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evangelical terms by D. H. Lawrence. It is natural to compare her with Virginia Woolf, but Virginia Woolf was a more deliberate writer, a woman with an intellectual background and with roots. She was conscious of literature, where Katherine Mansfield was more conscious of the cult of the self-purified artist. Where Virginia Woolf is precious, Katherine Mansfield is priggish. Mrs. Dallo-way is wayward, but is contained by her class. She will never be entirely lost; she can assimilate the iron that enters her soul. But Miss Moss has nothing; she is hopelessly lost, between too many worlds. When Katherine Mansfield imitated Mrs. Woolf, she was a sophisticated failure.

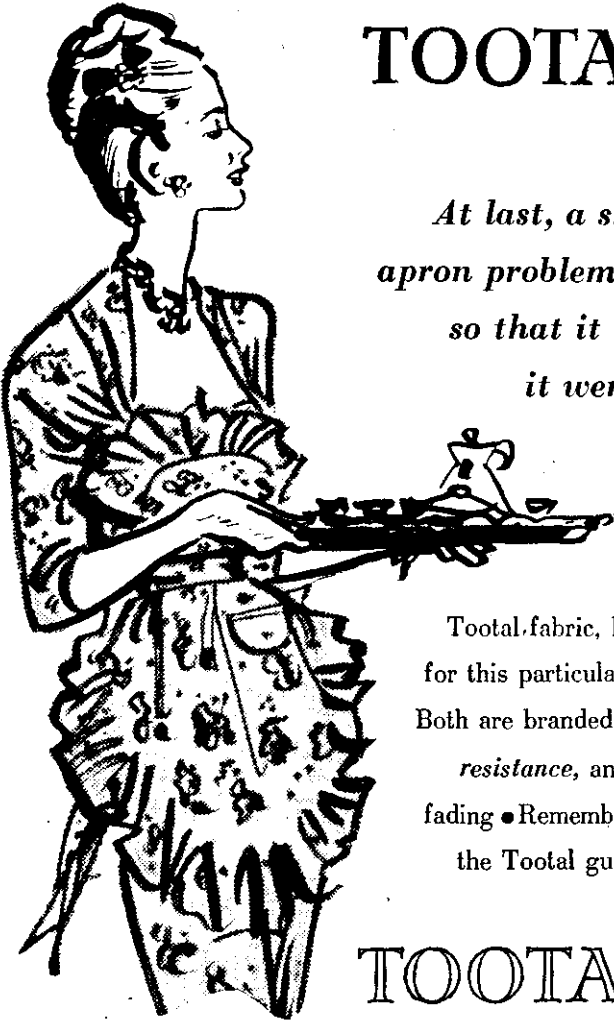
Comparison with Chekhov

Before I come to the end of this talk I must refer again to the comparison with Chekhov. Chekhov is a writer of far greater variety, vitality and range than Katherine Mansfield; but there is a more important difference between the two writers and one which puts Katherine Mansfield at a great disadvantage. Chekhov, like herself, wrote of moods, comedies, tragedies and built them up to the point of crystallisation. They crystallised in a cry, a phrase, a gesture, a moment of feeling or vision. Like her he often concentrated on the irrational and erratic moments of personal life and usually discarded the architecture of a contrived plot. But there is a binding element in his stories; behind his characters, though it may never be mentioned, Chekhov always conveys the sense of a country, a place, the sense of the unseen characters, the anonymous people who surround even our most private moments. Now Katherine Mansfield rarely does this. I rather think that only one of her stories—an early one about New Zealand life called "The Woman at the Store"—achieves this suggestion of a containing world. If you look again at "At the Bay," which I think is one of the minor masterpieces of our language, you find yourself asking: "Who are these people? Where do they live? What world do they belong to?" They seem to have dropped from the sky. Whereas in a story like Chekhov's "The Steppe," there is something else besides the mystery of life and death. Or rather Chekhov knows that the mystery of life and death is not something just floating about freely in the air, but has the indispensable connotation of time and place. In Chekhov there is a country; Russia, the condition of Russia, the effect of Russia, the breath of Russia, is the silent character always haunting us.

This leads one to the conclusion that what is called the plotless short story, the kind of short story which depends upon its power to suggest, must suggest that its gaps and silences are filled by things more powerful, more abiding than itself. There is no such thing as sensibility in the void. Too often we feel that there is nothing behind Katherine Mansfield's stories, and that is a reflection of her own rootlessness. It is, of course, idle to blame or to praise writers for limitations which may be due to their position in the society of their time. We have the virtues of our shortcomings and the best writing is invariably that which is the fruit of total disadvantages, the struggle with almost insuperable difficulty. We can see how, driven by invalidism and loneliness, Katherine Mansfield was forced into endless technical experiment; and to the technique of writing short stories she made a major contribution.

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