



Women Writers: Voices in Transition

Katherine Mansfield

Delia Da Sousa Correa, Senior Lecturer in English:

“I grew up in New Zealand, which is Katherine Mansfield’s birthplace, and we all read “The Garden Party” at school, and then later I discovered a very ancient Pelican edition of “Further Stories” on my parent’s bookshelf.

I just love the translucent musicality of Mansfield’s language, it’s always both poetic and crystal clear, and I’m just in awe of the way she conveys the inner lives of her characters through a sequence of really potent images, or brings together different characters in their landscape with just a few lines of sinuous prose.

I’m going to read the opening passage of a story called *The Voyage*, which is told through the eyes of a young girl who’s making the crossing from the North to the South Island after the death of her mother. It begins in a typically abrupt way that takes us straight to the situation of the character in an apparently simple but really perfectly crafted paragraph.

“The Picton boat was due to leave at halfpast eleven. It was a beautiful night, mild, starry, only when they got out of the cab and started to walk down the Old Wharf that jutted out into the harbour. A faint wind blowing under the water ruffled under Fenella’s hat and she put up her hand to keep it on. It was dark on the Old Wharf, very dark. Here and there on a rounded wood-pile that was like the stalk of a huge black mushroom, there hung a lantern but it seemed afraid to unfurl its light in all that blackness. It burned softly, as if for itself.

Mansfield was an outsider in that she was a colonial, and she was one of many colonials who made very significant contributions to modernism within Europe.

She was taken up by the artistic circles based in Bloomsbury and Garsington, but she never really belonged there. Then she was a woman and thus in certain respects an outsider in any country, and she was a writer entirely in the short story form which never had quite the same reputation as the novel.

Mansfield has always had a large readership but there have been some significant shifts in her reputation. It wasn't until the late 20th century that the critics started to emphasise the degree of social and political engagement that there is in her writing, her awareness of class and gender inequalities, and of colonial injustice.

Mansfield was very influenced by the French symbolist poets, and by Oscar Wilde. Later the stories of Chekhov were an all important discovery and you can see the influence of these very different writers in Mansfield's own very unique combination of symbolist and realist elements.

Katherine Mansfield really transformed the short story and she inspired a huge range of writers who followed from Virginia Woolf to Elizabeth Bowen to Ali Smith and Kirsty Gunn today.

Her writing seems simply never to have lost the freshness, and to "take the breath" as she intended it should. If I had to sum up her achievements with just five words they would be a "musical performer", and a "pioneering lyrical satirist".