

# KATHERINE MANSFIELD AND THE SHORT STORY

THE publication late last year of the first English collected edition of Katherine Mansfield's short stories was the occasion for some examination by English literary critics of the position Katherine Mansfield now holds in English literature, and in the field of the short story in general. V. S. PRITCHETT, who is a novelist himself and a frequent contributor to the "New Statesman and Nation," recently gave a talk (reprinted below) in the BBC's overseas service, in which he discussed her stories, and the significance of her New Zealand origin, and compared her work with Chekhov's.

AT the time of her death 23 years ago, when she was a youngish woman of little more than 30, Katherine Mansfield was the pre-eminent short-story writer of her day. Her position was distinctive. It was as if one had said she was the most interesting poet of her time; for the short story seemed, at that time, to owe a great deal to poetic inspiration. One spoke of the "art of the short story" as one might speak of the "art" of the sonnet or the madrigal; for the short story had ceased to be an anecdote or novel in brief. It owed nothing to other literary forms, but stood on its own feet by itself. When we

picked up a volume of short stories by Henry James, Maugham, Kipling, Wells, Bennett, W. W. Jacobs, we felt that here were stories with plots, ideas and characters; they could be expanded at will until they became novels. The stories of Katherine Mansfield, on the contrary, were incapable of becoming novels. After he had read one of her stories called "Prelude," D. H. Lawrence said: "Yes—but prelude to what?" The answer was "Nothing. Just Prelude." Katherine Mansfield's stories were not stories in the common use of the term; they were not, I hasten to say, prose poems. They were like fragments of music, some nocturne or polonaise of Chopin's heard on the piano in the evening.

But is this picture of Katherine Mansfield a true one? The moment we open her stories again, after 20 years, we feel the need of a total reconsideration. It used to be said that she was the English Chekhov and it is indeed true that she owed much to Constance Garnett's translations of Chekhov's stories which have had a very mixed influence on English writers. But that she resembled Chekhov is the least important thing about Katherine Mansfield. It has been suggested, also, that her choice of the brief form of writing, her eye for the agitated and evanescent, her instinct for the moments rather than for the years of life, was due to the invalid's knowledge that she had not long to live. This may well be. But to understand what kind of writer Katherine Mansfield was, it is important to look beyond Chekhov and beyond her character as an invalid.

## No Prodigal's Return

Katherine Mansfield was a New Zealander. She spent her girlhood in New Zealand and her adult life mainly in England. She left New Zealand because she found no satisfaction in the life there. Once established in England she found she had lost her roots. What was she to do? She could either go back and, as it were, submit to New Zealand again, return like the mature prodigal. Or she could try to work out a new spiritual basis for her life. She could invent, as it were, a private religion, a private myth to live by; the myth of pure receptivity. This was the course she chose. One can see it clearly stated in her *Journal*, which are literary documents of great interest to students of this period. After reading between the lines one forms a much clearer picture of Katherine Mansfield's position. She is the prim exile who belongs neither to her own society nor to London; but who like some nervous spider lives on an ingeniously contrived web that she has spun between the two places. The traditions of the optimistic and ruthless pioneer are strong in countries like New Zealand, and they are oppressive to the sensitive. But the sensitive get their revenge in satire, in cynicism, in exposing the hollowness of spiritual life. Katherine Mansfield enjoyed her own hard, acute wit, her malice, her bitterness, but she felt guilty about them. Hence the cult of self-perfection, of pure art, the religious devotion to the idea that an artist must create within himself a clean heart.

## Women on the Defensive

The collected stories of Katherine Mansfield make a single volume of eight hundred pages and even this includes a great deal of unfinished work. On the whole the stories about New Zealand, and especially about her childhood there, are the best, though there are also one



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or two good ones about vagrant life in London. Her bad stories are chiefly the semi-sophisticated ones she wrote about London love affairs. I will quote the titles of some of her best stories. They are: "Prelude," "At the Bay," "The Garden Party," "The Little Governess," "The Woman at the Store," "The Daughters of the Late Colonel." From this list you will see that it is women on their own, on the defensive before the excessive male; and then children, that are her characteristic subjects. She has the manner of the acid, catty, nervous spinster whose cattiness is capable of becoming a firm and melancholy irony; and whose nervousness suddenly turns into poetic feeling and a wonderful eye for vivid imagery. Katherine Mansfield had, so to say, always an eye or an ear; sometimes a heart. Her stories are as clear and brittle as glass. Being isolated herself she seeks to describe what living is like when one is alone.

## Primness Led Her Astray

On the whole she does not draw men well. Her primness makes her imagine men are clumsy, floundering sentimentalists; she punctures their conceit and their foibles well, but that is all. For Katherine Mansfield's women and girls are brilliantly done. In the story called "At the Bay," the women are excellent. I think especially of Beryl, the play-acting adolescent girl who lives in an unreal world, who poses the whole time—and, when she repents, is acting even in her repentance. Or there is the cynical childless woman of a certain age, the scandalous woman of the little town. Her relationship with the girl is terrifying. The older woman and the young girl are bathing:

"I believe in pretty girls having a good time," said Mrs. Harry Kember. "Why not? Don't you make a mistake, my dear. Enjoy yourself." And suddenly she turned turtle, disappeared and swam away quickly like a rat. Then she flicked round and began swimming back. She was going to say something else. Beryl felt that she was being poisoned by this cold woman, but she longed to hear. But oh, how strange, how horrible!

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KATHERINE MANSFIELD—A miniature (based on a photograph) by a Canadian artist. It was presented to the Alexander Turnbull Library by her father, Sir Harold Beauchamp.