



Teachers' Notes
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SCOUT *by Nicole Plüss*

Summary

The daughter of a sea captain who died when she was an infant, Kit Lovell is used to relying on the charity of her family. Her mother, unable to provide an independent life for them both, has had to depend on the hospitality of her brother and his wife, who are quick to remind her of her shortcomings in life. So when the opportunity to remarry presents itself, Mrs. Lovell feels that she has little choice but to take a chance and accept the offer of '*Mr. McKenzie, a lighthouse keeper on Kangaroo Island off the South Australian coast*' (p.9). Hence it is the promise of a better life that forces Kit to board the *Scout* with her mother.

Whilst anxious to learn that they will be traveling in the cramped accommodation of steerage, Kit is quickly captivated by the various characters aboard the ship. However, her mother's disapproval compels her to resist the temptation of their friendship. In spite of this, she and Clarissa quickly form an unlikely friendship. Whilst Kit is keenly aware of the expectations governing her behavior, Clarissa proves to be the polar opposite; caring very little for the approval of others. She enjoys the attention of the men on the ship, particularly the first mate who has '*difficulty dragging his eyes from*' (p.31) her. She conveniently fails to tell him that she is already engaged to another and proves herself quite the entrepreneur as she establishes a '*thriving [laundry] business*' (p.47). She is '*all skirt and loose flying hair like a breath of fresh air*' (p.47) whilst Kit is suffocated by her mother's endless expectations.

Quite the dramatist, Clarissa eagerly divulges that her new friend is the daughter of '*Captain William Lovell*' (p.33) and creatively imagines the tragic '*love story*' (p.34) of Kit's parents. Yet this love story was far from what Kit '*had been brought up to believe*' and she was '*ready to cling to every word that the first mate might utter*' (p.34) about her father. With their identity now apparent, Kit and her mother are moved from the cramped conditions of steerage '*to one of the cabins*

beneath the poop' (p.35). It is here that they meet '*Mr. Hatley, the surgeon ... and the Purvis siblings, Mr. Linley, Mr. Henry and Miss Annabel*' (p.36).

Uncomfortable with the increased attention caused by their move, and questions about her husband, Mrs. Lovell constantly reminds Kit that they must be above reproach and even goes so far to criticise her for '*how much [she] ate at the table*' (p.44). There results a sort of stand-off between them; Katherine is desperate to learn more about her father yet Mama turns '*the conversation away, deflecting any mention of him*' (p.45).

With very little to do for entertainment, the presence of '*huge flocks of seabirds swooping through the sky*' (p.47) serves as competitive target practice for Mr. Henry, Miss Annabel and the captain. With the '*trail of dead or struggling birds stretched in [their] wake*' (p.53) the presence of Death is keenly felt as passengers are reminded of both their own mortality and the potential dangers of their sea voyage.

It is at this moment of vulnerability that Kit encounters Gabriel Clarke whom she often caught '*looking at*' (p.55) her. It is when they are together that Kit feels herself torn between her mother's expectations and what she, herself, wants to do. She seems '*entirely unable to help*' (p.56) herself as she is inexplicably drawn towards him. Much of the journey is centered on Kit's torn loyalty to her mother and her desire to be true to herself. She and Angel develop their relationship in secret, against the backdrop of the harsh sea voyage. When a number of passengers succumb to the effects of sickness, Kit is again reminded of the precarious nature of life. The harsh elements magnify the lessons '*concerning the survival of the fittest and the way of nature*' (p.78), and it is perhaps the realities of such a setting that compel Kit to risk a relationship with '*the Irish sailor*' (p.54).

With a horrific storm blowing them '*off course and the mast*' (p.109) being severely damaged, the *Scout* sails for the nearest port. Whilst others were '*in a fluster at the news*' (p.109) of their stay in Rio de Janeiro, '*such an extravagance*' as leaving the ship '*was beyond*' (p.109) the Lovells. They were stuck '*on this horrible ship with these horrible people, and there's nothing [they] can do about it*' (p.110). Whilst such powerlessness causes Mrs. Lovell to bitterly distance herself from everyone else, it causes Kit to question all that she knows. She is increasingly unsure of their quest for a new life and her frustration increases as her mother refuses to discuss these issues with her. She resents the constant feeling of not being '*quite good enough*' (p.113) and desperately tries to make sense of her confusion. She recognizes that there is something '*loose inside [her], knocking about and causing damage to the person [she] is*' (p.113). Kit's independence and her courage to be her own person develop as the journey progresses. It is with this strength that she opens herself to the new experiences of the port and the ship itself.

The prospect of reaching the colonies of Australia proves exciting for most of the passengers; however, others hold the traditions of England close to their heart. The social norms governing the behavior of women were particularly important to some, which then causes conflict as others seem keen to use the journey as a time to throw caution to the wind. When the *Scout* hits an iceberg the brave few who decide that their '*chances are better*' to stay '*on the ship*' (p.177) carry the burden of watching as the sea claims the lives of their fellow passengers who flee the ship on the longboats. The presence of Death once again hangs over the ship; as Kit farewells the kind Mr. Linley she is faced with the reality that she is powerless to do anything but '*watch them drown*' (p.181). Far from giving up, Kit is mobilized to action. As the remaining crew work hard to keep the *Scout* afloat, she assumes the responsibility of jettisoning any non-essential items from the ship. As the '*chests became connected in [her] mind to the people who owned them [she] wanted to save them all*' (p.189), yet she is quickly forced to push aside any feelings of sentimentality as she has to sacrifice her own worldly possessions. Kit is determined to play an active role in their survival, unlike her mother who retreats to their cabin believing that '*there's nothing to do but pray*' (p.184). As they face their own mortality, Kit and Angel are able to admit their feelings to each other, whilst Clarissa (even more outrageously) takes to being the mistress of the first mate; both young ladies rebelling against the conservative expectations that usually govern their behavior.

It is a miracle when they are saved from a certain death by the whaling ship, *Amity*. The surviving women are united by the fact that they will never be free to live their own lives; forever dependent on others to secure their fortunes and reputations. However, Australia is a place of opportunity and possibility – where it is possible to make a new life. Whilst they do not have the luxury of marrying '*for love ... nothing less than love*' (p.219), Kit and her mother do have the courage to create their own futures in Australia. With a little help, from Mr. Linley, they are able to buy '*time, in the form of some land ... time in the sense that [they] would not be forced into a decision ever again*' (p.230).

Before Reading the Novel

- Consider the cover of the book and the inside map. Are you able to get a feeling about the story based on the cover and blurb? What does it give away that could help you piece together what might happen in the book? Record your ideas so that you can revisit them during your reading of the novel.
- Research the early sea voyages from England to Australia. What sorts of boats were used? What were the conditions of travel like? Why did people leave to travel to the colonies?

Character Profiles

Kit Lovell

It is easy to forget that Kit is just fifteen years of age, as her wisdom and maturity far exceed her years. She is constantly torn between her mother's stifling expectations and the person that she wants to be. Her mother's failure to be open and honest, about both her father and her recent decision to move them to Australia, frustrates Kit as she is rendered a helpless participant in her own life. The harsh criticism of her extended family has constantly left her feeling as though she is not good enough. Despite her loyal commitment to her mother, Kit is also an independent young woman. Whilst mindful of the fact that her mother would disapprove of both her friendship with Clarissa and her relationship with Angel, she still pursues their company. In many ways she is the mediator between many of the ship's passengers, befriending the eccentric Mr. Linley whilst also tolerating the hospitality of Miss Annabel. She develops a new respect for her mother after learning the truth about her parents' relationship, and gives her mother the courage to follow her own dreams rather than relying on the support of others.

Mrs. Lovell

Mrs. Lovell presents herself as anxious, bitter and rigid; there appears to be no flexibility to her conservative ideals and she is often unfairly critical of her daughter. She is too proud to accept the charity of others and is pained whenever they find themselves at the centre of attention. It is only after admitting to Kit that she never regretted marrying her father that she is then free to live her own life, without the fear of judgment from others. Unlike Clarissa, Mrs. Lovell does not possess the freedom or power to choose her own future. It is only after the sinking of the *Scout* that she chooses not to marry the Scottish lighthouse keeper.

Clarissa

Fiercely independent, Clarissa cares very little about what others think of her and enjoys being the centre of attention. She refuses to conform to the expectations about how a woman should behave and is not afraid to vocalize her opinions on the matter. Through her laundry business, Clarissa reflects the potential of female independence; despite the times and her social class. She parades around the deck and openly flirts with the first mate, going so far as to bed him despite already being engaged to another. There is, perhaps an element of survival in Clarissa choosing to bed the first mate, she is aware that her position as a single female woman of low class is vulnerable and she aligns herself to the man most likely to protect her. This is why the argument with Mrs. Lovell in the cuddy

cuts so close to the bone; she knows what she's doing is wrong, but she fears the consequences of potentially being used sexually by all the sailors in a situation where social norms could easily break down. Ignoring the advice of Mrs. Lovell, Clarissa refuses to marry Mr. Phillips and prefers to risk the damage that this will do to her reputation. Yet it is not just Mr. Phillips that she rejects, but also the life in England he offers. By accepting Mr. Hodgkisson's proposal, there is a sense that she knows exactly whom she is marrying as, being from the same village, they have the same values; and it is that life that she chooses as much as him. Whilst she is not marrying for love, Clarissa challenges the subservient status of women by choosing who she wants to marry. Whilst some are quick to dismiss her as a bad influence for Kit, she does teach her that it is possible to take risks and be your own person.

The Purvis siblings

The three Purvis siblings are quite different from each other. Whilst Miss Annabel and Mr. Henry resent having been forced to leave their life of privilege in England, Mr. Linley is excited to be really living his life and embarking on a new adventure. Miss Annabel's snobbery and self absorption proves her difficult to tolerate. Whilst some passengers admire Miss Annabel as a good example of the sort of woman that Kit should aspire to become, Mrs. Lovell clearly discourages her daughter from dressing or behaving like her. Despite his quirks, Mr. Linley is a kind man who is grateful for the chance to live his own life, rather than relying on the spoils of his ancestors. He and Kit develop an unlikely friendship and he sacrifices his future to ensure the Lovell's have the opportunity to achieve a better life. Mr. Linley is representative of a new ideology; he is a man of ideas which is a rarity for his time.

The Scout

The ship itself may be viewed as though it is another character. With its '*close and creaking*' (p.18) surfaces and an '*indescribable*' (p.18) stench, it serves as home to the displaced passengers who all desperately hope to find better lives in Australia. The different levels of accommodation clearly create a social hierarchy within the passengers and reflect traditional English society of the time. There is a strong sense of ownership and responsibility that the crew has towards the ship and they work tirelessly to save her. Kit experiences a sense of loss as she watches the ship slowly sink; becoming yet another life that is claimed by the sea.

Themes

Expectations & Judgment

- Before leaving for Australia, Rachel Lovell seems to have to live her life to suit her family as her sister-in-law demands that she '*do it for me*' (p.12). There is a clear sense that she and her daughter are being pushed out of the family home on the death of the grandmother.
- Kit observes that she '*could spend the whole voyage trying to get it right [the journal] and still fail*' (p.22) her cousin's expectations.
- Mrs. Lovell urges Katherine to '*try to pull yourself together ... everyone is watching you*' (p.24) when she is upset to be leaving.
- Kit knows that '*her mother would be horrified at*' (p.32) Clarissa's flirting.
- Mrs. Belmore makes the snide observation that the Lovell's must have '*friends in high places*' (p.35) after they are moved from steerage to a cabin.
- The Lovell's have the status of being the family of a ship captain, which is a status of higher value at sea than at land. They are between decks in every sense.
- Mrs. Lovell accuses Kit of being greedy at dinner and that '*everyone was watching*' (p.44) her.
- Clarissa's enterprise is '*considered ... demeaning but [Kit's] mother considers virtually all female enterprise demeaning*' (p.47).
- Kit is worried about what her mother might think of her friendship with Angel and reminds him that he '*shouldn't call [her] Kit*' (p.55)
- Mrs. Lovell is mortified that Kit is involved in '*a crossing the line ceremony*' (p.63), convinced that her daughter must never '*partake in anything so improper, undignified, intolerable and unnecessary ever again!*' (p.66).
- Mrs. Lovell is determined that they not be seen as '*the poor cousins, begging clothes at every landfall*' (p.120) and therefore refuses Mrs. Benning's generosity.
- Kit is not permitted to attend '*a dance at the British Consul's house*' (p.120) as there will be '*people judging [them]. Judging the clothes [they] wear and the life [they] lead*'. (p.121)
- Miss Annabel declares that '*Mrs. Sarah Benning had forgotten how to live as a gentlewoman. She had been away from society for too long.*' (p.133)
- Despite their precarious circumstances, Mrs. Lovell could not turn '*a blind eye*' to '*Clarissa ... openly sharing the first mate's bed*' (p.201), warning Clarissa that she will '*be marked for ever, her reputation would be ruined*' (p.202).
- There is a thread in the novel that Mrs. Lovell and Kit could hold their own in society. Mr. Linley is the top card on board and he is their friend. Whilst Kit's cultured upbringing is hinted at when she plays the piano very well, both Kit and her mother are very modest in this. They are in-between

classes and it will be difficult for any of them to find their level or to replicate their position back in England.

Independence & Identity

- Not knowing much about her father, Kit is '*ready to cling to every word the first mate might utter*' (p.34) about him.
- Despite never being at sea before, Kit believes that she has '*salt water*' (p.77) in her veins, just like her father.
- Kit seems '*to have no control*' when around Angel. '*At one moment [she] was so overwhelmed [she] couldn't speak and the next he had [her] smiling*'. (p.77)
- Mr. Linley is exhilarated to be '*living through*' a storm at sea, which is '*something wild and unpredictable. Unlike anything [he] could have imagined*'. (p.87)
- Kit's foolhardy determination to try and save the captain's dog shows her courage.
- Kit stands up to her mother and justifies why she allows the ship's cook to examine her injured arm (p.103).
- Mrs. Lovell's refusal of Mrs. Benning's generous offer of some dresses for Kit may be seen as an attempt to proudly assert their independence. (p.120)
- Pushing her luck, Kit accepts an invitation to dance at the ship's party, managing '*to stay for two*' (p.126) dances with Angel.
- Fearing that her '*life would always be lived at a safe distance, that the worry of what might happen or what people might think would become so strong that [she'd] do nothing*' (p.132) compels Kit to leave the ship to explore the port of Rio de Janeiro in the dead of night.
- Whilst her position in society affords her the luxury of independence, Miss Annabel is also very quick to assert her own opinions.
- As Angel and Kit watch the whales in the predawn light she feels '*content ... or at least happy*' (p.145).
- Kit's determination convinces her mother that they '*should stay on the ship*' (p.176). She also asserts herself by refusing the stay in the cabin and pray '*when everyone is outside working*' (p.184). This is the main display of independence that is borne out of her experiences on board and the relationships she's formed.
- Mrs. Lovell incredulously insists that Clarissa must marry Mr. Phillips, yet she is determined to honor her promise (or stick with her original plan) to become '*Mrs. Clarissa Hodgekisson ... It's how she sees herself*'. (p.218)
- Mrs. Redmond admits that she's '*not comfortable*' (p.220) with her marriage to the captain, that she '*can't remember what I was thinking*'. (p.220)

New Beginnings

- The precious contents of Kit's sea chest and her glory box may symbolize both her hope for the future, as they will help her to establish a new life, and the weight of expectation from her previous life. (p.2) The sea chest is connected to the inventory in Kit's head, and once gone, there is the sense that her worth is no longer measured by her possessions.
- Whilst Kit does not really understand why they are leaving England, she is committed to follow her mother '*wherever ... [she] chose to go*' (p.10).
- All the Purvis siblings '*wanted was a high patch of land, with good soil and a permanent creek*' (p.42) in Adelaide. Whilst this dream reflects Miss Annabel's desire for status, for Mr. Linley it is about establishing an independent life that is built on merit not inheritance.
- Mr. Linley is tremendously excited to have the opportunity '*to carve [their] name into the stone where no name has previously been carved*' (p.43).
- Mr. Linley's '*mysterious chest*' with its '*small packages of seeds*' (p.195) represent both the treasured traditions of their past lives and the hope for establishing a new life in the colonies. '*This was the funny obsession he was taking to the new colony – the flowers of home.*' (p.195) By taking the seeds with her, Kit is empowered to begin a new life but is also able to honour her friend.
- It is with Mr. Linley's fortune that Kit and her mother have the independence to create their own future. (p.229)

Truth and Secrecy

- All Kit can do is trust that her mother '*has made the right decision ... because she won't share it*' (p.10) with her.
- Unwilling to discuss her deceased husband, Mrs. Lovell is accused of having '*secrets to hide*'. (p.41)
- Kit hides her affection for Angel from her mother; '*it was a rare time I had ever hidden something from her.*' (p.61)
- Kit highlights the absurdity of her mother's declaration that '*at the next port [they] will leave this ship and find another one*' (p.103) by showing no remorse for her insolence when she '*was only speaking the truth*'. (p.104)
- Acutely aware of her mother's ever present disapproval as she '*instinctively hid [the orange] in [her] pocket*' (p.115).
- Kit cannot possibly tell her mother that she was watching the whales, with Angel, in the predawn light, and therefore explains that she'd '*ducked down to the cuddy to use the water closet ... the lie came surprisingly easily to [her] tongue*'. (p.145)
- After she shares a passionate kiss with Angel, Kit realizes that '*if [she] can't tell Mama what was happening then it must stop; it must stop immediately*' (p.159).

- Once Mrs. Lovell admits to Kit that she '*wouldn't marry Mr. McKenzie if [she] didn't have to*' (p.205) their relationship changes. Kit appreciates her mother's belated honesty.
- Kit and Mrs. Lovell prefer to maintain discretion about their lives as, whilst aboard the ship, they are in a state of flux. They do not yet know the 'truth' of their future positions in Australia.

Text, Style, Mood and Structure

- *Scout* is primarily a coming of age narrative. However, due to its appeal to a female audience, the text could be used as part of a broader genre study or as one option within a Literature Circles program.
- Nicole Plüss draws from the genre of a shipboard journal to construct her narrative. Have students' research real life sea voyages to compare the authenticity of Plüss' text.
- Mr. Linley enjoys reciting poetry. Students could analyse the original poems and explore any links with Plüss' narrative.
- Whilst the relationship between Kit and Angel propels a good part of the text, there is no indication as to what happens once they leave the ship. Whilst aboard the *Amity* he tells Kit to call him Gabriel, which may suggest that he no longer identifies himself as a sailor; thus creating the potential for him to leave the sea and be with her is enabled. Students could write a prologue which explores their possible future together.
- There appears to be a multitude of rules governing the behavior of women. Do such rules still exist?
- Kit and her mother are faced with the torturous decision as to whether they stay on the *Scout* or board the longboats. Have students discuss and debate the decision that they would have made.
- The text offers the opportunity for students to explore some personal and creative writing of their own:
 - Kit thinks about Mr Linley and the '*conversations we never managed to finish*' (p.1). What are these conversations and how could they have been finished?
 - Most of the passengers take a few treasured possessions with them to help establish their lives in Australia. What essential items would you take with you to start a new life?
 - Kit never manages to write a letter to Charlie. Imagine that she had, what would it say?