

This is an extract from Katherine Mansfield's short story 'An Ideal Family'.

www.gutenberg.org/files/1429/1429-h/1429-h.htm#chap14

That evening for the first time in his life, as he pressed through the swing door and descended the three broad steps to the pavement, old Mr Neave felt he was too old for the spring. Spring - warm, eager, restless - was there, waiting for him in the golden light, ready in front of everybody to run up, to blow in his white beard, to drag sweetly on his arm. And he couldn't meet her, no; he couldn't square up once more and stride off, jaunty as a young man. He was tired and, although the late sun was still shining, curiously cold, with a numbed feeling all over. Quite suddenly he hadn't the energy, he hadn't the heart to stand this gaiety and bright movement any longer; it confused him. He wanted to stand still, to wave it away with his stick, to say, 'Be off with you!' Suddenly it was a terrible effort to greet as usual - tipping his wide-awake with his stick - all the people whom he knew, the friends, acquaintances, shopkeepers, postmen, drivers. But the gay glance that went with the gesture, the kindly twinkle that seemed to say, 'I'm a match and more for any of you' - that old Mr Neave could not manage at all. He stumped along, lifting his knees high as if he were walking through air that had somehow grown heavy and solid like water. And the homeward-looking crowd hurried by, the trams clanked, the light carts clattered, the big swinging cabs bowled along with that reckless, defiant indifference that one knows only in dreams ...

It had been a day like other days at the office. Nothing special had happened. Harold hadn't come back from lunch until close on four. Where had he been? What had he been up to? He wasn't going to let his father know. Old Mr Neave had happened to be in the vestibule, saying good-bye to a caller, when Harold sauntered in, perfectly turned out as usual, cool, suave, smiling that peculiar little half-smile that women found so fascinating.

Ah, Harold was too handsome, too handsome by far; that had been the trouble all along. No man had a right to such eyes, such lashes, and such lips; it was uncanny. As for his mother, his sisters, and the servants, it was not too much to say they made a young god of him; they worshipped Harold, they forgave him everything; and he had needed some forgiving ever since the time when he was thirteen and he had stolen his mother's purse, taken the money, and hidden the purse in the cook's bedroom. Old Mr Neave struck sharply with his stick upon the pavement edge. But it wasn't only his family who spoiled Harold, he reflected, it was everybody; he had only to look and to smile, and down they went before him. So perhaps it wasn't to be wondered at that he expected the office to carry on the tradition. H'm, h'm! But it couldn't be done. No business - not even a successful, established, big paying concern - could be played with. A man had either to put his whole heart and soul into it, or it went all to pieces before his eyes ...

And then Charlotte and the girls were always at him to make the whole thing over to Harold, to retire, and to spend his time enjoying himself. Enjoying himself! Old Mr Neave stopped dead under a group of ancient cabbage palms outside the Government buildings! Enjoying himself! The wind of evening shook the dark leaves to a thin airy cackle. Sitting at home, twiddling his thumbs, conscious all the while that his life's work was slipping away, dissolving, disappearing through Harold's fine fingers, while Harold smiled ...

‘Why will you be so unreasonable, father? There’s absolutely no need for you to go to the office. It only makes it very awkward for us when people persist in saying how tired you’re looking. Here’s this huge house and garden. Surely you could be happy in—in—appreciating it for a change. Or you could take up some hobby.’

And Lola the baby had chimed in loftily, ‘All men ought to have hobbies. It makes life impossible if they haven’t.’

Well, well! He couldn’t help a grim smile as painfully he began to climb the hill that led into Harcourt Avenue. Where would Lola and her sisters and Charlotte be if he’d gone in for hobbies, he’d like to know? Hobbies couldn’t pay for the town house and the seaside bungalow, and their horses, and their golf, and the sixty-guinea gramophone in the music-room for them to dance to. Not that he grudged them these things. No, they were smart, good-looking girls, and Charlotte was a remarkable woman; it was natural for them to be in the swim. As a matter of fact, no other house in the town was as popular as theirs; no other family entertained so much. And how many times old Mr Neave, pushing the cigar box across the smoking-room table, had listened to praises of his wife, his girls, of himself even.

‘You’re an ideal family, sir, an ideal family. It’s like something one reads about or sees on the stage.’

‘That’s all right, my boy,’ old Mr Neave would reply. ‘Try one of those; I think you’ll like them. And if you care to smoke in the garden, you’ll find the girls on the lawn, I dare say.’

That was why the girls had never married, so people said. They could have married anybody. But they had too good a time at home. They were too happy together, the girls and Charlotte. H’m, h’m! Well, well. Perhaps so ...

1. Reread the first paragraph of the story. How does the writer use the language to develop the theme of old age and isolation?
2. Read the paragraph beginning with ‘Well, well! He couldn’t help a grim smile as painfully he began to climb ...’ to ‘... had listened to praises of his wife, his girls, of himself even.’ How does Mansfield use Mr Neave’s thoughts to develop the plot? What is the effect?
3. What is the effect of using spring imagery to show Neave’s mental and physical condition?

Extension task

1. Watch the song ‘Boulevard of Broken Dreams’ by Green Day.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Soa3gO7tL-c

How does the song show the theme of isolation? What symbols are used?

Teacher notes and suggested answers

The following answers are a guide only. Allow any supported, sensible comments.

1. Some possible selections:

Quotation	Effect
too old for spring	The phrase gives an idea that he is in his old age - mentally tired as well as physically.
white beard	This is a stereotyped image of old age.
old Mr Neave	The simple adjective suggests a defining label.
he stumped along, lifting his knees high as if he were walking through air that had somehow grown heavy and solid like water	The long, complex sentence could reflect his physical difficulties.
clanked/ clattered	Auditory imagery suggests the rough energy of city life contrasts with character's physical struggles.
heavy and solid like water	The simile intensifies the physical difficulties of old age.

- Establishes an undertone of regret. Gives context for character and develops the plot without including detailed flashbacks. Gives the reader a sense of the character's own weaknesses and frustrations at the end of his life - contrasts with how others view his life.
- Spring is personified as a woman. Contrasts with his old age - spring being associated with youth / start of life. Shows him turning away from life, cannot face the energy/activity/ renewal symbolised by the season of spring.

Extension task

Answers will vary but might comment on some of the following:

- expression
- eye makeup
- colours used
- movement
- though in a group, the lead singer is alone
- lyrics - empty road, broken dreams
- vulture as a symbol.