

A Study of the Mansfield's Short Stories

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Abstract

This article is about the woman characters in Katherine Mansfield's short stories.

As a woman writer, Mansfield is very much concerned with the position of women in society. Stories of women take up most of her compositions, in which she captures various women's plight and pain. Her women characters can be neatly divided into three categories: victims in the family, invisible women at workplace, doll and rebel. Poor or rich, single or married, Mansfield's women characters are all victims of their society. A discussion of Mansfield's stories about women can enrich understanding not only of the complicated conditions of women in western society at her time, but also of her contributions to modern literature, especially to the female culture.

Keywords: psychological stories, plot, literary and artistic works, story genre, examples.

After a long period in which Katherine Mansfield's writing attracted no special critical attention, the last decade has seen both Mansfield's centenary and a considerable resurgence of interest in her fiction from, among others, feminists and literary theorists. Professor J. F. Kobler's book in the Twayne Studies of Short Fiction series is eclectic in its approach with a bias towards reader response theory. Following the format of the series, it is divided into three parts dealing with the short fiction, the writer, and the critics, followed by a chronology, a fairly comprehensive bibliography of primary and secondary works, and an index. The study offers an interesting, carefully argued introduction to the writer (whom Kobler places firmly in the tradition of the English Romantic poets) and her oeuvre.

Katherine Mansfield's stories appear to be very simple and trivial on the surface, since they are for the most part domestic, trivial, and plotless, dealing with familiar experiences of daily life. Early criticisms tend to focus more on her art rather than the content and her thematic values are more or less neglected. However, Mansfield's works provide powerful and valuable insights into human conditions. Often when she seems at first glance most trivial, she is really most profound. In her writing, she deals with death, poverty, war, love, nature, marital relations, disillusionment, etc.. Her motif on women runs through most of her stories, in which she captures various women's plight and pain. From them, we can see her deep concerns with women's position in the society and her conscious effort to find a plausible way out for them.

Perhaps the unusual aspect of this new consideration of Katherine Mansfield's achievement is the relatively little space that is devoted to the famous New Zealand stories that, in their often-nostalgic recollection of past times and distant places, are among Mansfield's most "romantic." But while a major work like "At the Bay" is touched on only in passing, as it were, and one of Mansfield's most accomplished stories, "The Man Without a Temperament," is omitted altogether (along with the problematic "A Married Man's Story"), less important pieces such as "The Swing of the Pendulum," "A Cup of Tea," and "The Young Girl" receive sustained analysis. If Kobler is a trifle idiosyncratic in his emphasis, however, his discussion is peppered with illuminating observations

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and comparisons. He sees echoes of D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* in the excursion of the two young lovers to the woods in "Something Childish But Very natural," for example. And he draws attention to the parallels between "Je ne parle pas français" and to T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Kobler contends that although Mansfield's cry of despair in her story may echo Eliot's in "Prufrock," the emotional power of "Je ne parle pas français" exceeds that of *The Waste Land*.

Partly because of their frankly expressed emotion, Katherine Mansfield's letters and journal entries have fascinated readers almost as much as her stories. Professor Kobler has chosen to represent Mansfield in Part Two of his book with brief extracts from her nonfictional writing. Organizing these into the categories of writing, life, love, nature, and the real self, he appropriately discusses his selections in the context of Mansfield's well-documented espousal of Romantic values and attitudes. To round off the portrait, some often-quoted personal comments from her friends and a tantalizing snippet from the interchange of letters between the writer and her much-maligned husband, John Middleton Murry, are included. Finally, in Part Three, Professor Kobler represents Mansfield criticism with selections from the writing of Willa Cather, Elizabeth Bowen, George Shelton Hubbell, Cherry Hankin, Andrew Gurr, Philip Waldron, and Helen Nebeker. Although this is a book which represents no radical change of direction in its approach to Katherine Mansfield's fiction, it is a solid piece of work that provides a stimulating introduction to the stories and to their writer.

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