadows and Basil seem to be marrying not out of love, but due to social pressure. Miss Meadows is ashamed of being single at thirty, and Basil—who is implied to be gay—seems eager to appear heterosexual. Due to this era's pressures on women to be married and its pervasive stigma against homosexuality, this pair seems willing to accept a loveless, unhappy marriage simply to avoid the cruelty and judgment of others. Mansfield depicts this choice as tragic and ill-advised, and the story is an indictment of the misogynistic, heteronormative social pressures that keep people from being true to themselves and seeking fulfilling lives.

Throughout the story, it's clear that Miss Meadows' feelings for Basil are lukewarm; her real concern about their broken engagement is that others will judge her for being single. When Miss Meadows reflects on Basil, she recalls him as young and handsome, but doesn't seem to think much of him beyond that. In fact, she clearly implies that he doesn't matter to her when she argues with him in her mind, saying she doesn't care if he doesn't love her—implying that she only cares about being married. She describes their engagement as "a miracle, simply a miracle," but only because of their ages, because he is only twenty-five (and would presumably have other prospects) while she is thirty. In that era, a woman of thirty would think she had little chance of marrying a desirable man, if she married at all. Being single through adulthood was much less respectable for a woman than a man, even if she had a good job. Miss Meadows is amazed and relieved that a handsome man who is younger than she is asked to marry her at her age. Her shame at being single again is such that Miss Meadows thinks, after the breakup, "she could never face the Science Mistress or the girls once it got known. She would have to disappear somewhere," which suggests that losing Basil is less significant to her than losing the appearance of his love within the school community. The effect of her broken engagement on her relationship to her peers is so important to her that she feels that she would have to disappear entirely—and lose her livelihood—to avoid their judgment.

Basil doesn't appear to love Miss Meadows either; Mansfield seems to suggest that he wants to marry Miss Meadows to hide the fact that he is gay. Mansfield uses many stereotypes about his vanity and his interest in furniture that readers of the time would take as implications that he is gay. Beyond that, he says in his break-up letter that he loves her as much as he could love any woman, suggesting that he could love someone who is *not* a woman more. His use of the word "disgust" to describe his feelings about marriage also suggests that he does not want to have a sexual relationship with a woman, and this seems borne out in his feeble proposal to Miss Meadows. In proposing, he told her "you know, somehow or other, I've got fond of you," which suggests that he is surprised that he has become "fond" of a woman at all. He also touches her **ostrich feather boa** instead of touching Miss Meadows herself, suggesting a lack of sensual connection between the two characters.

Even though Basil and Miss Meadows clearly don't care for one another, they consent to be married because they believe that

their communities won't tolerate them otherwise. The truth about Miss Meadows is that she is a woman of thirty who is not in love, who supports herself as a singing teacher. The fact that this is seen as shameful, even within a community of teachers (who are traditionally self-supporting unmarried women), suggests how powerful the norm of marriage was for women in that time. However, while Mansfield portrays this pressure to be married as somewhat tragic, she also suggests that it is absurd. This is clearest in her melodramatic depiction of Miss Meadows' emotions: her over-the-top despair when her lackluster engagement ends, and her feverish joy when her engagement is feebly renewed. By depicting these emotions as comically intense and unbefitting of the situation, Mansfield seems to be poking fun at people who assume that following social norms is so high-stakes.

Mansfield herself openly lived with female lovers, so she lived the message of this story: that sacrificing happiness and fulfillment to follow social norms isn't worth it. But while Mansfield bucked social norms and faced the consequences, her characters don't at the end of the story: Miss Meadows and Basil decide to renew their engagement and obey the expectations of people they dislike, rather than living according to their true feelings. The decision to marry could be seen as tragic—and it is, to some extent—but Mansfield's mocking tone suggests that she thinks these characters are too foolish and cowardly to imagine and pursue more authentic lives.

AGING

After Miss Meadows's fiancé leaves her, she sees evidence of her advancing age everywhere. While she is surrounded by young girls who appear to enjoy the autumn, she connects the cold weather and dropping leaves with her loss of youth and the diminishment of her future possibilities. The fact that she was finally engaged had protected her from the full sense of growing older, but once Basil ends their engagement, Miss Meadows must face the fact that she is thirty years old and single—at that age, in that time, she would have had little prospect of ever being engaged again. Miss Meadows's despair over her age, and her association of aging with autumn and death, suggests the tragic inevitability of life passing her by.

Miss Meadows already feels herself to be old at thirty, as she shows by the degree of her surprise that Basil wants to marry her at all—she calls this "a miracle, simply a miracle." It is not only her own perception that she is too old to be loved by a handsome young man like Basil, since she recalls that the Science Mistress would not believe that they were engaged at first. When she thinks of her future if Basil does not marry her, she connects her despair to the song lyric "passes away," which is a euphemism for death, and she describes the girls' quiet voices while they sing this lyric as beginning "to die, to fade…to vanish." While thirty does not seem old enough to worry about death immediately, Miss Meadows evidently feels that there will be nothing but fading and dying in her future if she does not marry.

Miss Meadows also associates her dread of aging with the autumn. As she mourns her lost engagement, she observes that the willow trees have lost half their leaves. This suggests that her sorrow at the break-up is connected to the feeling she has that her own romantic appeal is fading, just like the willow trees losing their leaves. When she hears the girls sing the words "Fast fade the Roses of Pleasure," she can "scarcely help shuddering" as she recalls that Basil once wore a rose in his buttonhole to visit her. The image of a rose fading as time passes evidently connects to the loss of her relationship with Basil, and also to her own sense that the possibility of happiness and pleasure will diminish as she grows older.

While Miss Meadows connects the fall to her advancing age and bleak future, the young students, who are not yet worried about life passing them by, are full of energy and joy, symbolized by the fall-blooming **yellow chrysanthemum** Mary Beazley offers Miss Meadows. At the start of the story, the students are "bubbling over with gleeful excitement" as they run to school in the cool air. As they absorb Miss Meadows's mood, first from her unkind rejection of Mary's chrysanthemum and then later from singing the sad words of the autumn song with the sad expression she asks them to use, they become increasingly subdued and even begin to cry. When she leaves the classroom to go to Miss Wyatt's office, she asks them to talk quietly, showing that they would ordinarily have a more vivacious mood if they were left in a classroom without a teacher on an autumn day. Their energetic mood before class begins shows that it's Miss Meadows's attitude—and not the weather or the season—that has made them too sad to do anything but talk quietly when she walks out of the room.

Mansfield appears to be showing that Miss Meadows finds the fall to be a tragic time mainly because she fears growing older, since the more she ages, the less chance she has of living even a shadow of the life of which she once dreamed. Miss Meadows is old enough already not to naïvely dream of true love—she simply wants to be married to any man at all so that she can fit into her community—but even that seems to be beyond her reach after Basil breaks up with her and she's left single at thirty. The loss of even a shallow, unkind connection with Basil makes Miss Meadows confront that her youth is gone and even her most meager hopes for the future are unlikely to be fulfilled.

SYMBOLS

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

YELLOW CHRYSANTHEMUM

The yellow chrysanthemum in "The Singing Lesson" symbolizes youthful joy. Each day at the start of class, star music student Mary Beazley gives Miss Meadows a flower, and on the day of the story, it's a yellow chrysanthemum. While Miss Meadows has always accepted Mary's flowers, on this day Miss Meadows refuses it. Chrysanthemums bloom in autumn, and the flower's association with this season evokes the dissonance between Mary's youthful optimism and Miss Meadows' despair over her advancing age. For a young girl like Mary, the fall is a time of joy and excitement—she has just started a new school year and can look forward to new experiences and opportunities. For Miss Meadows, however, the fall (with its miserable cold and its dying leaves) reminds her of her diminished hopes for the future and her inevitable march towards old age. Therefore, while Mary sees the flower as a kind gesture, Miss Meadows sees its autumnal symbolism as rubbing salt in her wounds. Her rejection of the flower shows her inability to see herself as youthful or optimistic—after all, her engagement has just ended, and, at thirty years old, her prospects for finding another fiancé are limited. It's significant, however, that once Miss Meadows's engagement is renewed, she returns to her classroom and holds the flower while joyfully singing a song about summer. The dissonance between holding a fall flower while singing a summer song echoes the dissonance between Miss Meadows' happiness over her engagement and the obvious reality that her fiancé doesn't love her and their marriage is doomed.

OSTRICH FEATHER BOA

Miss Meadows's ostrich feather boa—which evokes the myth of ostriches burying their heads in the sand rather than running from danger—symbolizes her stubborn commitment to what is clearly a disastrous engagement. Mansfield describes many red flags about Basil, but Miss Meadows seems to bury her head in the sand about all of them, preferring to stay with her fiancé even as he treats her horribly. For example, in the scene where he proposes to her, he only says "you know, somehow or other, I've got fond of you," which seems like a cold and even insulting way to declare love, though Miss Meadows considers it "a miracle, simply a miracle." He also writes that, when he thinks of marrying her, he feels disgust, and then crosses that word out lightly so she can still read it. This shows that he doesn't just feel reluctant to marry—he actually doesn't care about her feelings at all. There are many indications that he is gay and is only marrying her to appear straight, and one of these indications is that when he proposes to her, he touches not Miss Meadows herself but her ostrich boa. Not only does this indicate a chilly sexual dynamic, but it also associates his proposal with ostriches, which shows him also denying reality and burying his head in the sand of delusion. None of these signs seem to make Miss Meadows change her mind about marrying him, though, and she remains stubbornly in denial about the reality of their future marriage.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Stories* published in 2009.

The Singing Lesson Quotes

❝ With despair…buried deep in her heart like a wicked knife, Miss Meadows [...] trod the cold corridors that led to the music hall. Girls of all ages […] bubbling over with that gleeful excitement that comes from running to school on a fine autumn morning, hurried, skipped and fluttered by.

Related Characters: Miss Meadows (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Meadows and her despair are introduced in the first sentence of the story, but Mansfield doesn't explain the cause of this despair right away. Later, she shows that Miss Meadows's fiancé Basil has sent an unkind letter breaking off their engagement, which is the simple cause of her sadness. However, the story also shows that their relationship is based on mutual convenience rather than love, and his carelessness with her feelings is hardly unusual—her despair is caused more by the need for a husband than the loss of Basil himself. She needs a husband because she is afraid of growing old while single, so the ultimate cause of her despair is her age and her feeling that her life will only be worse as she grows older if she does not marry. Mansfield hints at the real cause of Miss Meadows's despair and her feelings about aging at the start of the story, as these first two sentences show the contrast between Miss Meadows, who "trod the cold corridors" (implying that she is walking slowly and heavily and feeling the interior of the school as cold) and the students, who "hurried, skipped and fluttered" and feel the morning as "fine" and full of "gleeful excitement." The difference in the way Miss Meadows and the girls move and interpret the autumn morning highlights the difference in their ages, which is the ultimate cause of Miss Meadows's despair.

"You look fro-zen," said she. Her blue eyes opened wide; there came a mocking light in them. (Had she noticed anything?)

"Oh, not quite as bad as that," said Miss Meadows, and she gave the Science Mistress, in exchange for her smile a quick grimace and passed on.

Related Characters: Miss Meadows, The Science Mistress (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

Because the narration of the story follows Miss Meadows's perspective, it's not possible for the reader to know if Miss Meadows is correct in her belief that the Science Mistress is being unkind in this conversation. A "mocking light" in her eyes is the kind of thing that Miss Meadows could perceive while she is feeling so much despair, even if the Science Mistress isn't mocking her at all. The Science Mistress's words all appear to be about the weather and Miss Meadows's wellbeing, and Miss Meadows herself hears the Science Mistress's tone as sweet—she just feels resentful about the Science Mistress's sweetness. It's unclear whether the Science Mistress's sweetness is actually real and Miss Meadows is in such a despairing mood that she sees unkindness even in innocent interactions, and is even being rather unkind herself by grimacing when the Science Mistress smiles at her—or if the Science Mistress really does have a mocking expression and is eagerly searching for evidence that Miss Meadows is suffering. Later in the story, the headmistress Miss Wyatt appears much more blatantly to hope that Miss Meadows will receive bad news in the telegram she gets from Basil, so there are certainly members of this community that relish bad news and resent good fortune, but it's unclear from this interaction whether Miss Meadows only expects unkindness or whether the Science Mistress is actually being unkind.

She knew perfectly well what they were thinking. "Meady is in a wax." Well, let them think it! Her eyelids quivered; she tossed her head, defying them. What could the thoughts of those creatures matter to someone who stood there bleeding to death, pierced to the heart, to the heart, by such a letter-

Related Characters: Miss Meadows (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Meadows claims that she knows "perfectly well" what the girls in her class are thinking—but here, even more clearly than in her conversation with the Science Mistress (where it is not clear whether or not the Science Mistress is truly being as unkind as Miss Meadows perceives), the reader can tell that Miss Meadows is entirely inventing the hostility of the girls in her class. She expects them to have a somewhat jeering and unsympathetic reaction ("Meady's in a wax" –meaning, in 19th century slang, that she is angry), believing that they will see her despair as anger and have little respect or sympathy for that anger. She doesn't expect them to see, or care, that she is sad—even while she feels so sad that she describes herself as "pierced to the heart, bleeding to death." However, at this point readers have seen that Mary Beazley has prepared Miss Meadows's piano seat for her and appears to care about her feelings very much. This shows that Miss Meadows is a somewhat unreliable narrator, and her belief that the students are hostile and hateful is not borne out by the realities that the reader can see from the other characters' actions. Moreover, when she "tosses her head, defying them" she is treating the girls with the kind of hostility that she falsely believes they have for her.

"I love you as much as it is possible for me to love any woman, but, truth to tell, I have come to the conclusion that I am not a marrying man, and the idea of settling down fills me with nothing but" and the word "disgust" was scratched out lightly and "regret" written over the top.

Related Characters: Basil (speaker), Miss Meadows

Related Themes:

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

This is the letter Basil sends Miss Meadows, which is the immediate cause of her despair. He says that his dread of marriage comes from "the idea of settling down," implying that he wants to date more women rather than committing to one. However the fact that he writes the word "disgust" first and then crosses it out suggests that he doesn't fear

marriage because he would regret all the women he wouldn't be able to pursue, but rather that he feels disgust at the idea of having a sexual relationship with any woman at all, likely because he is gay. The fact that he used the word "disgust" particularly after saying he loves Miss Meadows "as much as it is possible for me to love any woman" (suggesting he could love her more if she were a man) gives the reader a clue about why he is ambivalent about the marriage—he wants to marry her to hide his true sexuality, rather than because he is attracted to her or loves her. Miss Meadows feels hurt that Basil thinks so little of her feelings that he leaves the word "disgust" visible to her, a cruel thing to say about someone he proposed marriage to. It also shows that he really does not care very much about her feelings, and his attitude toward their relationship is primarily selfish.

> […] what was Mary's horror when Miss Meadows totally ignored the chrysanthemum, made no reply to her greeting, but said in a voice of ice, "Page fourteen, please, and mark the accents well—"

Staggering moment! Mary blushed until the tears stood in her eyes.

Related Characters: Miss Meadows (speaker), Mary Beazley

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

Mary Beazley has a tradition of giving Miss Meadows a flower at the start of class, and for the first time, instead of accepting the flower graciously, Miss Meadows ignores her and the flower. The flower, a yellow chrysanthemum, commonly blooms in the autumn or even early winter, which suggests that Miss Meadows is not simply rejecting her student's kindness, but rather recoiling from a flower associated with late-season blooming, which evokes Miss Meadows's fear of age. Further connecting Miss Meadows's rejection of the flower to her attitude about aging and autumn, she speaks to the class "in a voice of ice," suggesting that she is united with the coldness of the weather rather than the potential for blossoming.

Even without the symbolism of the flower, the cruelty she shows to Mary echoes Basil's cruelty to her—Basil rejected her and was careless about her feelings with his letter, and now she is rejecting Mary without a thought to her feelings. Just as Basil's cruelty caused Miss Meadows's despair, Miss Meadows's cruelty makes Mary despair. This shows how despair can spread through cruel acts. Earlier, Miss Meadows was imagining she had to defend herself against the students' unkind judgments—when in fact, she is the one who is introducing the unkindness into the classroom.

> "The headmaster's wife keeps on asking me to dinner. It's a perfect nuisance. I never get an evening to myself in that place."

"But can't you refuse?"

"Oh, well, it doesn't do for a man in my position to be unpopular."

Related Characters: Miss Meadows, Basil (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

This is a conversation Miss Meadows remembers between herself and Basil. It shows that Basil is also a teacher in a school like the one where Miss Meadows teaches, but his position is quite different within the school. For one thing, in their society, it was rare for a woman to keep a teaching job after marrying, where it was not common for a man to leave his job after his wedding. The headmaster at Basil's school is married and his wife does some of the work of socializing on his behalf, putting on dinners for the teachers at the school. This is a contrast to Miss Wyatt, the headmistress at Miss Meadows' school, who is evidently not married since she still uses "Miss" in her name, and who—as she never married—has had to continue working. Further, Miss Meadows doesn't seem to think it's very important to be popular with Miss Wyatt, perhaps because she doesn't expect to stay at the school for long after marrying. Miss Wyatt doesn't have the kind of support the male headmaster has from a spouse, or the kind of respect from Miss Meadows that Basil shows in this quote.

Basil appears to be investing in his future at his school, wanting to remain popular with his colleagues. Because of his gender role, he expects to stay in his job and get promotions whether or not he marries, but this also means that he has no option but to stay in the community with

people who might not approve of his being gay. He has no alternative to having a job. While the headmaster of the boys' school appears to be in a better, more supported position than Miss Wyatt, the expectation that Basil will stay in his job with the support of his eventual wife is also the trap that prevents him from living honestly.

"And then in the second line, Winter Drear, make that Drear sound as if a cold wind were blowing through it. Dre-ear!" said she so awfully that Mary Beazley, on the music stool, wriggled her spine.

Related Characters: Miss Meadows (speaker), Mary Beazley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

When Miss Meadows explains to her students what kind of emotion they should express while singing their autumn song, she transfers her despair to them. Earlier in the story, she transmits despair to Mary Beazley by being unkind to her when she offered Miss Meadows a flower. This time, it's her tone of voice that makes Mary shiver. Soon, many of the girls in the class begin to cry because of how completely they take on Miss Meadows's emotion through singing this song with the emotional tenor she describes.

This quote suggests that Mary is especially susceptible to this emotional transfer from Miss Meadows, possibly because of Miss Meadows's unkindness earlier, but also possibly for the same reason that she is Miss Meadows's star student—Mary may be very sensitive to music, and the emotion in the song and tone of voice that Miss Meadows is using affect her deeply. Miss Meadows herself appears to be extraordinarily sensitive to the emotion in the song she has assigned, as well, even when the girls are singing without particular expression. This suggests that Miss Meadows herself may have been a sensitive and hopeful girl like Mary, before her fear of aging changed the autumn to a fearful time for her.

But nobody had been as surprised as she. She was thirty. Basil was twenty-five. It had been a miracle, simply a miracle, to hear him say, as they walked home from church that very dark night, "You know, somehow or other, I've got fond of you.'" And he had taken hold of the end of her ostrich feather boa.

Related Characters: Basil, Miss Meadows (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

At this point, Miss Meadows shows the heart of her despair. She believes that it is "a miracle, simply a miracle" for a man to want to marry her when she is thirty years old, particularly if he is twenty-five and handsome. In her society, thirty was unusually old to marry for a woman, and she apparently believes that she has very few other options for a satisfying life if she does not marry. This problem leads her to see Basil's proposal as a miracle, even when the reader can see that it is a half-hearted and unkind way to confess love, saying "somehow or other" he has become "fond" of her, while touching her only at the farthest end of her scarf. None of this seems like the passionate declaration of someone truly in love, or even a kind person offering her a marriage of mutual friendship. The reference to the ostrich suggests that she is in denial about the danger of this engagement, since ostriches bury their heads in the sand to avoid acknowledging danger, and the darkness of the night and their walk away from church also could be read as bad omens. The fact that she seems to recall such an unloving proposal as "a miracle" suggests that her judgment is bad, and she is possibly willfully blind to the drawbacks of this relationship because she is so afraid of being a single thirty-year-old woman.

The head mistress sat at her desk. For a moment she did not look up. She was as usual disentangling her eye-glasses, which had got caught in her lace tie. "Sit down, Miss Meadows," she said very kindly.

Related Characters: Miss Wyatt (speaker), Miss Meadows

Related Themes:

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Wyatt is the first woman who seems to be older than thirty in the story. Her position of authority and (more subtly) her glasses both suggest that she is significantly older than Miss Meadows. In addition, since she goes by "Miss," she is evidently unmarried. In this description, she appears to be kindly, but the implication that she regularly tangles her glasses on her clothing makes her appear somewhat foolish—not a person Miss Meadows seems to admire. While she seems to be the first kind-hearted adult in the story, it is soon clear that she is as embittered and nasty as Miss Meadows believes the Science Mistress was. Miss Wyatt is only kind to Miss Meadows when she believes the telegram will contain bad news. Miss Meadows's reaction to her doesn't suggest that she wants Miss Wyatt to like her the way Basil wants to be popular with his headmaster and the headmaster's wife. On the contrary, Miss Meadows appears to want to leave the school entirely, whether or not she marries. If she did stay at the school and not marry, Mansfield suggests that she might become a person like Miss Wyatt, who is the story's only character who is an unmarried woman older than thirty.

"Pay no attention to letter, must have been mad, bought hat-stand to-day—Basil"

Related Characters: Basil (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

Basil sends this telegram to Miss Meadows during the school day. A telegram was an expensive form of communication and every word would represent money Basil was spending, which explains why it is so much briefer than his letter. However, it doesn't seem likely that this is terse simply to cut costs—after all, he includes the news that he has bought a hat-stand, suggesting that he is not too concerned with the expense of each word. In this light, it seems that he leaves out any mention of Miss Meadows or her feelings because they matter to him less than his hat stand. His interest in furniture would align with stereotypes about gay men from the early 20th century, but like in all of the communications between Basil and Miss Meadows, he appears to be unkind and thoughtless even beyond the fact that he does not have romantic feelings for her. He seems to think he can erase all the suffering his earlier letter caused just by saying she should "pay no attention" to it, when she has been paying attention nearly nothing else for the entire story. At first, it is unclear how Miss Meadows will react to this telegram—perhaps this will be the final straw that makes her demand more of someone she marries. However, she is elated and immediately refers to him as her "fiancé" to Miss Wyatt, so it is clear that she has learned nothing from his unkindness or her own despair. She is willing to entrust her entire happiness and wellbeing to Basil, even when it's clear he doesn't deserve that trust at all.

"Oh, no, thank you, Miss Wyatt," blushed Miss Meadows. "It's nothing bad at all. It's"—and she gave an apologetic little laugh—"it's from my *fiancé* saying that . . . saying that—" There was a pause. "I see," said Miss Wyatt. And another pause. Then—"You've fifteen minutes more of your class, Miss Meadows, haven't you?"

Related Characters: Miss Wyatt, Miss Meadows (speaker), Basil

Related Themes:

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

By describing Basil as her fiancé, Miss Meadows shows that she accepts Basil's half-hearted and even insulting telegram as good enough to renew their engagement. She also seems to emphasize the word "fiancé" in a way that could indicate that she is pleased to be engaged again, but could also be a veiled insult to Miss Wyatt. Miss Wyatt is likely much older than Miss Meadows and she is still unmarried. Unlike the headmaster at Basil's school, a headmistress in a girls' school would likely leave her job if she did marry, so she would never have the benefit of a spouse that shared her work the way the headmaster of Basil's school and his wife evidently do. The role of headmistress is a lonelier and less supported role than headmaster then, because of the gender roles of their society. Miss Meadows emphasis of the word "fiancé" could be an unkind reminder to Miss Wyatt about what she is missing. Given how much despair Miss Meadows was feeling earlier in the story at the prospect of being single at thirty, she appears to think that a life like Miss Wyatt's would be cause for despair, and when she says the word "fiancé," she is reminding Miss Wyatt that she won't have to have that kind of life. However, Miss Wyatt's nasty delight in the possibility of bad news for Miss

Meadows suggests Miss Wyatt is not any kinder than Miss Meadows, as she appeared to be eager for Miss Meadows to have very bad news. It is likely that she has despair of her own that she is spreading around to others, much as Miss Meadows was earlier in the story through her unkindness to her students.

> "It ought to sound warm, joyful, eager [...]"

And this time Miss Meadows's voice sounded over all the other voices—full, deep, glowing with expression.

Related Characters: Miss Meadows (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, Miss Meadows is almost preposterously joyful about the renewal of her engagement to Basil, despite every sign that their marriage would be a disaster. She directs the girls to sing the summer song she assigns with a tone that is "warm, joyful, eager"—but unlike the autumn lament that makes them cry, it is not clear whether the girls follow Miss Meadows into her joy the way they became distraught when she was sad.

The fact that Miss Meadows chooses and sings a summer song when it is still autumn outdoors is a signal to the reader that she is in denial about how mixed the news from Basil really is. The girls had a natural, youthful pleasure in the autumn weather at the beginning of the story, but Miss Meadows doesn't seem to be able to feel both joyful and aware of reality at once. After she has connected the autumn weather to her fears of aging, she expresses joy by choosing a summer song—symbolically denying her progression of age, even though the youthful summer of her own life will not come back. This form of lying to herself mirrors how she is lying to herself about her terrible engagement. Since it is not clear how much the girls take on her joy, it is not clear how much anyone else is convinced by her delusion.

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 SINGING LESSON

Miss Meadows, a singing teacher, walks through the school where she works, heading toward her classroom. She is feeling despair "buried deep in her heart, like a wicked knife." Around her, girls are arriving at school, "rosy" from the chilly fall weather and full of excitement.

The story initially describes Miss Meadows's despair but not the cause of it—possibly because her despair has complex causes. The story only shows that she feels that she has a knife buried in her heart, which is quite a dramatic description of suffering. Mansfield shows the contrast between Miss Meadows and the girls, who are "rosy" and blooming. Miss Meadows, by contrast, feels that she is already becoming cold and aged, like the autumn weather.

Another teacher, the Science Mistress, stops Miss Meadows and mentions the cold weather. The Science Mistress, who looks sweet and blonde, notices that Miss Meadows looks cold. Miss Meadows thinks this kindness is insincere, wonders whether she "noticed anything," and says "oh, not quite as bad as that."

When the Science Mistress appears to be asking kindly if Miss Meadows is cold, Miss Meadows thinks something else is happening—that perhaps the Science Mistress has noticed Miss Meadows' despair and is cruelly commenting on it. Miss Meadows hides the truth about her feelings from the Science Mistress, showing that she expects hostility from the school community. While it isn't the main cause of her despair, this hostile community appears to be one reason she is so sad.

When Miss Meadows arrives in the classroom, the students are noisy. Her favorite student Mary Beazley is preparing Miss Meadows's seat at the piano, and Mary hushes the other students when Miss Meadows walks into the room. Miss Meadows taps her baton and demands silence without looking directly at Mary or anyone else. She imagines that the students will think she is angry today.

Miss Meadows is expecting unsympathetic judgment from her students, but she is also cold to them—in particular, toward Mary Beazley who is trying to please her by preparing her seat at the piano. Her feeling that she must defend herself and her despair from the unkindness she expects makes her behave unkindly herself. She is one of the people making the school community unkind.

Miss Meadows feels defiant in the face of her students' judgment. Their opinions don't matter to her, since today she is "bleeding to death, pierced to the heart" by a letter that her fiancé Basil left to end their engagement. He wrote that he loved her "as much as it is possible for me to love any woman" but that the notion of marriage makes him feel "disgust"—however, he lightly crossed out "disgust" and wrote "regret" over it.

This reveals the cause of Miss Meadows's despair—Basil has ended their engagement. While her description of "bleeding to death" suggests the loss of a great love, the letter from Basil hints heavily that he is gay (since he says that he cannot love a woman much, and feels disgust at the idea of presumably having a sexual relationship with her). He also seems careless about her feelings while he is rejecting her—he does not bother to cover the word "disgust," even after he changes his mind about using it. It seems that this was not a great love affair, and that he is rather cruel and careless to Miss Meadows.

Thinking of this, Miss Meadows walks to the piano where Mary Beazley greets her and offers her a **yellow chrysanthemum**. Mary has done this every day for a term and a half, which seems like "ages and ages" to Miss Meadows. For the first time, instead of greeting Mary and accepting the flower, Miss Meadows ignores Mary and speaks to the students coldly, ordering them to open their books. Mary blushes and nearly cries.

The thought of Basil's cruel breakup letter prompts Miss Meadows to be cruel to Mary Beazley in turn. She is not only lost in thought, she is outright unkind to Mary by refusing to speak to her or accept the gift that Marry offers her every morning. This shows how Basil's cruelty becomes Miss Meadows's despair, and her despair becomes cruelty, which spreads the despair to Mary.

The song Miss Meadows has chosen is called "A Lament," and she asks them all to sing it through together, without emotion. The lyrics describe the sadness of the passing of seasons, autumn turning into "Winter drear" as music "passes away from the listening ear." Even while the girls are not singing with emotion, Miss Meadows hears every note as "a sigh, a sob, a groan" and as she conducts, her rhythm matches her recollection of the words of Basil's break-up letter.

Miss Meadows's feelings about the autumn and her own dwindling prospects in life are closely connected with this song—from the name "A lament" to the invocation of autumn and winter, the song evokes sadness and aging. She feels that the words themselves, even sung without emotion, sound like crying—and the crying is directly connected to Basil's letter.

This letter came out of the blue, as Basil's previous letter had been all about the furniture he planned to buy for their future home. Miss Meadows recalls smiling at his plan to buy a hat stand that holds three hat brushes. She asks the students to sing again without emotion, but still she feels the sadness of the song. She recalls Basil's handsomeness and how he couldn't help knowing how handsome he was. She recalls him stroking his own hair and moustache.

Even in Miss Meadows's memory of the happy times in their courtship, Basil does not seem like a very passionate lover. The things she recalls about his interest in his own appearance and his focus on furniture align with that era's stereotypes about the vanity of gay men. Further, she doesn't recall anything about his personality that she likes beyond being glad that he is good-looking and wants to furnish a home for her. She does not seem to be in love with him either.

Miss Meadows thinks of another conversation she had with Basil, where he said that the headmaster's wife has asked him to dinner again, but he doesn't feel that he can refuse—even though he finds it annoying—because "it doesn't do for a man in my position to be unpopular"

Basil seems invested in his career and he expects to stay at the school where he teaches, whereas Miss Meadows would likely give up her job when she marries. He doesn't appear to like the people at his school any more than Miss Meadows does, but this illustrates a reason that they each might want to marry—Basil might want a wife to help him look good (and not gay) within his school community, and Miss Meadows wants to marry rather than endure the shame of being an old maid in her own school. However, both of them are marrying without love, to impress people they dislike. This moment also affirms Basil's devotion to keeping up appearances, as he chooses to go to annoying dinners for reasons of social propriety and advancement, rather than living in alignment with his true desires. This obviously connects to the suggestion that he is getting married merely to appear straight.

While the girls are still singing without emotion, Miss Meadows hears their voices as a "wail" and sees the trees out the window waving in the wind, having lost many of their leaves. She speaks to the girls in a strange, cold voice that makes the students afraid, and she asks them to sing the song again with as much expression as possible. As Miss Meadows describes how to fill the words of the song with emotion, the awful tone of her voice makes Mary Beazley writhe.

Miss Meadows has transmitted her despair to the children through her cruelty to Mary earlier in the story, and now she is transmitting her emotion again through the tone of her voice. Despair and sadness travel easily, and it seems that the joy the girls felt at the beginning of the story is completely gone. Miss Meadows appears to be very sensitive to the emotion in the song and in the weather, and Mary also appears to share this trait.

While the students are singing, Miss Meadows fixates on the fact that her engagement must truly be over. This engagement had seemed like a miracle to her, and also to the Science Mistress, because Basil is twenty-five and Miss Meadows is thirty. She remembers him first declaring love to her, saying "somehow or other, I've got fond of you" and touching her **ostrich feather boa**. Miss Meadows asks the girls to repeat the song, and they are so upset by the emotion in it that many of them begin to cry.

This is finally the heart of Miss Meadows's despair, which was hinted at in the beginning of the story. She is despairing because she is thirty and she believes she is now too old to find a desirable marriage again. In fact, the engagement with Basil was based on self-delusion, which is symbolized by him touching the ostrich feather boa. First of all, touching the boa rather than touching her is quite impersonal, and second, ostriches are known for burying their heads in the sand to avoid reality. That the boa is ostrich associates both Basil and Miss Meadows with this tendency to avoid painful reality and live instead in convenient delusion. With that delusion taken from her by the break-up letter, she must face her true hopelessness about her age and prospects in life as a woman of thirty.

While the girls sing, Miss Meadows thinks that it doesn't matter to her how little Basil loves her, but she knows he doesn't love her at all. He didn't even care enough about her feelings to cross out the word "disgust" so that she couldn't read it. She thinks that she will have to leave the school entirely rather than face the Science Mistress and the girls once they know about her broken engagement.

When Miss Meadows thinks it doesn't matter to her how little Basil loves her, she is showing that their marriage would be one of convenience for her just as much as it would be for him. She'd rather be unloved than humiliated in her community. Her level of dread about being known to be single again seems to show that this fear of being single at thirty and having everyone know it is her true motive for marrying. However, even a marriage of mutual friendship seems unlikely from Basil, who doesn't even care about her feelings enough to hide the word "disgust" in his letter, which underscores his cruelty.

A student, Monica, comes into the classroom appearing nervous. She tells Miss Meadows that the headmistress Miss Wyatt wants to see her. Miss Meadows asks her students to talk quietly until she returns. Many of the students are still crying.

Miss Meadows's despair has had such an extreme effect on her students that they are crying, which underscores how exaggerated Mansfield's portrait of despair is (and suggests that maybe she is a little satirical about the magnitude of emotion felt, considering the relative unimportance of losing a lackluster engagement).

Miss Wyatt is untangling her glasses from her lace tie when Miss Meadows arrives. Miss Wyatt kindly asks Miss Meadows to sit and says she has a telegram. Miss Meadows is at first afraid that Basil has committed suicide and she reaches for the telegram, but Miss Wyatt holds onto it for a moment, saying with kindness that she hopes it isn't bad news.

Miss Wyatt seems to be quite a bit older than Miss Meadows, as she untangles her glasses from her clothing, and has likely had promotions from teaching roles like Miss Meadows's to become Headmistress. She is also unmarried (since she is called "Miss")—this indicates that Miss Meadows might have a future at the school even if she does not marry Basil, or anyone else. In a way, Miss Wyatt can be seen as a possible future for Miss Meadows. Miss Meadows's expectation that Basil may have committed suicide and Miss Wyatt's evident expectation of bad news show that they both appear to expect the worst when the news is not yet known.

Miss Meadows reads the short telegram—it's from Basil, saying she should ignore his earlier letter and that he "must have been mad." He says he has bought a hat-stand.

This telegram from Basil saying he doesn't want to break up with her after all is extremely short and contains no reference to Miss Meadows at all, only himself. He reverses his opinion from the letter only by saying he "must have been mad"—or crazy. He never apologizes or acknowledges the distress he has caused, and then he says he bought a hat-stand, which is quite frivolous and underscores how inadequate this note is. It's uncertain at first how Miss Meadows will respond to this insulting and unkind telegram.

Miss Wyatt leans forward and again says she hopes it's not serious. Miss Meadows says it's not bad news—it's from her fiancé, she says, emphasizing the word "fiancé." Miss Wyatt says "I *see*" and reminds Miss Meadows that she still has fifteen minutes left to teach in her class. Before Miss Meadows leaves, Miss Wyatt scolds her for receiving a telegram containing good news during the school day. She says telegrams at work are only allowed for very bad news.

Miss Wyatt's kindness drops away as soon as it's clear that Miss Meadows has not had bad news. Mansfield suggests that Miss Wyatt enjoys bad news and feels sour toward Miss Meadows when she is happy. Where the adults of the school seem to relish sadness, there is no equivalent transmission of joy. Miss Meadows herself also emphasizes the word "fiancé" reminding Miss Wyatt that she will marry, where Miss Wyatt did not. In a way, this substantiates Miss Meadows' fear that the school community will judge her for not marrying—after all, she herself is being cruel to single Miss Wyatt by emphasizing the word "fiancé."

Miss Meadows returns to the music classroom "on the wings of hope, of love, of joy" and assigns the girls a different song. She turns to Mary Beazley and picks up the **yellow chrysanthemum** to hide her smile. The girls begin to sing the triumphant summer song Miss Meadows has assigned, but she stops them, saying they should sound more "warm, joyful, eager." She sings with them, with her voice "over all the other voices—full, deep, glowing with expression."

It seems amazing that Miss Meadows could take Basil back so easily and with so little suspicion when he has been so cruel to her, but Miss Meadows's joy is as extreme as her despair was. Just as her despair seemed disproportionate to her situation, her joy here is clearly precarious and based on a lie—her engagement is tepidly back on, but Basil has been shown to be cruel and unreliable, a person who is unlikely to make her happy. When Miss Meadows felt sad, she assigned an autumnal song (which was associated with her fear of aging), but now that she is happy, she assigns a summer song. The weather, though, is still clearly late fall—it's cold and stormy—so the out-of-step summer song embodies Miss Meadows' own delusional joy about her engagement, which is clearly not good.

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