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| Mansfield, Katherine (1888 – 1923) |
| Katherine Mansfield Beauchamp Murray |
| Katherine Mansfield Beauchamp was born in Wellington, New Zealand on October 14th, 1888. Yet this bare factual statement in no way indicates Mansfield’s importance to the Modernist movement, nor how she transformed the English short story. Mansfield’s writing utilizes key themes and dicotomies such as loneliness versus society; woman versus man; nature versus culture. Moreover, her style is characterized by its neutral (as opposed to emotional) tone, and her use of Symbolism to depict personal alienation.  Growing up in an arguably patriarchal, colonialist family, Mansfield adopted her middle name as a pseudonym when she was nineteen, perhaps to provide herself with a certain psychological distance from her upbringing. Indeed, much of her writing characterizes the tension between her unconventionality and her family’s solid affluence and high social standing. Her father, Harold Beauchamp, a successful banker, a vigorous and energetic man, longed for a son, but, to his disappointment, his first four children were female: Charlotte, Vera, Katherine and Jeanne (another sister, Gwendoline, died at four months). The longed-for son, Leslie Heron, did not arrive until 1894 (tragically Leslie was killed in 1915, fighting in France during World War I). |
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Her father, Harold Beauchamp, a successful banker, a vigorous and energetic man, longed for a son, but, to his disappointment, his first four children were female: Charlotte, Vera, Katherine and Jeanne (another sister, Gwendoline, died at four months). The longed-for son, Leslie Heron, did not arrive until 1894 (tragically Leslie was killed in 1915, fighting in France during World War I).  Mansfield married twice. Her first marriage to George Bowden lasted only one day. Her second marriage to long time lover, John Middleton Murry, occurred five years before she succumbed to tuberculosis in 1924 at age thirty-four.  Mansfield’s life was turbulent, constantly punctuated by a series of sexual and romantic relationships with both men and women. Her bisexuality tormented her to such a degree that she referred to it as a ‘sickness’ in a number of her letters. Her shame about her sexual ambivalence appears throughout a number of her stories; her short story ‘BLISS’ is an excellent example of this. She experienced at least two pregnancies: one was aborted and the other ended in miscarriage.  Mansfield had two long term relationships: one with her longtime lover and husband John Middleton Murry, and the other with Ida Constance Baker, whom Mansfield nicknamed ‘Lesley Moore.’ Moreover, Mansfield also had intense friendships with both D.H.Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. Woolf at one point wrote that Mansfield was the only writer whose writing she envied. Woolf, especially, it seems was affected by Mansfield, to the extent that a number of scholars credit Mansfield’s writing with having deeply influenced Woolf. Influence of Post-Impressionism On November 8th, 1910, while in London, Katherine Mansfield attended Roger Fry’s first exhibition of the Post-Impressionist painters, at the Grafton Gallery. It was London’s first experience with ‘modern’ art, and it arguably made a lasting impression on Mansfield. Eleven years later, just a few years before her death, Mansfield wrote to painter Dorothy Brett that she had seen something in Van Gough’s famous ‘Sunflowers’ that continued to ‘live’, with her: ‘a shaking free.’ Presumably such ‘a shaking free’, as Mansfield describes pertains to the release from an artistic bondage inherited from the Victorians. Art, as it was known up to that point, was just beginning to dramatically change, even transform. Reaction to Victorianism Mansfield’s writing starkly shows how the emotional void between people is the result of personal alienation. Moreover, her depictions do not derive from a class commentary but rather with individual psychology, and her writing thus articulates a complete departure from Victorian literature, consumed as it was by class and cultural relations; an excellent example of this reactiveness is her short story ‘The Garden Party’, found in her collection, ‘The Garden Party and Other Stories.’ Thus, while the Victorians wrote from a position of Objective Description, Mansfield’s writing, appears determined to truthfully show (rather than describe) the individual, Subjective Condition. Point of View   Mansfield’s decision to render the Narrator invisible was a complete departure from the traditional Victorian narrator. Arguably the reader cannot perceive the narrator in Mansfield’s stories; instead, readers seem to inhabit, as it were, each of the characters in turn. Perhaps this is most apparent in Mansfield’s ‘Prelude’, which gives an account of a New Zealand family moving from town to country. Readers knows what each of the characters is thinking and feeling, and yet are not told *why or to what end*. Mansfield provides a series of psychological snapshots of each character’s thought process—in other words, the narrator is no one and yet everyone in the story. Form and Content FMansfield was one of the first writers of the Modernist Era to give as much value to Form as to Content. In her stories, Mansfield dispenses with a PLOT that reaches an understandable Conclusion. Events merely happen in her stories; they seem to have no set purpose. Instead, readers are merely plunged into a scene without explanation. Readers thus experience stumbling upon an event that is in the midst of unfolding. Readers see, hear, and smell what is going on in the story, but do not know *why* events are happening only that they *are* happening. Influence of World War One Part of Mansfield’s writing style was undoubtedly influenced by World War I, which caused her intense despair and a deep sense of hopelessness about humanity. She once wrote to lover and husband John Middleton Murry that the war changed everything for their generation; she felt that people, and artists especially, had to ‘know’ that like beautiful flowers in a vase, people were just experiencing ‘life in death’, and that writers had no choice but to render that stark reality in their art. Death Constantly seeking cures for her tuberculosis, Mansfield ended her life at the controversial sanatorium fontainebleau. Ironically, she experienced a massive hemorrhage after running up a flight of stairs to demonstrate to a skeptical Murry how well she was. Destraught, Middleton Murry spent the next several years editing and publishing Mansfield's unpublished works. Chronology of Works *In a German Pension*.1926.  *Prelude.* 1918.  *Je ne parle pas français.* 1920.  *Bliss and Other Stories*. 1921.  *The Garden Party and Other Stories*.1922.  *The Doves' Nest and Other Stories*. 1923  *Poems*. 1924.  *Something Childish and Other Stories*. 1924.  *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield*. 1927.  *The Letters of Katherine Mansfield*. 1929.  *The Aloe*. 1930.  *Stories by Katherine Mansfield*. 1930.  *The Scrapbook of Katherine Mansfield*. 1937.  *Collected Stories of Katherine*. 1945.  *Katherine Mansfield's Letters to John Middleton Murry*, 1913-1922. 1951. |
| Further reading:  (Alpers)  (Burgan)  (Hanson)  (Mansfield)  (Smith) |