

One of New Zealand's greatest writers

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It is only in more recent decades, as the short story has come to be seen as more deserving of close study, that Katherine Mansfield's achievements and modernist affinities have been recognised.

Katherine Mansfield was a prominent New Zealand modernist writer of short fiction. She was born Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp on 14 October 1888 in Wellington, New Zealand, into a socially prominent family.

Her father, Harold Beauchamp, was a successful businessman and her mother, Annie Burnell née Dyer, was of genteel origins. She was also a first cousin of authoress Countess Elizabeth Von Arnim. By the time of Katherine's adolescence, her father had become a director of the Bank of New Zealand.

Her mother has been described as 'delicate and aloof', with a gift for unthinking pronouncements. Her first words to her artistic daughter, on returning from nine months in England, were, 'Well, Katherine, I see that you are as fat as ever.'

Katherine had a lonely and alienated childhood. She lived for six years in the rural village of Karori. Later on she said 'I imagine I was always writing. Twaddle it was, too. But better far write twaddle or anything, anything, than nothing at all.'

Her juvenilia are no more or less mawkish than the youthful work of any writer; what is occasionally noteworthy is the degree to which the future figure of the artist can be heard sounding her characteristic notes.

Here is an extract from an abandoned novel: 'Live this life, Juliet. Did Chopin fear to satisfy the cravings of his nature, his natural desires? No, that is how he is so great. Why do you push away just that which you need —because of convention? Why do you dwarf your nature, spoil

your life? ... You are blind, and far worse, you are deaf to all that is worth living for.'



Her first published stories appeared in the *High School Reporter* and the Wellington Girls' High School magazine, in 1898 and 1899. As a first step to her rebellion against her background, Katherine withdrew to London in 1902 and studied at Queen's College, where she joined the staff of the *College Magazine*.

Writing to a school friend at the age of 16, Katherine set out her programme: 'I'm so keen upon all women having a *definite* future – are not you? The idea of sitting and waiting for a husband is absolutely revolting and it really is the attitude of a great many girls. ... It rather

made me smile to read of your wishing
you could create your fate—O how many



With sister Jeanne and brother Leslie.



Katherine in Brussels, 1906.

times I have felt just the same. I just long
for power over circumstances.'

The longing was expressed in such
acts as wearing brown to match the colour
of her beloved cello. A talented cellist, she
was not at first attracted to literature, and
after finishing her schooling in England,
she returned to her New Zealand home in
1906.

Katherine then took up music, and
had affairs with both men and women.
Her father denied her the opportunity to
become a professional cello player—she
was an accomplished violoncellist. In a
letter she wrote in 1906 she said: 'Would
you not like to try all sorts of lives—one
is so very small—but that is the satisfac-
tion of writing—one can impersonate so
many people.'

In 1908 she studied typing and
bookkeeping at Wellington Technical Col-
lege. It was during this time that Katherine
began writing short stories. Her lifelong
friend Ida Baker (LM, Leslie Moore in her
diary and correspondence) persuaded
Katherine's father to allow Katherine to
move back to England, with an allowance
of £100 a year. There she devoted herself
to writing. She never visited New Zealand
again.

In the context of a long and ardu-
ous sea journey—six or seven weeks—
this might not appear significant. And yet
by the time her father, who had been born
in Australia, came to write his memoirs,
he could boast that he had made the trip
'back' to Mother England 24 times.

In yet another self-addressed jour-
nal manifesto, she wrote of the need to get
rid of 'the doctrine that love is the only
thing in the world. ... We must get rid of
that bogey—and then, then comes the op-
portunity of happiness and freedom.'

On her return to London in 1908,
Katherine quickly fell into the bohemian/-
bisexual way of life lived by many artists
and writers of that era. With little money,
she met, married and left her first hus-
band, George Bowden, all within just
three weeks.

Katherine toured for a while as an extra in opera. Before the marriage she had an affair with Garnett Trowell, a professional violinist and family friend from New Zealand. Around this time, she became pregnant by Trowell, and her mother sent her to Bavarian health spa. However in 1909, while she was there, she suffered a miscarriage, possibly brought on by lifting her trunk off the top of a wardrobe.

Her mother had arrived in London to 'sort out' the business of Katherine's close friendship with an old Queen's College friend, Ida Baker. Mother was wrong—there was nothing 'unwholesome' in the relationship, at least not along the lines she imagined.

Ida Baker, variously nicknamed Jones, the Albatross, the Cornish Pasty, the Faithful One, became Katherine's life-long helpmate, nursemaid and whipping post. Her devotion was unwavering in the face of some extraordinary insults and unkindnesses. Katherine found Ida's self-sacrifice galling and irritating; she also understood the large debt she owed her and was constantly admonishing herself for these sentiments.

In a letter of 1922, she wrote to Ida: 'I am simply unworthy of friendship. ... I take advantage of you—demand perfection of you—crush you ...' Eight years earlier in a journal entry, thinking about Ida, she wonders whether she has 'ruined her happy life?'

Back in England in 1910, her work drew the attention of several publishing houses, and she took on the pen-name Katherine Mansfield. During her stay in Germany she had written satirical sketches of German characters, which were published in 1911 under the title *In a German Pension*.

This showed Katherine on the offensive. Stories such as 'Germans at Meat', 'The Baron' and 'The Modern Soul' gleefully skewer the pomposities and self-deceptions of the spa-going German middle class. The Germans are fa-

natically humourless, routinely condescending, and always eating.

The narrator observes of one Frau who is affecting to be shocked: 'If it had not been for her fork I think she would have crossed herself.' Seeking purity and good health, they always give themselves away through unconsciously polluting acts: 'Prompted by the thought, he wiped his neck and face with his dinner napkin and carefully cleaned his ears.'

The narrator is an attractively dry, English-speaking outsider who has simply to turn up at mealtime to be presented with another amusingly offensive outburst. At one point she is offered cherries by an absurd music professor, who tells her: 'There is nothing like cherries for producing free saliva after trombone playing, especially after Grieg's *Ich Liebe Dich*'.

Katherine also contracted gonorrhoea around this time, an event that was to plague her with arthritic pain for the rest of her short life, as well as to make her view herself as a 'soiled' woman. She attended literary parties without much enthusiasm: 'Pretty rooms and pretty people, pretty coffee, and cigarettes out of a silver tankard. ... I was wretched.'

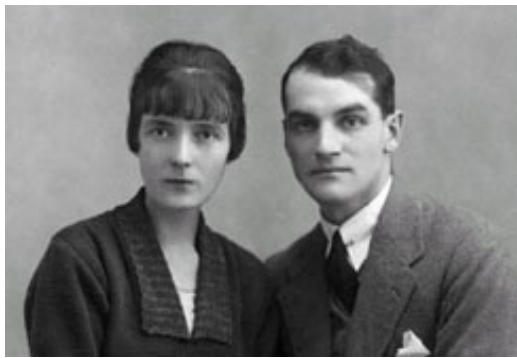
In 1910 Katherine saw the famous Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London and later recalled the effect Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* had on her own practice. The painting, she wrote, 'taught me something about writing that was queer, a kind of freedom—or rather a shaking free.'

Also in 1910, after attending a Japanese cultural exhibition, she took to wearing a pink kimono. During her brief Russian phase, she toyed with a fresh set of names for herself, 'Katharina', 'Yekaterina' and 'Katya'.

In 1911 Katherine met John Middleton Murray, a Socialist and former literary critic, who was first a tenant in her flat, then her lover. Murray edited a new avant-garde magazine called *Rhythm*. The journal's slogan, taken from the Irish playwright JM Synge, set out the terms of



*Katherine wearing an Arabian shawl,
1910*



With John Middleton Murray

engagement, 'Before art can be human again it must learn to be brutal.'

Katherine submitted a lightweight story to *Rhythm*. The story was rejected by Murray, who requested something darker. She responded with 'The Woman at the Store', a tale of murder and mental illness that Murray called 'the best story by far that had been sent to *Rhythm*.' Katherine's other main contributions were 'Ole Underwood' and 'Mollie'.

For Vincent O'Sullivan, the noted Katherine Mansfield scholar and writer, these often neglected pieces are essential

to the oeuvre, being 'the first New Zealand stories to thread human behaviour with the brooding grimness of landscape.'

'The Woman at the Store', a kind of colonial murder ballad in which the social isolation of rural life breeds despair and violence, contributed this much-quoted sentence to the dictionary of definitions a country keeps of itself: 'There is no twilight in our New Zealand days, but a curious half-hour when everything appears grotesque—it frightens—as though the savage spirit of the country walked abroad and sneered at what it saw.'

She co-edited and contributed to a series of journals. *Rhythm* folded in 1913, to be replaced by a new venture, the short-lived *Blue Review*, jointly edited by Katherine and Murray. The collapse of this second journal caused them financial stress, forcing the couple to return to London from Paris, where they hoped to establish themselves as writers. The material insecurity of their lives, mixed with the volatility of their own natures, initiated a lifelong pattern of partings and reconciliations.

During the war she travelled restlessly between England and France. In one of the more notorious of these 'flights', Katherine made a daring trip to visit her lover, Francis Carco, a writer and 'committed Bohemian', in the French war zone.

A fictional version of this trip can be read in her story 'An Indiscreet Journey'. While Carco pops up again as the cynical narrator of 'Je ne parle pas Français'. Carco, for his part, made Katherine the model of a character in his own novel, *Les Innocents*: 'She was a small, slim woman, pleasant but distant, her large dark eyes looked everywhere at once.'

In 1915 she met her beloved younger brother Leslie, known as 'Chummie'. When he died in World War I, Katherine was shocked and traumatised by the experience. Speaking of the war she wrote: 'I feel in the profoundest sense that nothing can ever be the same—that as

artists, we are traitors if we feel otherwise: we have to take it into account and find new expressions, new moulds for our new thoughts and feelings.'

Her work now began to take refuge in the nostalgic reminiscences of their childhood in New Zealand. During these years, she also formed important professional friendships with writers such as DH Lawrence, his wife Frieda and Virginia Woolf who later claimed that her writing was 'The only writing I have ever been jealous of.'

Katherine was drawn to Lawrence—he was, after all, another outsider in the English literary world—but her journal also records her impatience with what she saw as Lawrence's reductive view of human nature: 'I shall never see sex in trees, sex in the running brooks, sex in stones & sex in everything. The number of things that are really phallic from fountain pen fillers onwards!'

Lawrence, with whom she had a fraught friendship, later visited Wellington, her birthplace, and was moved to send her a postcard bearing a single Italian word, *Ricordi* ('memories'). It was a small and cryptic gesture of reconciliation; they'd fallen out badly and in his previous letter he had said 'You are a loathsome reptile—I hope you will die.'

'Prelude' (1916), one of her most famous stories, was also written during this period. Katherine drew on her mother for the character of the reclining, perpetually disappointed Burnell mother in 'Prelude', pregnant again and victimised by disturbing dreams of a bird swelling into a baby 'with a big naked head and a gaping bird-mouth, opening and shutting.'

This 60-page story re-defined what a story could do and be. The action involves the Burnell family moving house from the town to the nearby countryside. Its autobiographical basis lies in the move Katherine's family made from Tinakori Road in Wellington to Karori, 8 km away.

The story is told in 12 sections. We enter an individual consciousness for



Katherine's brother Leslie, 1915



Katherine in 1915

a few pages at a time before moving on to someone else. We glide from adults to children and back again, and from the family to its servants. The story is a miracle of fluidity.

Very little ‘happens’ but the story is full of vivid personal crises that crucially affect each character’s internal weather while leaving the atmosphere of amiable, conventional family life intact: the girl Kezia witnesses the killing of a chicken; Kezia’s unmarried and desperately timid Aunt Beryl recalls with horror coquettishly leaning against her sister’s husband when he was reading the paper; Linda, Kezia’s mother, fearful of being swallowed by family life, imagines the wallpaper is coming alive.

In an ecstatic letter written around the time she was working on the story, Katherine identified the form as her own invention and used the language of impressionism to suggest what she was aiming for:

‘You know, if the truth were known I have a perfect passion for the island where I was born. Well, in the early morning there I always remember feeling that this little island has dipped back into the dark blue sea during the night only to rise again at gleam of day, all hung with bright spangles and glittering drops. ... I tried to catch that moment. ... I tried to lift that mist from my people and let them be seen and then to hide them again.’

The tenderness of this statement represents a dramatic shift in Katherine. Though there was social commentary, ‘Prelude’—like its companion piece ‘At the Bay’—lacked the full protective armour of satire. Its insights were not arrived at through the observations of an outsider but mediated magically, it seems, through a floating narrator with access to the interior dramas of each personality. The intimacy was startling.

Her undiscovered home country could rise into view as Crescent Bay does in the famous opening of ‘At the Bay’ -

the borderlessness of land and sea standing in for freedom and possibility:

‘Very early morning. The sun was not yet risen, and the whole of Crescent Bay was hidden under a white sea-mist. The big bush-covered hills at the back were smothered. You could not see where they ended and the paddocks and bungalows began. The sandy road was gone and the paddocks and bungalows the other side of it; there were no white dunes covered with reddish grass beyond them; there was nothing to mark which was the beach and where was the sea. A heavy dew had fallen. The grass was blue. Big drops hung on the bushes and just did not fall. ...’

Her health declined further after a near-fatal attack of pleurisy when she contracted tuberculosis in 1917. Although she continued writing between her first and second collections, she rarely published her work, and sank into depression. In 1918 Katherine divorced her first husband and married John Murray.



Katherine at the Villa Isola Bella, 1920

It was while combating the disease in health spas across Europe, suffering a serious haemorrhage in 1918, that Katherine began writing the works she would become best known for. In September 1920, Katherine moved to the Riviera town of Menton, renting the Villa Isola Bella, and entering one of her most productive periods. Here she wrote a group of stories that rank with her best work: 'Miss Brill', 'The Stranger' and 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel'.

In December of that year, her second book of stories, *Bliss and Other Stories*, was published to enthusiastic reviews. A few months later there was another move—this time to a mountainside chalet in Switzerland. Here she wrote some of her best-known stories: 'Her First Ball', 'The Garden Party' and 'The Doll's House'.

When Murray had an affair with the Princess Bibesco (née Asquith), Katherine objected not to the affair but to her letters to Murray: 'I am afraid you must stop writing these love letters to my husband while he and I live together. It is one of the things which is not done in our world' (from a letter to Princess Bibesco, 1921).

'Miss Brill', the bittersweet story of a fragile woman living an ephemeral life of observation and simple pleasures in Paris, established Katherine as one of the pre-eminent writers of the Modernist period, upon its publication in 1920's *Bliss*. The title story from that collection, 'Bliss', which involved a similar character facing her husband's infidelity, also found critical acclaim. She followed with the equally praised collection, *The Garden Party*, published in 1922.

In 1922 she should have been secure, buoyant. In fact, her health was getting worse and she was now looking for a miracle cure. Katherine spent her last years seeking increasingly unorthodox

cures for her tuberculosis. In February 1922, she consulted the Russian physician Ivan Manoukhin. His 'revolutionary' treatment, which consisted of bombarding her spleen with X-rays, caused her to develop heat flashes and numbness in her legs.

As a part of her treatment in 1922 at an institute, Katherine had to spend a few hours every day on a platform suspended over a cow manger. She breathed odours emanating from below but the treatment did no good.

In October 1922, Katherine moved to George Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in Fontainebleau, France, where she was under the care of Olgivanna Lazovitch Hinzenburg (later, Mrs Frank Lloyd Wright).

Gurdjieff's basic thesis was that the harmony of life had been disrupted by the pressures of modern living. His commune was an attempt to restore balance through a regime that included physical exercise and labour. Residents were encouraged to walk about with arms outstretched for long periods, take part in dances, and rise early in the morning to do communal work.

None of this, of course, would have been an ideal regime for a TB sufferer. However, Katherine's TB was by this stage so advanced that Gurdjieff's methods are thought to have had no effect on her decline. Katherine, for her part, believed she'd found 'my people at last'.

The final months of her life produced little fiction, though she did complete 'The Fly', a portrait of her father and her classic statement on the futility of war. Two weeks before Katherine died, she expressed, with characteristic restlessness, her dissatisfaction and her ambition: 'I want much more material; I am tired of my little stories like birds bred in cages.'

Katherine suffered a fatal pulmonary haemorrhage in January 1923 in Gurdjieff Institute, near Fontainebleau. Her last words were: 'I love the rain. I

want the feeling of it on my face.' She was buried in a cemetery in the Fontainebleau District in the town of Avon.

She proved to be a prolific writer in the final years of her life, and much of her prose and poetry remained unpublished at her death. The peak of her achievement was *The Garden Party* (1922), which she wrote during the final stages of her illness. Without the company of her literary friends, family, or her husband, she wrote much about her own roots and her childhood. Murray took on the task of editing and publishing her works.

His efforts resulted in two additional volumes of short stories in 1923 (*The Dove's Nest*) and in 1924 (*Something Childish*), as well as her *Poems*, *The Aloe*, a collection of critical writings (*Novels and Novelists*) and a number of editions of her previously unpublished letters and journals.

The sickly sweet Katherine created by Murray was difficult to swallow. In 1937, the American writer Katherine Anne Porter issued this warning: 'She is in danger of the worst fate an artist can suffer—to be overwhelmed by her own legend.' Fortunately, the legend was made more life-like by subsequent and fuller editions of her *Journal* and by more complete selections of her *Letters*.

Katherine Mansfield is widely considered one of the best short story writers of her period. A number of her works, including 'Miss Brill', 'Prelude', 'The Garden Party', 'The Doll's House', and later works such as 'The Fly', are frequently collected in short story anthologies.

'Miss Brill' was about a woman who enjoys the beginning of the Season. She goes to her 'special' seat with her fur. She had taken it out of its box in the afternoon, shaken off the moth-powder, and given it a brush. She feels that she has a part in the play in the park, and somebody will notice if she isn't there.

A couple sits near her. The girl laughs at her fur and the man says: 'Why

does she come here at all—who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?' Miss Brill hurries back home, unclasps the neckpiece quickly, and puts it in the box. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying.

In 'The Garden Party' (1921) an extravagant garden-party is arranged on a beautiful day. Laura, the daughter of the party's hostess, hears of the accidental death of a young local working-class man, Mr Scott. The man lived in the neighbourhood. Laura wants to cancel the party, but her mother refuses to understand. She fills a basket with sandwiches, cakes, pastries and other food, goes to the widow's house, and sees the dead man in the bedroom where he is lying.

He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane. Crying she tells her brother who is looking for her: 'It was simply marvellous. But, Laurie - ' She stopped, she looked at her brother. 'Isn't life,' she stammered, 'isn't life - ' But what life was she couldn't explain. No matter. He quite understood.

Katherine was always concerned with notions of authenticity. As an early devotee of Oscar Wilde she was thoroughly versed in the idea of the 'mask'—the false self, the social self behind which the 'real' self sat, watching and judging and rejecting.

As a schoolgirl she had copied Wilde's epigrams into her notebook: 'Being natural is simply a pose—and the most irritating pose I know.' She took from Wilde a kind of delight in the artificiality of the mask; if one had to hide, it may as well be cleverly and knowingly done.

Katherine also proved ahead of her time in her adoration of Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, sharing his warm humanity and attention to small details of human behaviour. She incorporated some of his themes and techniques into her writing. Her influence on the development of

the short story as a form of literature was also notable. The fact that she died relatively young only added to her legacy.

Katherine Mansfield revolutionised the 20th century English short story. Her best work shakes itself free of plots and endings and gives the story, for the first time, the expansiveness of the interior life, the poetry of feeling, the blurred edges of personality.

She is taught worldwide because of her historical importance but also because her prose offers lessons in entering ordinary lives that are still vivid and strong. And her fiction retains its relevance through its open-endedness—its ability to raise discomfiting questions about identity, belonging and desire.

In the words of one of her biographers, 'It was largely through her adventurous spirit, her eagerness to grasp at experience and to succeed in her work, that she became ensnared in disaster. ... If she was never a saint, she was certainly a martyr, and a heroine in her recklessness, her dedication and her courage.'

TS Eliot found her 'a fascinating personality' but also 'a thick-skinned toady' and 'a dangerous woman'. And if we want to add one more voice to this roll-call, the Irish writer Frank O'Connor, in his classic study of the short story, *The Lonely Voice*, called Katherine 'the brassy little shopgirl of literature who made herself into a great writer.'

The contemporary English novelist and editor of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Margaret Drabble, summed up Katherine's lasting radical spirit: 'A symbol of liberation, innovation and unconventionality. Her life was new, her manners and dress were new, her art was new.'

After Katherine died, Virginia Woolf often dreamed at night of her great rival. The dreams gave her a Katherine who was vividly, shockingly alive, so that the 'emotion' of the dream encounter remained with Woolf for the next day.

Hermione Lee, Woolf's biographer, wrote that 'Katherine haunted her as we are haunted by people we have loved, but with whom we have not completed our conversation, with whom we have unfinished business.'

It is a formulation that captures wonderfully the current position of Katherine Mansfield. She is a key figure in the development of the short story and yet she remains somehow on the margins of literary history. She is also the great ghost of New Zealand cultural life, felt but not quite grasped.

Her relationship with her country of birth was, like most of her relationships, marked by extremes. In the beginning, as a precocious, literary schoolgirl, she despaired of her uncouth colonial home where 'people don't even know their alphabet'. As a mature writer she found in that 'hopeless' material a way of pushing the boundaries of the form—in the words of her biographer, Antony Alpers, a means of 'revolutionising the English short story'.

Her masterpieces—the long stories 'At the Bay' and 'Prelude'—are lovingly detailed recreations of a New Zealand childhood, reports from the fringe—the edge of the world as she felt it to be. She wrote as if she had stayed. Of course these luminous re-imaginings are lit with the affection and nostalgia of the expatriate. They would not exist without their author's estrangement from the scenes and places and people she describes. They are set in a New Zealand of the mind, composed at the edge of Katherine's memory.

'At the Bay' and 'Prelude' are her most innovative and widely-read works and as such they are often the only point of contact an international readership has with this obscure country at the bottom of the world.

The contemporary Katherine Mansfield is a figure of vivid contradiction—fiercely independent and pathetically needy, brilliantly bold and wretchedly repentant, terrifically ambitious and

plagued by self-doubt. And these contradictions are most vitally present in all her thinking and writing about home, New Zealand. The despised place could also be the dream place. The empty place could be imaginatively rich. The unschooled land could teach the world.

Mount Roskill Grammar School in Auckland, Rangiora High School in North Canterbury, Westlake Girls High School in Auckland, Macleans College in Auckland, and Wellington Girls' College in Wellington have a house named after her.



New Zealand issued this postage stamp in honour of Katherine Mansfield.