

This work has been submitted to **NECTAR**, the **Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses and Research**.

Article

Title: Katherine Mansfield's modernist short stories

Creator: Kimber, G.

Example citation: Kimber, G. (2016) Katherine Mansfield's modernist short stories. *Gale Researcher*.

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work.

Version: Accepted version

Official URL: <http://learn.cengage.com/GaleResearcher>

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/8934/>



Katherine Mansfield's Modernist Short Stories

Gerri Kimber
University of Northampton
Department of English and Creative Writing

Gerri Kimber is coeditor of the annual yearbook *Katherine Mansfield Studies* and chair of the Katherine Mansfield Society. She is the series editor of the four-volume *Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield* (2012–2016). Kimber is author of *Katherine Mansfield: The Early Years* (2016), *Katherine Mansfield and the Art of the Short Story* (2015), and *Katherine Mansfield: The View from France* (2008).

Katherine Mansfield employed free indirect discourse, literary impressionism, and the innovative use of time and symbolism, culminating in her position as one of the most important early exponents of the modernist short story. Mansfield's fiction—and literary modernism as a whole—is associated with a rejection of conventional plot structure and dramatic action in favor of the presentation of character through narrative voice. Many different influences converged to create Mansfield's own personal aesthetic philosophy, which continually evolved and developed throughout her short lifetime. She presents a down-to-earth kind of “truth,” with its foundations in her observations of the everyday world. The modernist revelation of character through narrative voice—through suggestion and symbolism—became her method, through which she would offer glimpses into the lives of individuals and families captured at a certain moment, frozen in time like a painting or snapshot. This essay seeks to illustrate how innovative Mansfield's narrative writing is, placing her at the forefront of modernist short story writers.

The fiction of New Zealand writer Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923)—and literary modernism as a whole—is associated with a rejection of conventional plot structure and dramatic action in favor of the presentation of character through narrative voice. For Dominic Head, in his *The Modernist Short Story* (1992), “the plotted story . . . is set against the less well structured, often psychological story; the ‘slice-of-life’ Chekhovian tradition. It is to this tradition that the stories of the Modernists (those of [James] Joyce, [Virginia] Woolf and Mansfield in particular) are usually said to belong” (16). Mansfield was present at the beginning of the modernist movement as one of its most exciting and cutting-edge proponents, and modernist tendencies can be found throughout her fiction.

Narrative Technique

The short story, unlike the novel, is restricted by its length in the details it can provide. The genre relies on implication and suggestion, employing immediacy of range, condensation of action, and restrictions on time and number of characters. Mansfield mastered the art of being brief; there is nothing extraneous in her stories, which rarely take place over more than a day. Instead they develop into slices of life—written snapshots of the lives of individuals and families. No case is presented for or against the characters' actions or their lives; they simply *are*, and readers are left to fill in the blanks. In *Reading Mansfield and Metaphors of Form* (1999), W. H. New points out that readers should not be taken in by the surface simplicity of Mansfield's stories because it serves as a cloak for more subversive themes and attitudes.

One marker for these stories is the way in which they begin—cutting straight to the action, from the very first line, as if a stage direction were being given, with the use of temporal

constructions implying a prior knowledge of the event being described; this technique is known as “in medias res.” Examples from *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield* (2012) include: “Very early morning” (“At the Bay” 2:342); “And then, after six years, she saw him again” (“A Dill Pickle” 2:97); “Eight o’clock in the morning” (“Pictures” 2:178); and “The week after was one of the busiest weeks of their lives” (“The Daughters of the Late Colonel” 2:266). “The Garden Party” begins, “And after all, the weather was ideal” (2:401); from the outset readers are plunged into the action of a story that has already been building. “And after all” implies an entire sub-story around the family’s concerns over their party and whether rain will spoil the occasion. Mansfield implies, and readers imagine: that is the hallmark of a great short story, where three words can replace three hundred or more.

Mansfield, ever the innovator and seeker of new experiences, was fascinated with the medium of the cinema, to the extent that she was an extra on several silent movie productions in London. Her work reflects this interest in the deliberate cinematic impression of many of the stories; it is as if the narrator has a moving camera, panning across, then focusing in, which provides so many of the stories with their unique “pictorial” quality, as in the celebrated opening paragraph of “At the Bay”: “A heavy dew had fallen. The grass was blue. Big drops hung on the bushes and just did not fall; the silvery, fluffy toi-toi was limp on its long stalks, and all the marigolds and the pinks in the bungalow gardens were bowed to the earth with wetness” (2:342). In addition, the theatrical/cinematic tone is enhanced in some of the longer stories by their division into sections or “scenes”; “Prelude,” “At the Bay,” and “The Daughters of the Late Colonel” are each divided into twelve scenes (with “At the Bay” having an additional four-line scene at the end).

Free Indirect Discourse

One of Mansfield’s greatest strengths was her ability to “become” her fictional characters and to depict with acute psychological insight the workings of their minds, as well as to delineate their physical attributes. For each character she developed a distinctive voice and an appropriate narrative strategy. Mansfield was recognized by many of her contemporaries as having a gift for impersonation, which she incorporated into her work through the myriad characters presented there. Her use of the technique of free indirect discourse enabled her to inhabit her characters’ minds and present their thoughts to her readers.

In free indirect discourse, the reader is never told which thoughts belong to which character; instead the narrative moves between a more conventional narrator and a character’s conscious thoughts. The result is an intimate method of storytelling, where, for certain moments, the reader almost becomes the character on the page. This use of free indirect discourse, together with the episodic nature of certain stories and their theatrical quality, is a hallmark of Mansfield’s narrative technique. Mansfield’s personal correspondence in *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield* (1984–2008) offers glimpses of her philosophy; as she remarked in a letter discussing “Prelude,” “What form is it you ask? . . . As far as I know, it’s more or less my own invention” (1:331). Some years later she referred to “the *Prelude* method—it just unfolds and opens” (4:156). “Prelude” and “At the Bay” have an identical narrative style, reflecting their modernist origins: an omniscient point of view, combined with multiple limited points of view represented as free indirect discourse, together with a plotless form. The result is a method of storytelling that allows the reader to become intimate with the character on the page.

Literary Impressionism

Literary impressionism is another feature of modernist writing. It employs a deliberately ambiguous style, in which the reader, not the narrator, is ultimately responsible for drawing conclusions about a text, and the chronological ordering of events is less important than the emotional responses engendered by those events; indeed, in most modernist texts, almost nothing of any consequence actually happens.

Among the ways in which Mansfield aligned herself with literary impressionism were her focus on small, seemingly insignificant details at the expense of comprehensive description; her preference for the vignette, which provides the reader with only fleeting glimpses of people and places; and her preoccupation with color and emphasis on surfaces and reflections. Her employment of multiple, shifting perspectives—which are both subjective and fractured—also displays an affinity with impressionism, as does the attention she pays to the ephemeral effects of artificial and natural light, weather, and seasonal changes. Here, for example, is a description of the onset of autumn, from the opening lines of “Miss Brill”: “The air was motionless, but when you opened your mouth there was just a faint chill, like a chill from a glass of iced water before you sip, and now and again a leaf came drifting—from nowhere, from the sky” (*Fiction 2*:250–251).

Liminality

Liminality—the sense of being transitional, or between two states—is also part of this impressionistic, stylistic device, and can be found in ordinary spaces and commonplace objects such as mirrors, staircases, and windows within the confines of Mansfield’s domestic arena. Characters as insiders, absorbed in their own reflections, frequently position themselves on staircases or staring through windows, allowing Mansfield to engage with altered perceptions of interiority. Modernist interiors glint with reflective surfaces. Mansfield meditated on the effect of the mirror within the claustrophobic interior, writing to her husband, John Middleton Murry (1889–1957), “I walk up & down—look at the bed—look at the writing table—look in the glass & am frightened of that girl with burning eyes” (*Letters 2*:229–230).

Within many of Mansfield’s stories, at least one character will, at some point, look through a window. These myriad references to windows reveal for Antony Alpers in *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (1980) how a “trick of her mind is evident: she is constantly inhabiting one space while observing another, and has her characters doing the same” (53n). This view from a window—another in-between place—can alter perceptions from the present to the past, from the past to the future, and invite the crossing of a metaphorical threshold to an event yet to be realized or understood.

A story that exemplifies this liminal place is “The Tiredness of Rosabel”: “Rosabel . . . down on the floor, pillowing her arms on the windowsill . . . just one little sheet of glass between her and the great, wet world outside!” (*Fiction 1*:134). In this position Rosabel reflects on the harsh reality of the events of the day and dreams of an alternative fairy-tale scenario of the same events. In “Bliss,” Bertha Young’s first epiphany comes as she looks through an open window at a moonlit pear tree, in the presence of Pearl Fulton: “She crossed the room, pulled the curtains apart, and opened those long windows. ‘There!’ she breathed. And the two women stood side by side looking at the slender, flowering tree” (*Fiction 2*:149).

Mansfield's "painterly" technique often takes the form of the presentation of a "still-life" within a descriptive passage, such as in "Bliss":

Mary brought in the fruit on a tray and with it a glass bowl, and a blue dish, very lovely, with a strange sheen on it as though it had been dipped in milk.

There were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk; some white grapes, covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones.

When she had finished with them and had made two pyramids of these bright round shapes, she stood away from the table to get the effect—and it really was most curious. For the dark table seemed to melt into the dusky light and the glass dish and the blue bowl to float in the air. (*Fiction 2*:142)

The similarity between this descriptive prose and any number of the still-life paintings of French artist Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) is striking.

Symbolism

In Mansfield's stories, symbolism creates an important undercurrent, employed to offer an insight into the psychology of her characters. One story that exemplifies this notion is "Miss Brill," a parody of the isolated expatriate, the story of a woman who, while seeming to see everything, actually sees nothing. Symbols are everywhere: the little fox fur, anthropomorphized and mirroring the life of Miss Brill herself, though, with its overt male characterization, it offers a sensual satisfaction for her, at least in the early part of the story; the "ermine toque"—a metonymic name for the character of the prostitute, down on her luck, as the decaying state of her ermine hat suggests; and the orchestra, whose music echoes Miss Brill's emotions as the story runs its course. The story is a brilliant evocation of an impoverished, lonely, empty life.

Flowers and Plants

Plants, especially flowers, are constantly recurring symbols in Mansfield's stories. In "The Garden Party," Mansfield gives full rein to her flower theme, from the depiction of the roses that start the story to the lilies bought in profusion by the mother to the daisies on Laura's hat and in the grass—they fill the pages of the story:

There, just inside the door, stood a wide, shallow tray full of pots of pink lilies. No other kind. Nothing but lilies—canna lilies, big pink flowers, wide open, radiant, almost frighteningly alive on bright crimson stems.

"O-oh, Sadie!" said Laura, and the sound was like a little moan. She crouched down as if to warm herself at that blaze of lilies; she felt they were in her fingers, on her lips, growing in her breast. (*Fiction 2*:404)

Yet flowers are never present merely to add botanical interest or "color" to a story. Here the reader sees a young girl's burgeoning sexuality—crimson, wide-open flowers, their stamens on full view, touching her, feeling her as a lover would—perhaps indicative of the end of innocence, placed at the beginning of a story that charts the development of Laura's cruel entry into the adult world.

Perhaps the most famous flowering plant symbol used in Mansfield's fictional work is that of the aloe, given prominence in one of her longest and most famous stories, "Prelude" (originally titled "The Aloe"), in 1918. This was the second publication of the Hogarth Press, the private press owned by Woolf and her husband, Leonard (1880–1969), established in 1917 to publish works they believed to be important, including the works of their friends. By the time of Leonard's death, it had grown from a small hand press to one of the most influential publishing houses in Great Britain. In "Prelude" the symbolism of the aloe is critical to an understanding of the story:

Linda looked up at the fat swelling plant with its cruel leaves and fleshy stem. High above them, as though becalmed in the air, and yet holding so fast to the earth it grew from, it might have had claws instead of roots. The curving leaves seemed to be hiding something; the blind stem cut into the air as if no wind could ever shake it.
(*Fiction* 2:73)

The plant is taller than a man, ancient and gnarled. Linda, the mother, tells her young daughter Kezia that it only flowers once every hundred years. Kezia finds herself drawn to the aloe on several occasions—its sense of mystery, marooned on its magical island of grass, troubles and concerns her, echoing her childlike troubles and concerns in the real world. On a personal level for Mansfield, Andrew Gurr claims that "the aloe signifies the daunting fears and pains of a lifetime, lived for a brief moment of flowering, that timeless moment which both illuminates and justifies all the rest of the pained and miserable time of learning" (1996, 205).

Children

Mansfield is particularly renowned for her depiction of children. Children are of paramount importance in every story in which they appear—and they appear frequently—in "Prelude," "At the Bay," "Sun and Moon," "The Doll's House," and many others. The children are vividly presented and thus memorable, appearing to monopolize the stories in which they appear. But these stories are not children's stories (though they are sometimes mistaken as such); instead, children are used as vehicles for a number of different themes. Mansfield portrays them in their own world as well as trying to survive in the adult world, with all its inherent difficulties.

Several of Mansfield's stories are dominated by the portrayal of children and the relationship they have with their parents and the adult world in general; here Mansfield's social conscience and sensitivity to injustice are particularly evident. As the stories progress, the young protagonists attempt to understand adult behavior in the face of complex moral issues.

Perhaps nowhere is this emphasis more clearly demonstrated than in "The Garden Party," where Mansfield presents the development of the teenage mind and its gradual succumbing to adult values and morals. On the surface the story reads as a homely vision of youthful femininity and middle-class values, set within the picturesque New Zealand landscape. Yet these values, these notions, are the backdrop for a discourse on the plight of the working classes, the presentation of staid, middle-class reaction to social inferiors—a child's last attempt to understand the world naturally and simplistically, without the need for a social mask, though this mask becomes more stiflingly present each time Laura, the protagonist, at the onset of adulthood, tries to shy away from it.

In a story sixteen pages long, the garden party itself occupies a mere half-page of narrative. The first four pages focus on the workmen as much as on any other characters. There are then three pages of garden party preparations, followed by the first mention of the death, which permeates the remaining nine pages of narrative. Yet, reading the story, one is not aware that the garden party takes up so little space; the title “Death of a Carter” would be much more appropriate. Mansfield uses the garden party as an excuse, a shroud within which to encapsulate her myriad themes. Its false importance symbolizes the way adults tend to gloss over everything ugly, to deny ugliness an entry into the common round of life.

Mansfield finds it easy to slip into the world of children—their idiomatic expressions and their actions are portrayed to perfection—but uses children as symbols, as messengers, as a contrast between the dividing realms of innocence and experience. In Mansfield’s grasp, they are used as weapons of exposure.

Death

Death is a constantly recurring theme in Mansfield’s stories. As Françoise Defromont asserts, “Written as they are in an elusive style that relies on impressionistic touches, Katherine Mansfield’s short stories radiate an atmosphere of light and lightness. Yet underneath this aerial world the inexorable sweep of the sickle of death can be perceived” (1989, 157). Its mark is clearly visible in “The Garden Party,” “The Daughters of the Late Colonel,” “Life of Ma Parker,” “Six Years After,” “At the Bay,” “The Child-Who-Was-Tired,” “The Fly,” and “The Canary,” to name a few.

For Mansfield, World War I altered everything. It killed her beloved only brother and many of her dearest friends. Though only two of Mansfield’s stories—“An Indiscreet Journey” and “The Fly”—deal directly with the war and its consequences, for Mansfield, life could not and should not ever be the same again. Indeed, Alice Kelly notes in her introduction to *Katherine Mansfield and World War One* (2014): “one thing that we are prompted to consider whilst reading is the extent to which Mansfield’s wartime experience not only influenced, but also provoked her literary experimentation” (9). Celebrating the minutiae of daily life, the joy to be found in simple things, was her tribute to those—including her brother—who had lost their lives and was also in keeping with her premise that ordinary people in ordinary surroundings provided the best subjects. The beauty of life, the life of life, needed to be exposed and celebrated because of the war, in order to affirm that death had not gotten the upper hand.

It is also important to remember that, for the last five years of her life, Mansfield was driven not so much by sales figures as by a search for health and a resolve to cheat the early death from tuberculosis everyone predicted for her. As a result, like her friend D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930), who also spent his life on the move, seeking respite from his tuberculosis, she never lost her ability to take pleasure in simple things.

Conclusion

Mansfield’s narrative art encapsulates many significant themes encoded within a deceptively simple genre. Her narrative technique was carefully crafted around a personal philosophy that evolved and grew with her own development as a writer, culminating in the production of sharp and polished prose. Her symbolism was constant, echoing recurrent themes; her personal philosophy remained mutable. By the time of her death, she had evolved into a

confident writer, unafraid to confront human frailties, using various scenarios to examine the nature of memory and personal interpretations. Mansfield challenged her readers to look beyond face values, confront superficiality, despise cruelty, deny false values, revert to the notions and viewpoints of children, and, through this reversion, overthrow the rules of society and recreate laws governing life that are more spontaneous and less bigoted. While never offering a direct theoretical manifesto, her stories nonetheless reinforce her status as one of twentieth century's most gifted short story writers.

Alpers, Antony. *The Life of Katherine Mansfield*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1980.

Defromont, Françoise. "Impossible Mourning." In *The Fine Instrument: Essays on Katherine Mansfield*, edited by Paulette Michel and Michel Dupuis, 157–165. Sydney: Dangaroo, 1989.

Gurr, Andrew. "Katherine Mansfield: The Question of Perspectives in Commonwealth Literature." In *The Critical Response to Katherine Mansfield*, edited by Jan Pilditch, 197–207. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996.

Head, Dominic. *The Modernist Short Story*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Katherine Mansfield Society. <http://www.katherinemansfieldsociety.org>.

Kelly, Alice. Introduction to *Katherine Mansfield and World War One*, 1–9. Edited by Gerri Kimber, et al. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Kimber, Gerri, and Vincent O'Sullivan, eds. *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*. Vols. 1 and 2 of *The Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

Levenson, Michael, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

New, W. H. *Reading Mansfield and Metaphors of Form*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999.

O'Sullivan, Vincent, and Margaret Scott, eds. *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*. 5 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1984–2008.

Selected Works

Bliss and Other Stories (short stories), 1920.

The Garden Party, and Other Stories (short stories), 1922.

Prelude (short stories), 1918.