



Thank You for the Lovely Tea

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This story perhaps reflects Gallant's sense of distance and disconnection as a result of spending much of her childhood in boarding schools. The central character in the story is Ruth Cook, a boarding-school student, who, while waiting for Mrs. Holland, her father's new, American girlfriend, to come pick up her for an afternoon tea, writes on the top of her desk "Life is Hell." Ruth, resigned to her boarding-school life, seems to have been conditioned to a passive, unemotional attitude. As her school's influence suggests, being emotional is being American, which is something worse than bad taste.

The tea, primarily an effort by Mrs. Holland to ingratiate herself with Ruth, is made even more uncomfortable by the fact that two of Ruth's friends, May and Helen, are invited along. Helen comes from a half-literate family with several children. Her dearest wish is to remain at the school as long as possible, to move from student to staff with no gap in between. May, who has been separated from a twin sister who goes to another school, feels split from a mirror half of herself but maintains the discipline learned at the school.

The conservative influence of the school is also symbolized by the fact that Helen cries whenever reminded of the recent death of King Edward and Rudyard Kipling, signaling a "year of change." However, things do not seem to change for the girls. The only issue pursuant to the tea is whether the girls remembered to thank Mrs. Holland. Ruth is left wondering if she will ever care about anyone, as she smiles placidly and breathes on the window, drawing a heart shape and watching it fade.

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