

Name: _____ Class: _____

Jackie Kennedy Onassis: An Icon for the Ages

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Jackie Kennedy Onassis (1929-1994) was the former First Lady of the United States. She was married to John F. Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States, who was assassinated in 1963. In this informational text, Shelby Ostergaard discusses Jackie's life and time as First Lady. As you read, take notes on Jackie's relationship with the media and the public.

[1] She had been dubbed “the most intriguing woman in the world,” but just who was Jackie Kennedy Onassis? Socialite?¹ Book editor? First Lady? Patron? She was all of these things and more. She was a style icon and, as the wife to President John F. Kennedy, she was the first First Lady to become a bonafide² celebrity. If the Kennedy dynasty was the closest thing to a royal family that the American public ever had, then Jackie Kennedy was its queen and media darling. Nearly every move Jackie made was subject to intense media scrutiny. Even now, almost twenty-five years after her death, there still is a public fascination with her.



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Early Life

Jackie Kennedy Onassis was born Jacqueline Lee Bouvier in Southampton, New York, on July 28, 1929. Her father was a wealthy Wall Street stockbroker, and her mother was a well-respected socialite. As a teenager, Jackie was an accomplished equestrian,³ an enthusiastic reader and a classical ballerina. When she debuted⁴ in Manhattan, she was considered one of the most promising debutantes⁵ of the season. In 1947, she graduated from Miss Porter's School, a prestigious boarding school in Connecticut. She went on to continue her education at Vassar College in New York. She spent her junior year in Paris but would later transfer to the George Washington University in Washington, D.C., in order to be closer to her stepfather's Virginia estate. Jackie was popular in both New York and Washington high society.

1. a person well-known in upper class society
2. genuine; real
3. a rider or performer on horseback
4. to make a formal entrance into society
5. an upper-class young woman making her first appearance into society

Jack and Jackie

In May of 1952, Jackie was formally introduced to U.S. Representative John F. Kennedy — known by those close to him as “Jack” — at a dinner party. He had charm, wit, good looks, wealth, and political aspirations. She had intelligence, beauty, grace, and social connections. They both had an Irish-Catholic heritage, a love of letters, and a desire for a more exciting life than what suburbia promised. Their September 1953 wedding was the social event of the season.

After the wedding, the couple settled into life in Washington, D.C. Jackie remained a prominent socialite, often having her photo taken at some of the most lavish high-society parties. Almost every aspect of the couples’ life was played out in the public eye. John F. Kennedy was portrayed as the handsome, rising politician, while Jackie was depicted as the beautiful, sophisticated socialite. Their first daughter, Caroline Kennedy, was born in 1957, and the couple posed with the newborn on the cover of *Life* magazine, a hugely popular publication at the time.

- [5] On the surface, they were seen as the perfect family. In reality, they had their challenges. The couple spent a lot of time apart. John F. Kennedy suffered from Addison's disease⁶ and was always in great pain. Jackie had previously suffered a miscarriage and a stillbirth. Despite their struggles, the picturesque portrait of the family persisted in the public's mind, and John F. Kennedy became a very popular politician. Encouraged by this popularity, Kennedy announced his candidacy for the Presidency of the United States on January 3, 1960.

As First Lady

John F. Kennedy was sworn into office as President of the United States in January 1961. In her role as First Lady, Jackie quickly became a trendsetter. She was the first presidential wife to hire a press secretary,⁷ and she carefully cultivated⁸ her relationship with the press and media. This carefully constructed image often gave the public impression that she was the ideal woman. She dedicated much of her time to being a patron to the arts and hosted many social events, bringing politicians and artists together.

Her time as the First Lady is also known for the restoration of the White House. She redesigned many rooms and replaced its furniture. She also oversaw the replanting of the White House Rose Garden. Before she became First Lady, the furnishing in the White House rooms held little historical significance. She tracked down many historical pieces and founded the Committee for the Preservation of the White House. The historical and museum aesthetic that the White House has today is a result of her efforts.

6. a disorder in which the glands above your kidneys don't produce enough hormones, resulting in various health problems
7. a person responsible for press and public relations for an important public figure
8. to develop something through careful attention

Style Icon

As First Lady, Jackie was often both applauded and criticized for the way she dressed. On the one hand, she was stylish and praised for her iconic outfits — which included bright colors and pillbox hats. Going to state dinners and political events, she often looked like she could have stepped out of *Vogue* magazine. On the other hand, as much as Americans loved their young First Lady, there were many columns inches that questioned whether she dressed “appropriately.” Jackie’s clothes would have been considered completely appropriate for a stylish young European woman, but they defied the convention of what a good American wife should be wearing in the 1960s.

Tragedy

As majestic as Jackie Kennedy's life seemed, it was also full of tragedy. In addition to the miscarriage she suffered and the birth of a stillborn child, she endured the death of another infant son, Patrick, while in the White House.

- [10] Then, on November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. This occurred as the two of them rode in an open car in a presidential motorcade.⁹ The assassination was captured on video and broadcasted across the country. There were many photos of a bloodsoaked Jackie Kennedy desperately trying to aid her wounded husband.

Jackie had faced harsh public criticism on how she handled her grief as First Lady while mourning the loss of Patrick, but she was roundly praised by the media for how she handled the loss of her husband. Jackie believed she had a duty to all Americans grieving the loss of their President. She planned a state funeral for her husband; it was modeled after Abraham Lincoln's service and featured a closed casket. She led the procession and lit the eternal flame.¹⁰ She gave an interview to *Life* magazine just a week after her husband's death. In this famous interview, she compared her husband's years in the White House to King Arthur's mythical Camelot. Because of her, President Kennedy's administration is often referred to as the "Camelot Era."

No Longer First Lady

Jackie received hundreds of thousands of condolence letters from Americans. A year after President Kennedy's assassination, she moved to New York with her children. She found solace with her brother-in-law, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who had remained close to her and her children during those difficult years. She encouraged him to run for President in 1968, gave her public support, and even campaigned for him. But that same year, on June 6, he too was fatally shot. Jackie fell into a depression and expressed concern for her life and the lives of her children. “If they're killing Kennedys,” she said, “then my children are targets. I want to get out of this country.”

In October of 1968, four months after Robert Kennedy's death, Jackie married Aristotle Onassis, a longtime friend of hers and a wealthy Greek shipping magnate. Like many of her decisions, this was harshly criticized. She took the legal name Jackie Onassis; the press derisively¹¹ called her “Jackie O.” During their marriage, the couple lived in both Europe and the United States. Jackie remained close with the Kennedy family, especially Ted Kennedy, President Kennedy's younger brother.

9. a parade of cars

10. a flame that is kept burning to symbolize that something will never end

She lived a very full life, working as a book editor at Viking Press and Doubleday after her second husband's death in 1975. She had a hand in several popular books at the time, such as Michael Jackson autobiography *Moonwalk*, *The Cartoon History of the Universe*, and the translation of *Cairo Trilogy*. She was working as a senior editor when, in 1993, she was thrown from a horse and taken to a hospital. While she was being examined, doctors realized that she had lymphoma. The cancer spread, and she died in her sleep on May 19, 1994.

Legacy

- [15] Today, female political figures, from Michele Bachmann to Michelle Obama, often have their fashion decisions heavily scrutinized. The 1960s had begun to usher in a new era of televised culture, and Jackie Kennedy was the First Lady to experience media scrutiny on a scale never witnessed before. Jackie Kennedy captivated the nation with her charm and style, and she carefully cultivated a public image for herself and her family. She transformed the first family into celebrities. Even now, she is still the subject of endless fascination and vintage style spreads. Her life has been the subject of numerous biographies, documentaries, and even Hollywood biopics. Truly, Jackie Kennedy has become an icon for the ages.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. Jackie was the first First Lady to consider her position a job and to work towards creating social and political change.
 - B. Jackie made the role of First Lady something of a celebrity status, and was the beginning of a trend in which the public and media paid close attention to First Ladies.
 - C. The media and public became extremely interested in Jackie's life following her various personal tragedies and the violent death of her husband.
 - D. Since Jackie, the public has encouraged First Ladies to take on superficial tasks, such as being fashionable and hosting parties.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Despite their struggles, the picturesque portrait of the family persisted in the public's mind, and John F. Kennedy became a very popular politician." (Paragraph 5)
 - B. "She dedicated much of her time to being a patron to the arts and hosted many social events, bringing politicians and artists together." (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "There were many photos of a bloodsoaked Jackie Kennedy desperately trying to aid her wounded husband." (Paragraph 10)
 - D. "The 1960s had begun to usher in a new era of televised culture, and Jackie Kennedy was the First Lady to experience media scrutiny on a scale never witnessed before." (Paragraph 15)

3. Which of the following describes the author's purpose in the text?
 - A. to show how the media was wrong for broadcasting Jackie's life and personal struggles
 - B. to argue that the Jackie that people saw on television wasn't the real Jackie
 - C. to explore America's intrigue with Jackie and how she impacted the role of First Lady
 - D. to provide information about what is expected of First Ladies and how Jackie measured up

4. How does paragraph 5 contribute to our understanding of Jackie and John F. Kennedy as people?
 - A. It stresses how resilient Jackie and John F. Kennedy were in the face of various obstacles.
 - B. It shows how difficult it was for Jackie and John F. Kennedy while he was running for President.
 - C. It emphasizes how different Jackie and John F. Kennedy's lives were from the image they projected.
 - D. It suggests that Jackie and John F. Kennedy were truly unhappy with their relationship and life together.

5. How do you think Jackie's lifestyle growing up impacted her time as First Lady?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. How has the legacy of Jackie Kennedy Onassis impacted the First Ladies that have followed her? How does her influence continue to be felt in the White House?
2. In the text, the author discusses the media attention that First Ladies experience. How would you feel if the media paid that much attention to your life? How would this affect your decision to take on a public position, such as First Lady?
3. In the text, the author discusses how after Jackie Kennedy Onassis, it became common practice to scrutinize the First Lady's fashion. How important do you think the First Lady's fashion should be to her position in the White House? What do you think the First Lady's fashion choices are supposed to convey to the public?
4. Why do you think the First Lady's fashion choices get more attention than the President's fashion choices? Do you think this would change if a woman became President? Why or why not?