

## Why Do These Men Do the Things That They Do?

Sonta Clouatre

**Course:** English 102

**Instructor:** Ms. Amy Acosta

**Essay Type:** Short Story Analysis

In a world labeled with "dos" and "don'ts," many people think society will accept anything morally wrong as long as society does not know about the sin at face value. If people do not realize what is going on, how can they accept or reject it? Many also have a tendency to stereotype people for what they see and not for what they do. Further, they may either ignore the truth or refuse to come to terms with the reality of a situation. These sentiments are reflected in "No One's a Mystery" by Elizabeth Tallent and "Can-Can" by Arturo Vivante—both essays dealing with men having affairs. The husbands in the stories are looking for something other than what they receive from their wives; they seek to hide their infidelities from their spouses, yet they feel no guilt over their actions. In both stories, the thought of breaking up their marriage for their mistress is not even an option. Their affairs dangle in mid-air, suspended, as if time has stopped. They are treated merely as loose interactions with other humans rather than adulterous acts negating their commitments to their mates.

In both "No One's a Mystery" and "Can-Can," the mistresses of the husbands seem to be jealous and even resentful of their lovers' wives, though it is more pronounced in the second case. In "No One's a Mystery," the narrator loves her married lover in an unrealistic, immature manner that could be attributed to the inexperience of her eighteen years. She even mentions idealistic dreams of marrying him and bearing his children. She states in her diary, "In a year I'll write 'Jack should be home any minute now. The table's set-my grandmother's linen and her old silver and the yellow candles left over from the wedding—but I don't know if I can wait until

after the trout a la Navarra to make love to him" (Tallent 12). She continues, "In two years I'll write, 'Jack should be home by now. Little Jack is hungry for his supper. He said his first word today besides 'Mama' and 'Papa.' He said 'kaka'" (Tallent 12). She literally wants to take over the role of her lover's wife. In the story "Can-Can," the description of the mistress is much shorter, but the point is conveyed in only one sentence. Her resentment or disdain for her lover's wife is shown in limited, but effective, dialogue when she says, "Oh, for a moment I was afraid you were thinking of your wife" (Vivante 6). It is obvious in both stories that the mistresses want to be the only ones on their lovers' minds when they are together. They want the ideas and truths of wives and fidelity left at home so that all attention can be focused on them.

In both stories, the husbands seem confident of their wives' actions and responses. In "No One's a Mystery," the husband immediately knows his wife is driving behind them because he says, "She keeps the lights on in the daytime" and also, "She's driving exactly fifty-five miles an hour" (Tallent 10). These observations may seem trivial or shallow on the surface, but their mention symbolizes all that spouses learn and know about each other simply from being married for an extended period. In the story "Can-Can," the husband knows his wife will not question his going out for a drive. The author writes, "She wasn't the least bit inquisitive, though jealous she was in silent, subtle ways" (Vivante 5). The husband's true reason for a "drive" is later revealed, when the author notes, "He wasn't simply going out for a drive, as he said, but going to a cafe to meet Sarah, whom his wife knew but did not suspect, and with her go to a house on a lake his wife knew nothing about—a summer cottage to which he had a key" (Vivante 6). The husband's confidence in his wife's ignorance is unquestioned. This mirrors the attitude of the husband in "No One's a Mystery." Neither husband seems to feel he will be caught. However, in "No One's a Mystery," Jack pushes his mistress onto the floor of the truck to hide her from his wife; when his

mistress says, "She'll see your lips move, Jack. She'll know you're talking to someone," he replies, "She'll think I'm singing along with the radio" (Tallent 11).

Further, neither the husband in "No One's a Mystery" nor in "Can-Can" appears to feel any guilt over his actions of infidelity. In the first story, the husband, Jack, does not speak of his wife lovingly or with respect, but rather scoffs at her habits of keeping her car lights on in the daytime and driving fifty-five miles per hour (Tallent 10). In "Can-Can," the husband thinks of his wife and wishes his mistress would not show up at the cafe for their appointment, but his feeling this way is merely selfish. He is not thinking about how hurt his wife would be if she knew where he was; instead, he is remembering the physical attraction he felt toward his wife when he left her in the living room of their house with his eldest daughter, "her skirt bunched up, attractively" (Vivante 6). Later, when he is at the lake house in bed with his mistress, he still thinks of his wife, wishing he was with her and not with his lover. Again, this longing is not bred out of the love he feels for his wife or his guilt over being with another woman. It is merely a base feeling of carnality that makes him want to be elsewhere.

Both short stories—"No One's a Mystery" and "Can-Can"—are about affairs. In neither case does the husband feel guilt over his actions of infidelity or desire to terminate either his affair or his marriage. Both husbands are selfish and self-absorbed, completely oblivious to the effects their indiscretions might have on their families or their little or no evidence that either character is contemplating changing his ways. While the fate of each marriage or affair remains unknown, the comparisons between them can clearly be drawn and illustrated, and the stories leave the reader wondering, "Why do these men do the things that they do?"

## Works Cited

Shapard, Robert and James Thomas, eds. *Sudden Fiction: American Short Stories*. Salt Lake

City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1986.

Tallent, Elizabeth. "No One's A Mystery." Shapard and Thomas 10-12.

Vivante, Arturo. "Can-Can." Shapard and Thomas 5-6.

**Ms. Acosta's Comments:** *This is an incredibly mature analysis of two incredibly immature men.*