

## **THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACETS OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD’S SHORT STORIES**

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**Rezumat:** Prezentul articol ia în discuție specificul prozei scurte engleze de la începutul sec. al XX-lea, avînd la bază creația autoarei Katherine Mansfield, opera căreia reprezintă un etalon al reflectării psihologiei firii umane. Autoarea a influențat dezvoltarea specificului prozei scurte, reflectînd într-o manieră realistă detalii ale vieții ordinare din epocă și creînd o atmosferă artistică specifică societății engleze din epoca modernismului.

*Cuvinte-cheie: povestire scurtă, modernism, literar, psihologic, protagonist, stil, conținut, perioadă, detalii, inovații, tehnici, percepții extrasenzoriale.*

**Abstract:** The present article studies the specific features of the English short story of the beginning of the 20th century on the example of Katherine Mansfield's literary works that are in themselves an ideal standard of the psychological reflection of the human being. Katherine Mansfield literally revolutionized the development of the short story genre, realistically reflecting the everyday details of the epoch, simultaneously creating the literary atmosphere characteristic of English society of the period of modernism.

**Keywords:** *short story, modernism, literary, psychological, style, protagonist, plot, period, details, innovation, technique, extrasensory perception.*

*„ I often wonder whether other writers do the same – if a thing has really come off it seems to me there mustn't be one single word out of place, or one word that could be taken out. That's how I aim at writing. It will take some time to get anywhere near there.”*

*Katherine Mansfield  
(The Letters and Journals of K. Mansfield)*

As the amount and diversity of modern literary output with the apparent prevalence of the short narrative forms is steadily increasing, there arises a pressing necessity to single out those significant features and representatives of the short story genre that have made it so favoured nowadays.

The short story, the most popular literary genre throughout the 20th century, has been long before favoured by such literary geniuses as E.T.A. Hoffmann and Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Guy de Maupassant and O. Henry, each of whom, with the variations and nuances typical of their time, has upheld the paramount features of the short story, proclaimed by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) in his 1842 review of N. Hawthorne's „ Twice-Told Tales”, where he (E.A. Poe) asserted that only „the short narrative”, in which the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his „intention” and which can „be read at one sitting” may produce „a certain unique or single effect” (E.A.Poe 1984:567-577). These internal unity and coherence together with deliberate care for the seemingly insignificant were kept up and further highlighted by the writers of psychological realism, who, like Henry James (1843-1916), strove for the true-to-life presentation not only of plot settings and modes of life, but, predominantly, of the characters' perceptions and motivations, simultaneously preserving the effect of condensation of the larger world into the compactness afforded by the inherent brevity of the short story form.

Yet, the advent of modernism, which in itself achieves the effect through the constant creation of beliefs and values, different and better than those of the past, (Sanders 1999: 127) made the key element of the short story fiction, which is the amplification of the small moment, into the one of universal significance. Aspiring to novelty and innovation, the highly experimental writers of modernism sought to fight new ways of representing the world, penetrating the surface of life to discover the elusive causes of blissful and grievous moments as well as the psychic self of the individual. This transformation was enhanced by the literary works of Katherine Mansfield (born Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp), which, being literally deprived of the complicated twists in the plot and of the depiction of people in the bold primary colours of conduct, facilitate the dramatic webs of personal thoughts and interrelationships, embedding them in the multitude of descriptive, suggestive and even symbolic details. (Sanders 1999: 129). Along with other modernist writers, K. Mansfield broke new literary ground by dispensing with the strictness of plot, preferring to capture episodic „moments” through the layering and slicing of images, symbols and thoughts. Widely considered one of the best short story writers of her period, Katherine Mansfield proved to be most prolific during the final years of her short, but turbulent life (14 October 1888- 9 January 1923) and much of her prose and poetry remained unpublished at her death (the task of their editing and publishing being taken on by her husband Mr. J. Middleton Murry). Simple in form, luminous and evocative, Katherine Mansfield's stories were almost an immediate success, presenting with delicate plainness the elusiveness of human decision, defeat and triumph. Impelled to writing by the two contradictory motives, that is, by „joy” she felt when in „some blissful way” she was „at peace” and by „a cry against corruption ... in the widest sense of the word” (Sexton 2008), Katherine Mansfield continually analyzed the yearnings, complexities and misunderstandings of love; men and women failing to love because of being timid, people roughly rejecting others because of having more significant aims to pursue and, particularly, the inner lives of women constrained by convention, emotionally isolated, and rejected or preyed upon by male characters. Katherine Mansfield's stories, often designed by means of unpredictable changes in time and by unexpected turns, may point in many directions, not all of which being logically consistent, but that is the innovative and genuine way the author feels the whole truth is mostly honestly communicated. In this she resembles Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), her Russian predecessor, to whom she is often compared and for whom she herself freely expressed admiration and a feeling of kinship in the preference for the subtleties, rather than the dramatics, of human behaviour.

More importantly, incorporating some of Anton Chekhov's themes and techniques in her writing (especially evident in the stories with German settings that were collected in her first book „In the German Pension”, 1911), she notably affected and subtly resumed the variety of story types, styles and subjects heralded by the other literary giants of her time, whose professional assessments of Katherine Mansfield's artistic output were far from analogous. D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), a close friend, based fictional characters on her (Gudrun in „Women in Love”), yet dismissed Mansfield's dreamy psychological portraits as too touching and delicate, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), however, praised her work, acknowledging that she and Mansfield had something in common.

Furthermore, compared and influenced by Europeans, Katherine Mansfield also set herself apart by adopting her native New Zealand as the inspiration and setting for her greatest works, whose descriptive passages are always more than a mere record of what the country was like, being in themselves the stylistic tunnels, which, embracing the most effective features of stream-of-consciousness, effortlessly transfer the reader from the mind of one character to another. The author's extensive use of indirect speech, the complexity of her tone, combining witty satire with shattering emotional reversals, is in astounding concord with the general economy of her style, her montage-like technique, whose exact meanings are not always easy to identify and whose overall impact engrossed even untutored readers.

Out of the writer's tremendous literary production it is „Miss Brill” (1920), the bittersweet story of a fragile woman living an ephemeral life of observation and simple pleasures in Paris, that established Katherine Mansfield as one of the preeminent writers of the Modernist period, as in this story „I (K. Mansfield) choose not only the length of every sentence, but even the sound of every sentence. I choose the rise and fall of every paragraph to fit her (Miss Brill), and to fit her on that day at that very moment. After I'd written it I read it aloud – numbers of times – just as one would play over a musical composition – trying to get it nearer and nearer to the expression of Miss Brill – until it fitted her.” (Mansfield 1921: 201) The euphoric style of the mind of a spinster attending an outdoor musical concert, carefully investigated and reproduced by the author, is suddenly demolished by a rude comment of a disrespectful young man, simultaneously affecting both the character and the reader, as the musical rhythm of the story imperceptibly entwines the reader's mind with the protagonist's point of view.

Brilliant in portraying the banalities of common people, Katherine Mansfield is equally brilliant when rendering the interior world of the more vibrant characters as it happens in „The Garden Party” (1922), Katherine Mansfield's most famous story, which is lived through the mind of Laura, a young woman on the edge of adulthood. The decisive tranquility of the opening passages – a well-to-do New Zealand family planning a party on their estate; the behind-the-scene episodes revealing the emotional state of the other characters – is abruptly crushed by the intruding incident of the outside world – the accidental death of one of the poor characters, which makes the story follow a different, more sinister track. The story ends with the passage in which the protagonist, affected by the tragedy and forced to confront the manifestation of the basic truth, tries to express her confusion to her brother: „Isn't life”, she stammered, „Isn't life ...” But what life was she couldn't explain.” (Mansfield 2000: 261).

The congruous epiphanic moments of revelation, permeated with the author's extrasensory perception of life and humane vision of the inscrutable human nature, combined with the sharpness of the author's style, have entered the English artistic canon, being taken up by Katherine Mansfield's literary successors (e.g. Elizabeth Bowen and Frank O'Connor).

Namely this exemplary congruence of the thorough choice of the minute details with the overall psychological effect, intended by the author, has enhanced the popularity of the short story genre is to be observed by any modern writer, aspiring to wide recognition.

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