

Selected Stories from Katherine Mansfield

I read only "The Garden Party" from the short stories of Katherine Mansfield, as a teenager, and now returning to the stories nearly 50 years later, it was a joy to read them.

Katherine Mansfield was born in Wellington NZ in 1888. Her name was Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp.

Katherine was gifted in both music (she played the cello), and language. Her father, a banker, sent his three eldest daughters to London, for their education in 1903. On her return to NZ, Katherine found NZ society of the day stifling, and eventually her parents agreed to her returning to London in 1906. She lived a bohemian life, associating with the Bloomsbury set, including with writers D H Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and other artists, musicians, and intellectuals of the day.

During WW1, her only brother Leslie died in France in the fighting in 1915, and she wrote a poem of a dream she had about him.

To L. H. B. (1894-1915)

Last night for the first time since you were dead
I walked with you, my brother, in a dream.
We were at home again beside the stream
Fringed with tall berry bushes, white and red.
"Don't touch them: they are poisonous," I said.
But your hand hovered, and I saw a beam
Of strange, bright laughter flying round your head
And as you stooped I saw the berries gleam.
"Don't you remember? We called them Dead Man's
Bread!"
I woke and heard the wind moan and the roar
Of the dark water tumbling on the shore.
Where--where is the path of my dream for my eager
feet?
By the remembered stream my brother stands
Waiting for me with berries in his hands...
"These are my body. Sister, take and eat."

From 1911, she was in on/off relationship with the publisher John Middleton Murry, eventually marrying him in 1918. She contracted TB in 1917, and just as she was enjoying some success with the publication of some of her short stories, she weakened and died in January, 1923, in France, and is buried at Avon, near Fountainbleu. Upon her death John Middleton Murry spent 2 decades publishing her works, journals and diaries.

Katherine Mansfield was one of the early modernist writers.

The short stories of Katherine Mansfield have been described by one commentator as luminal. Her writing is certainly imbued with energy and candour, wry humour (slightly cruel at times), all conveyed with her sparkling use of language. She paints word pictures, incidents, and experiences, in rather disjointed fashion, at times, but somehow linked together, and the story is understood, through the descriptions and the atmosphere created. Perhaps she was the literary equivalent of the Impressionist painters of the day. This was time of great change, and she was undoubtedly influenced by the changes in understanding

through the teachings and research of Freud and others in psychology, and the criticism of the economic and political mores of the day through Marx's teachings. Her writings were largely ignored till fairly recently, in favour of the male modernist writers of the same period.

Her stories depict and describe the gender roles, and status of women in society of the day e.g. *Daughters of The Late Colonel*, the daughters are at a loss as to how to function on their own without their father's instructions. Also, in *Prelude*, both Linda Burnell, and her sister Beryl, bemoan the fact that not having any money of their own, limits their choices in life i.e. in being able to strike out on their own if they want to. In *Miss Brill*, the middle-aged musician, Ada Moss is having difficulty in surviving on her own, and has to turn to prostitution to survive.

In *At the Bay*, the status of man in the family is examined through the husband of the family Stanley Burnell both expecting and wanting to be waited on hand and foot, and the sometimes lack of satisfaction with working life through the conversation of Linda Burnell with her brother-in-law Jonathon regarding his attitude to work.

Relationships in marriage are explored in *Bliss* where Bertha, coming to understand her own sexuality, is disappointed to realise that her husband has taken a lover, a woman she has just befriended, and he apparently completely unperturbed, feels entitled to this.

Issues of class, and life and death, are examined in *The Garden Party*, with the attitude of Laura's mother in not wanting to cancel the garden party, on the death of the neighbour - the lowly carter, and the awkwardness of Laura in taking food to the carter's widow. There is also Laura's realisation of her sadness, but somehow peaceful acceptance of the carter's death.

She used objects as symbols or metaphors. For example, light is a theme or symbol in many of her stories. Also other objects, such as the pear and the cat in *Bliss* symbolise feelings of the characters, or their experiences.

Virginia Woolf wrote that her writing was "the only writing I have ever been jealous of".

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