

Life and Death of Harriett Freen

by May Sinclair



About the Book

"In a few short pages," writes Francine Prose in her Introduction, "May Sinclair succeeds in rendering the oppressive weight and strength of the chains of family love." Young Harriett Freen is taught that "behaving beautifully" is paramount, and she becomes a self-sacrificing woman whose choices prove devastating to herself and to those who love her most. An early pioneer of stream-of-consciousness writing, Sinclair employs the technique brilliantly in this finely crafted psychological novel. Evoking the style and depth of her contemporaries Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence, Sinclair's haunting narrative also reflects her keen interest in the theories of Jung and Freud. The text of this Modern Library 20th Century Rediscovery was set from the first American edition of 1922.

Discussion Guide

1. May Sinclair has been credited with coining the phrase "-stream--of--consciousness writing." How effective is her use of this technique in **Life and Death of Harriett Freen**?
2. In her Introduction, Francine Prose writes about "the oppressive weight and strength of the chains of family love, of the craving for parental approval." The example she cites is Mr. Freen's discussion with Harriett after her forbidden expedition down Black's Lane. Can you find other examples? What happens to young Harriett's rebellious streak?
3. Harriett devotes her life to "behaving beautifully." Which characters in the novel would agree that she had achieved this goal, and which would disagree? Do you think she "behaved beautifully"?
4. The critic Judy Cooke has described this book as "a disturbing analysis of English class and character." How does Harriett see her own social status in relation to her friends and her servant, Maggie? What happens to the social standing of the Freen family over the course of the novel?

5. The blue egg and red campion are two recurring images throughout the novel. What do you think they symbolize?
6. A year after her mother's death, Harriett feels "the vague stirring of her individual soul." What changes does she decide to make? Does she take full advantage of this new opportunity to make her own life choices?
7. According to the scholar Jean Radford, "the new science of psychoanalysis offered [Sinclair] a theory of mental functioning and she drew in particular on the Freudian notions of repression and sublimation." Can you find evidence of this in **Life and Death of Harriett Freen**? Consider the characters of Priscilla and Robin, as well as the Freans.
8. Prose writes, "It would be a mistake to assume that lives and deaths like Harriett Freen's ended with the Victorian era or that some modern version of Harriett's life -isn't being lived at this very moment." Do you agree?

Author Bio

May Sinclair (1863?1946), poet, translator, critic, fiction writer, woman's suffrage advocate, and co-founder of a pioneering psychoanalytic clinic, was one of the most popular female British novelists of the early twentieth century. Her twenty-four novels include **Mary Olivier: A Life** and **The Three Sisters**.

Critical Praise

"A little masterpiece."

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