

Katherine Mansfield, the Great War, and Modernism

Like other British Empire writers of her generation, Katherine Mansfield's most traumatic and meaningful experience with public world events was the Great War. In the case of Mansfield, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of this massively tragic event. Leslie Beauchamp, Mansfield's only and much younger brother, was killed in an accident behind the lines during World War One. Mansfield had seen him in London just a few days before his death, only a week before Katherine's birthday on 7 October 1914. He was killed when a grenade (he was an army instructor in the use of grenades) he was demonstrating blew up in his hand. This loss and Mansfield's deteriorating health and late diagnosis of tuberculosis in 1917, according to biographer Antony Alpers, can be partially attributed to the trauma, disorientation, and personal loss that World War One inflicted on her. Clair Tomalin, in her 1988 biography of Mansfield, makes a compelling case that Kass also suffered from some sort of debilitating venereal disease. Noting a post-War shift in the Mansfield artistic sensibilities, Martin Seymour-Smith, in about the coldest terms imaginable, calls her reaction to the First World War a "reverie, which at least is fortunate for posterity" (Who's Who in Twentieth Century Literature, 230).

For decades we have accepted the idea that World War One was what created Modernist writing. Robert Graves' Good-bye to All That (1929) told us about modern warfare and the total end of innocence, and more recently, Paul Fussell in The Great War and Modern Memory (1975) explains how World War One taught a generation of young writers how to achieve thematic and formal emancipation through irony. But in a revisionist study of World War One and its influence on the modern writer, Jerome Thale in a 1982 Southern Humanities Review article convincingly documents that the Great War was not a "casual force" for emerging writers, but a validation for sensibilities and artistic strategies already established. Although Thale does not mention Mansfield, his point about World War One being a continuation and affirmation of an already established "Modernism" holds true for her work (See SHR, XVI, 3, 185-99). What Mansfield wrote John Middleton Murry about his blaming the war for his morbidity and anxiety--"[the war was] a supreme justification of all you had trembled towards...all your life"--holds true for Katherine Mansfield as well (See Murry, ed., The Letters of Katherine Mansfield, II, 275).

With her work for The New Age, Rhythm, and The Blue Review, and her committed, sometimes fiery connections with a publisher like Orage and writers such as Lawrence and Murry, Katherine Mansfield had already established herself as a Modernist writer--one with a growing reputation--by 1914. What the Great War did (along with tuberculosis) for Mansfield as a writer was to give her an apocalyptic sense of life--the end was at hand and time was dear. Thus she kept moving and experiencing (shifting houses and relationships), turning towards writing about what she knew best (New Zealand and the Wellington world of colonial poseurs), and turning away from writing the fashionable, artsy story of English manners and life in London.

But perhaps more importantly, Mansfield intensified her quest for a unique narrative voice that would be intense and interior, and that would portray her astonishing sensibility. A comparison of two early

stories--"A Fairy Story" and "A Marriage of Passion," full of imitation, even mimicry--with a great later story, "Prelude," with its complex and sophisticated evolving narrative stance, establishes her considerable progress towards being a unique modern voice.

In 1910, when Katherine was 22, she published a fantasy tale called "A Fairy Story." In it, a "woodcutter's daughter" is introduced by a somewhat older male mentor figure (clearly modeled on Walter Rippman) to the works of Shaw, Ibsen, Symons, Wilde, Verlaine, and other "Decadents." Le modernisme est arrivé. The female protagonist learns that "Unselfishness signifies lack of Progress," and that she must at all cost avoid the Seven Deadly Virtues. In 1912, Kass produced a biting piece of satire called "A Marriage of Passion," a gibe at bourgeois values and marriage, portrayed in excoriating visions of velvet bedspreads, pink-shaded lights, and boredom when the party guests have gone. Both of these pieces show the superiority, sarcasm, and promise of a young writer with talent. The Great War violently pulled Mansfield in the direction of Modernism that would be more fully realized (as many literary critics feel) by Woolf, Lawrence, Joyce, but this cataclysmic event created Modernism in none of these writers.

Often, even critics sympathetic to Mansfield claim that she was incapable of expanding her fiction into the novel form. The tyranny of this traditional belief that short fiction will always remain inferior to longer fiction is evident here. For instance, at a Modern Language Association meeting, Professor Sydney Janet Kaplan, the Head of Women's Studies at the University of Washington, author of the excellent critical study called Female Consciousness in the Modern British Novel (1977), noted Mansfield's failure to produce a novel as "a real limitation to her art, a denial of her ever being rightfully considered a major figure" (1983). But what Katherine Mansfield created in the short fiction genre was truly remarkable and major.

We can see what Mansfield accomplished in fiction writing by the end of her short life by examining the way she turned "The Aloe" into a formidable piece of short fiction, "Prelude." She worked most of her adult life on the piece of fiction that eventually became "Prelude." The original and very sentimental version was a story called "Mary," which appeared in Idler, when Katherine was twenty (Idler, a light and illustrated monthly, did not survive as a publication for very long). The story is about a family (very much like the Beauchamps) moving from a home in the city to one in the country. The hero and second oldest daughter (appropriately named Kass) suffers jealousy when her family heaps praise on her older sister, Mary. Many family members and friends are transparently recognizable, such as Pat, the handyman, a sort of every-day Oliver Mellors, who chops the head off a rooster in the story. Kass does not blurt out the fact that she was responsible for getting the slow Mary a school prize, and at the end of the story, the better nature of Kass prevails, and Kass gives the sleeping Mary a kiss. A far more original and realistic version of this story came out in 1917 as "The Aloe," thanks largely to the support of Virginia Woolf. Later, Katherine finished a much better version of a disturbing family move in "Prelude." Gone was the schematic and linear spin of the plot. Gone also was the sentimentality. From the vantage points of several characters the reader is plunged directly into one fresh scene after another. Hanging over all these events like a dark and sulphurous

cloud is the growing awareness that the mother made this move solely to upset and empower her children. This story became Mansfield's hallmark, a story smoldering with texture, tone, and meaning, a piece of short fiction boldly original, even in the age of such short fiction masters as Lawrence, Joyce, and Cather.

One of the key ways that Mansfield demonstrates Modernism is through her commitment to experimentation. This may give some of her stories an uneven quality, but this fearless quest for originality also allows her to move in directions that no other writer was able to do before. What we need to develop now with Mansfield criticism and scholarship is what might be called a Post-Modern view. By that I mean more respect and value for short fiction, and more interest in her poetry, letters (with Mansfield an art form), and her journals, such as the fascinating notebook that she wrote (as a young writer) about her trip to the rugged and primitive Maori area known as the Urewera National Park. Now also--thanks to Dr. C. A. Hankin's reprint series of all the original Mansfield short story collections (five volumes)--we may in our attempts to understand Mansfield lead with her texts, rather than her most fascinating life.

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