

# Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper

by Harriett Scott Chessman



## About the Book

Readers will be transported to the vibrant art scene of late nineteenth-century Paris in this richly textured portrait of the relationship between Mary Cassatt and her sister Lydia.

Beginning in the autumn of 1878, *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper* dreams its way into the intimate world of Cassatt's older sibling. Told in the reflective, lyrical voice of Lydia, who is dying of Bright's disease, the novel opens a window onto the extraordinary age in which these sisters lived, painting its sweeping narrative canvas with fascinating real-life figures that include Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Edgar Degas, Cassatt's brilliant, subversive mentor.

Shaded with intimations of mortality, **Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper** explores the dueling natures of art and desire, memory and identity, and romantic and sexual love. It is a moving and revealing portrait of the free-spirited artist and the sister and model who lived—and died—with such courage, dignity, and grace.

## Discussion Guide

1. Does Lydia's illness permeate her every action or does she transcend its physical limitations?
2. Why is Lydia so jealous of Mary's relationship with Edgar Degas?
3. Degas confesses to Lydia, "You show me how to live, if only I could do it as you do." What does he mean by this? What is Lydia's reaction?
4. How does Lydia feel about being the passive sitter as opposed to the active artist?
5. Lydia tells us that she cherishes her time with Mary, yet she feels guilt that she is keeping Mary from her work,

especially when her sister spends time nursing her during intense bouts of her illness. How does this dynamic play out in the story? Does Mary resent having to care for Lydia?

6. Describe Paris in the late 1800s through Lydia's eyes. How is it a different place from the Philadelphia she knows so well? Discuss what she means by being "in love with this bright and foreign life."

7. How would you describe Lydia's relationship with her mother and father? How does this compare to Mary's relationship with them?

8. What does Lydia admire most about Mary's work?

9. What is the message Lydia receives from Mary through her painting *Driving*? Is this Mary's lasting gift to her dying sister?

10. How does the spectre of The Civil War hover over the Cassatt family? In what ways has it influenced all their lives?

11. Because of Lydia's illness, images of mortality?some graphic, others allusive and allegorical?are found throughout the novel. What is the author trying to say about death and life?

12. Lydia says she "can't tell May my thoughts, because she can't bear to face illness or death. My whole family's like that." How does Lydia feel about this? What has made her family this way?

13. Why does Lydia have such a powerful, visceral reaction to the subject of one of Mary's paintings, *Woman Reading*? As Lydia says, "I can't think it is, and yet I know, with exquisite pleasure, that it is." How does she view herself as model and muse for her sister?

14. As death draws nearer, how does Lydia change?

## Author Bio

Harriet Scott Chessman has taught modern literature and writing at Yale University, and is a member of the faculty of Bread Loaf School of English. She has published a novel, **Ohio Angels**, essays on art and literature, two children's stories, and an interpretation of Gertrude Stein's writings entitled **The Public is Invited to Dance**. Her novel-in-progress is about a contemporary family in which three generations of women, bridging Europe and America, become aware of the vital gaps in their knowledge of each other's secret life and history. She has recently moved with her family to the Bay Area.

## Critical Praise

"Lovely...Chessman beautifully captures the rich relationship between model and painter, and between sisters."

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